

The Last Valley

Among the houses in the valley, grew an abundance of native trees,
Attending to the forest, she had learnt the art of deep observation,
Witness to the long, consonant history from her eerie on the ridge;
The unabashed stare sheer across a meadow, of a big red kangaroo
The fall of long leafed twigs from eucalypts, rustle of skinks in roadside grasses,
Hot breezes sway stick insects, the water sound of Currawongs above
Harsh calls from Cockatoos flashing white and yellow, moving from tree to tree,
Goshawks silent diving, taking Bowerbird chicks or mice.
In early spring the Red-tailed black Cockatoos with their frightful screech,
Alight like paratrooper swarms, frantically picking nuts from the stand of Casuarina's,
Then flying, she assumed, further north. A peremptory sojourn, gone after a day;
Whereas the white, sulphur-crested hooligans stayed for the entire season,
Their constant bickering, driving everyone mad.

The fire came, encouraged by the hot winds, from the parched western plains.
She saw them in past summers, usually from a safe distance.
The blaze roaring across the vast forests and tree-change holdings towards her,
Like some hysterical opera, reaching the village and her splendid valley,
Balls of flame rise like rockets destined for the stars.
She could barely believe her own eyes, the florid progress,
A leering overture through the low branches of familiar trees,
Before burrowing maliciously into their bowels, to conspire with their own oil,
Setting leaves like firecrackers, in a blaze of glorious blue, white and red,

A fury of violent winds begin to crash among the branches ascending voices,
Joining with their peculiar instruments, a startling climax, a crack like cannon fire,
Trees bursting, scattering incinerated branches, leaves, seeds and blackened flowers,
She was surprised how these histrionics excited her, transfixed her.
Cars escaping up the hill, from low in the valley, bumper to bumper.
Awed faces of children pressed to the windows, yellow with terror in the gathering night.
Men black with ash, directing traffic, yelling into walkie-talkies,
Rushing from house to house, pounding on the doors,
'Leave now' they wail above the sirens, all sounds now muffled by the roar of fire,

The birds are gone or dead from exhaustion, torched by the flames.
A wide, ineluctable path ravaged the forests and indolent suburbs.
The dreariness of Christmas now deemed profound; the worst in a century of fires.
Houses were lost where chimneys bricks exploded like chestnuts,
Farms denuded of beast and grain, car's left smouldering, pinging popcorn on the streets.
An artist's commune of cool adobe houses, vitrified on the slopes of one pristine valley,
Still the westerly winds push the flames across the land toward the ocean,
Refusing to stop until all the fabric containing the world was erased from memory.

A fireball engulfed her car and licked the bubbling paint off the weatherboards,
As the windows turned back to liquid, she drew into the shadows,
Already her remains revealing a life lived in her particular form of desperation.
The high ridge, the few houses, became a bright furnace,
When not one blade of grass remained, the dirt began to boil.