

*Pilbara Road Scene*

On the Oversize Highway, the Great Northern,  
where all loads are mega,  
truck horns and birds each  
tootle their species call: fuck off.

The sun has its bite, but the land in winter  
breathes wooingly, smells  
of a kinder wetter time.

A gum-trunk at thirty years, hip-high,  
its unburnt side patina'd, glossed  
by the cattle's massage.

An even no-mow lawn of spinifex surrounds  
the termite mound's extrusion  
of brown lambs-brains, Pilbara-brown  
– supremo of its grazing patch

*Sturt's Desert Rose*

Sturt's Desert Rose (*Gossypium sturtianum*) is an aberrant hibiscus that has strayed far from water. The translucent lavender-white petals, overlapping, make its deep cup, which is stained at the base a stunning blood-purple, as if with 'love's purple wound'. The pistils and stamens are the same lavender-white as the petals, and hold a suggestion of bridal silk. The buds, the leaves, and the rest of the shrub are the familiar dust-green of most Pilbara plantlife.

A glaucous string-like stalk supplies the faint hint of moisture that is all the petals need to stand stiff in the desert breeze. (Cut, they fold swiftly.) Flower buds come in green globular clusters. The buds of a cluster open in turn, putting out another and then another flower. Each lasts a day, each is the belle of its day, until there are no more.

As a bud opens, first a fold or two of lavender-white silk protrudes, as if from an ill-packed parachute. More folds spill free. Finally out spinnakers the red-purple splotch that will summon in the bee. Faintly the saturated purple-red dye infects and bleeds thin veins of itself into the purer lavender-white beyond.

Tough, and refined,  
of the watery family of hibiscus,  
named 'Rose' in days  
when folks still grew a single rose.

The cup's petals, rigid but slanted aswirl,  
syncopated flamingo  
snapshot.

Ice-lavender, silk-laced thinness,  
are this desert lady's dowry;  
her bridegroom, death, comes in the night;  
no space for coyness.  
She's the ice-maiden who keeps  
open as long as life lasts  
to the hive's brawling pandars,  
the night's hairy hucksters.

Her downward-tilted  
cup of petalled crinoline  
demurely skirts a deep, selective quest  
too major to conceal.

Boldly the petal-struts shiver in boisterous breeze  
that tests them to destruction.  
The organs within must trust  
their craft of moisture-stiffened veins  
to sail that desert air.

Lavender lace-mantles, edge-on, can-can in the breeze.  
Delicate veins and folded tissues  
fence the inner purse and pollen trap.  
If ever a bloom played semiotic games,  
this signals in human.  
Fire, hoof and heat ensure  
this beauty's print is fugitive  
as cudded fibre  
on the camel's tongue;  
and soon must come the seeds.

So human brides make argosies of outlay.  
Their cloth pavilions point and do not point  
at 'what they would have hit', a trick  
the cross-dressed, red-petalled bullfighter adores;  
and her whirling petals semaphore  
to where a single whorish thrust and quiver  
gifts her the bee-borne gametes that will seed  
the future's dust.

As the last worker withdraws  
her compound eye still points  
to the nanoworld within:  
a slow bandaid-ish unpeeling  
of spiral gene-bands that rebuild, re-join  
to grasp the future in a heat-struck second  
– the carpels' *carpe diem*.

One day old, job done,  
all that butterfly frippery wilts;  
the desert roses drop, dry-crumpled  
litter underneath their bush;  
the umbrella's papery ribs,  
that fought the desert's trade-wind  
– blobs and wads of crinkled tissue.

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*Rail Line*

Strata welded together  
bending like a therma-couple.  
Land in abeyance,  
sparsely tenanted  
by man or nature.

(Here I'd prefer nature.)

In the cutting  
the deep slow granite's texture  
like hard-boiled eggs cut through.

*At Doolena Gap*

Here, a few kilometres from Marble Bar, the usually lazy Coongan river passes between high banks of quartzite. In this resistant rock it could cut only a narrow channel before expanding into the looser pebble-stones of the valley beyond. Rainbow-birds barrel-roll among these red cliffs of the Archaean shield, their generations coming and going in a geologic nanosecond.

A row of trees runs down a non-conformity . . .

A skink's tail stirs billennial sand  
round rejected remnants of conglomerate.  
Some bird, fated to live a year,  
repeats its chirrup-squeak 'I am'  
until a stone might wear away.

With day and night rolling over  
the rock heats and cools,  
towards its ten trillionth time  
(even *age-old* has numbers).

Fig-roots are the bindings  
clutching the layers  
where a million years are paged, loose-leaved.  
Root-hairs invade the ordered annals,  
spinifex crackles on the jump and boot of now.

We, and the bird, and the river-height  
conjoin; an instant fix, in time and climate  
across a million same-ish years.

\*

Hills of gum-greens and olive-greens  
lack only a satyr goat  
to make them Mediterranean;  
hold instead those shy brown spirits,  
rock wallabies that nightly scour and sniff  
on the unyielding rock.

*At Hearsons Cove*

Gabbro is a coarsely crystalline igneous rock that tends to form rounded boulders. These erode so slowly that the resulting soil often washes away faster than it accumulates, leaving a vast bare rockpile. Next to the famous sandy beach at Hearsons Cove, on the Burrup Peninsula near Dampier, is a gabbro headland on whose boulders thousands of prehistoric artworks are incised.

The light comes rippling off the land and water,  
crows' wings, truck hoods, and grader blades;  
Archaean land in the grip of modern raptors.

On this smallish planet  
we can girdle in three days  
spinifexed rocks cost us two hours  
for a kilometre's stumble.

Ancestor-figures, scratched on the gabbro's outer rust  
prefiguring the Pharaohs

decay to that granular substrate  
where a lemon wattle waves.

*Towards Wittenoom*

In the serpent-smooth rocks, tongues of blue or white lichen  
flicker in crannies;

the wind darts from bush to bush  
quick as the blue-white spirit that lives in these rocks,  
or the swallow diving through them.

We came at our peril.

The asbestos-blue damselfly,  
double-winged darning-needle of the fates,  
works in the wind  
dodging the dust and petals.

Dusky bream, out of shag-sight below,  
know its taste and speculate.

\*

This solid hollow is made  
by what the busy streams, tinkle-dingling, take  
from old plains, flat sea-floors,  
to carve homes for wasp, snake, dunnart.

Elsewhere such rifts and gaps  
– rift-valleys if they knew it –  
were genus *homo*'s first cathedrals  
where the moon was howled antiphonally  
and the leopard coughed behind the pews.

### *Trucked Cattle*

The cattle howl, or what would be howling in less deep-voiced creatures.

They cannot turn. Starting to die of thirst, they stamp in the shoulder-crushed space. The container's metal sides clank, an under-base to their bellows – bellows so low they are almost not sound but vibration.

The cries grow louder, a crescendo maintained. *Someone surely now must come to release us.* Each one, on a different note, proclaims its share of their shared distress. One cow is no cow. Herd-units they are, and each one reports – is vibrated by – its part in their common herd-wail.

*The humans have always been kindly till now.*

*Yes, kindly on balance.*

*Apart from the ear-tags and such.*

Families are shouting to the noisy campfire parties to let them sleep. The new noise is trivial, but this old one, this lowing like the sound of ocean waves breaking upon a beach, is an invisible backcloth of sound.

By moon-rise the trapped herd's bellows grow deafening; but still, like the sound of the sea, or of trains, unheard. Too low and constant to bear attention. Too deep to be heard as ear-sound, an earth-shudder rather. Earth creaking like an old ship's timbers. Bawling each stands, crush-propped, while blood drips from a dewlap, a hock chafed on a neighbor, a nose bashed against steel in the long corrugated hours.

And all the while humans are showering, eating, fixing coffee and tea in cups, watching the cafe's TV, arranging their beds for the night.

The metal trays clank with their shifting weights, above and below. The whole herd strives, and is beaten. They will go nowhere till morning, I guess, when the driver is rested.

*Why, and how, water cattle that go to their deaths? Only makes more piss in the trays.*

They will not believe the worst. One after one, some deep-voiced sufferer leads a reverberant communal, and unal, outcry, then falls back in weariness. These are no random cries. The beasts are calling to dimly remembered mothers, aunts, siblings. It is blood that speaks. Their cries are antiphonal, rising up in the help-begging howl, falling away to exhaustion. No one, human or cattle – and humans till now have always grasped their needs – could mistake it. In the camp ground a child asks 'What is that noise?' – 'Just some cattle, dear. Brush your teeth properly.'

But the herd go on. They are calling to kin, and to dimly remembered kindnesses, of mother or man. All they remember of life and love is in that long bellow. My friend in the cafe orders a pie, watches a flirt-piece on *60 Minutes* – on an all-girl band, very spunky. Elsewhere, in rooms I will never know, torturers are changing shifts, checking their instruments; and near to them people are dancing, loving, excreting, dying, rejoicing, breaking up, being born. And the sassy girl band dances on. We are predator-stock. We dance on bones.

I walk out, furtively, round the back of their trays. The noise alters and falters. Heads would turn if they could. Trapped, they have scented the anthropoid coming to help or to kill. Their flanks strain to turn; are held. Some are knocked down on one knee, or on two in the crush. A dog barks at them then, and their huge flanks bash the sides – a dull metal booming.

And still no one sees them. They are only some cattle, a background. What do you expect in the country? Out here no one complains, almost ever. Here it doesn't pay to complain. Only the cattle, self-interested, protest. For one day more.

Their herd-minds cannot grasp indifference. They know deaths, sickness, predators – not trucking. The aunt who lies down and never gets up. The patch of torn leather and bones at the fence corner. But not death-camps, and not death for the herd. Their god, the herd, must have had a plan. In that faith they followed each other up the ramp, to where they are jammed. And still it is herdwise they search for escape. They scent me as the breeze shifts again, and tonnes of flesh thrash-bash the steel welds.

They are gentle at heart, and half tame from birth. Centuries back, we cut the wild out of them. They feel present aches and cuts; since the present for them is all.

If any have guessed, it must be the steers. Lonely ones, with faint calfish memories of a day when humans seemed angry and took their sex away.

The driver has paid his bill. Yet he dawdles, rewarding himself with a smoke.

Ah, I've overheard! The truck's lights have failed, a mechanic is coming to speed them on safely. No way to unload them. Dry meat for the abattoir! So the driver waits. And the cattle cry.

They are quieter now. Are talking to us, to themselves about it, in low existential moans.

The bargain was simple: all tender care in exchange for your meat at a given date. Cradle to cull security. Some would jump at that. No parasites, creditors, predators ever. Good feed and water. Great living.

Hours pass; and the cattle's veins dry. Water and feed have flowed through them. They are turning hollow.

Now a man turns the motor on and off, probes and tinkers. The cattle's hopes rise and fall, they chant and bellow – such heart and unison any parson would wish in his flock.

Near midnight, the cattle grow plangent, but the men won't move, not till all's right with their night-swimming ship.

The Southern Cross spins its slow 24-hour hand. Spins slowly over their drying mouths, their drying cries. Their cries dying down. The smell intense.

Now the mechanic has got the lights cobbled. And the driver is walking on top of the two-storey roadtrain. He clanks on the roof, and their feet panic on the steel floors. He would be crushed like a rag if he fell in. Their rush begins in ripples, in bone breaking shoulder-pack. A terrible shuffling. The frozen stampede goes millimetres into steel walls.

Satisfied with how they are packed, he climbs into his cabin. Time now to concentrate, and finish. The motor roars up. Yes, the cattle city is lit. The dog barks again, and the steak train throbs.

Now the prime-mover is edging, a liner away from its berth, towing its twin tall trailers, and seeking the swift night roads.

Leaving behind a crowd of heavy mosquitoes, in a puff of warm odor, the roadtrain pulls clumsily out.

And now the vast rig goes past me, at walking speed, out into the gravel driveway, stirring the cool air of night. With lights at all levels, in all shapes and colors.

Moving away slowly, up to the bitumen road. Now the assemblage swings around, takes up its flight path onto its runway. And the cattle low, relieved to be going.

Their bones that soon will be waste at the abattoir, then the warm stench of blood-and-bone on somebody's lawn, have a job still to do. To hold them up stiffly. To keep the meat's structure.

Soon a terrifying wind blows through their open-mesh prison. Standing sideways, metres up, they are flung through the night air, over the corrugations clean to Port Hedland.

And now they are sailing at top jolting speed, their tail-lights fading through country that's burning its spinifex daytime and night, burning the old to bring fresh shoots for the breeding herds.

And now only the distant fires (the same that have fragrantly burned for weeks) glow in the far sky's dust.

The campers have forgotten, but half-notice a backdrop is gone, like a cloth-blind pulled away. Later, when the generator goes off, one will stretch and say, *It's so quiet out here in the country.*

*At Wadden Creek*

The first primitive giants of the Proterozoic (the so-called ‘Age of First Life’) were stromatolites – colonies of single-cell plants that clumped together in shallow water. Using the energy from sunlight to release sugars and limestone, they built a kind of coral reef. They also released a deadly by-product called oxygen – to which other life-forms would in time (mostly) adapt. Some of their descendants are still alive, 600 kilometres away in the shallows of Shark Bay.

An ancient stromatolite reef often makes a more resistant layer that stands out as a black band in the sedimentary or volcanic-tuff layers of a cliff – so characteristic that one can suspect its identity by glimpsing it from the road.

Sometimes, it seems, an asteroid’s impact would destroy the stromatolites’ world and leave as its signature a layer of ‘spherules’. These are tiny spheres of rock that were vaporized by the impact and then re-solidified as a sort of glass before falling out of the air. They are millimetre-scale or smaller; whitish, and hollow, like stone rice-bubbles.

We walk a one-celled landscape,  
reefs made by bugs missing a nucleus;  
calcareous algal mats.  
Wadden Creek has cut gaps through time  
till it reached this limestone and dripped dry:  
marsupial dung lies thick on top  
and the spinifex prickles our socks  
on a ledge laid down on a day  
the Archaean world fell apart.

An asteroid's match flared the country rock;  
seas hissed in the rock-rain  
heaving hot porridge of spherules  
– then layered them in sludge.  
Earth's blenders churning  
again, again.  
Two sea-cliffs, of silica and lime,  
shaken together, like card-packs inter-riffled,  
their smashed mess filled the deep.

Those mini egg-shells, rock-sago,  
sliced through and polished  
make complex curios, clues  
for a planet's pathologists.