

Flame-tree

the flame-tree scatters
little silk goblets, Chinese-red
loosed handfuls of scarlet

the storm, passing at a distance,
is a clot of dark gestures,
flung brushstrokes – stilled,
suspended

and the flame-tree scatters
the light red and the dark red
little stemmed cups

and it is a tree scattering itself
against the light
mingling red into its own shade

exclaiming itself
in wet red silk
against the painted light

Rain

I went out
in the slow bloom of rain,
wet petals on my skin

the sleeping ibis
were folded white packages
lodged in the high branches

I went out into the white air,
into the misty quiet

the river slipping fast,
striped darkness and silver

I swam under a cataract
of hectic lorikeet chatter

then out into the calm, the eddy
the slow warm bloom

in the riverbank trees
the slow warm bloom of rain

Half a moon

Come and stay,
there'll be half a moon by Sunday,
a gleaming bowlful of dark

enough to feed
the lover in me, the elusive
heart in you –
all the lost chances,

they are here still,
turning in sleep
in the dark bowl
the new moon comes carrying
like a gift.

Man sleeping

it curls beside me at night
flanks just touching
it is sunk deep in sleep

it is a man, or
rather it is an ocean
sleeping along the sand

under its reflective sky
the tribes who breathe water
are finning their unseen trails –

rapt, under the moon,
their marvellous seasons
of seeding and rebirth –

I would draw your hips to me
their silvery catch
but you have gone deep

far under the swell and sparkle,
with the slow breath of waves
and you would not know me there

Landscape

after Dorothy Napangardi's 'Karntakurlangu Jukurrpa'

I remember arriving with the grasstree spikes
in creamy flower, taller than a man,
the birds balancing to feed
on such cones of sweetness
in the excited air –

the dead in their trees, speaking and sighing,
the wind in their leaves –

the locked and breaking
honeycomb of days

the hooked blanket of the land
the mesh of light
the tongues of the white rain

The leaving

For Anne

your brother with you as you walk
down to where the air goes fuzzy with salt
and a boat carves the green bay,
a cormorant on every channel-marker

you sing him a hymn from childhood
the sand braided with the tide
jellyfish like heavy-petalled glass flowers
sea eagles rafting the wind

too late to touch him,
and too far – but you sing
of childhood and the small waves of the bay,
and walk with him until

it is suddenly too deep
and he goes on without you

say, a river

say, a river of dark honey
say cormorant, a swimming
neck and head

curved the wet black neck
diving through, flecked with gold
the sliding dark
river dusted with leaves, with sun
dusted with glint, touched
with the tip of the brush – say
goanna, its tail on the ridged bark
finely dotted with yellow, scales of
paint on the slow curve bending
the honey river, its dark flank
speckled with light, with dust
spreading wide under the shine
of sharp leaves brittle
banksia and she-oak
soft-flaking paperbark
river of slow honey, say dark
river of light

Or this way

On “Probably” by Anne Kellas

not that way, Anne
not for me
the fearful plunge
into the heaving dark

I will head out across the shallows
the flat shelving seabed
ankle-deep, dappled with sun

and flatten myself like a stingray
into a resting hollow
and pull up the sand like a sheet

and lie invisible
under the fine white sand
while the sunstruck sea
sighs and breathes above me

The launch

on a painting by Charles Blackman

they have laid her to sleep
in a bank of flowers

she is curled, eyes closed
into a dream of earth

the child, the bride
they have launched her like a boat

like a boat she has slipped
into a swoon of sky

lit by white petals –
and founders, willingly

into the caress of dark blooms
into the knowing tide

The easterly spell

Blackmans Bay, Tasmania

the bay was pewter, the sky
the bloom on a blue plum

and now, in the wind off the sea,
rain is feathering down like snow

the boat moored inside the headland
is a drag of dark paint in the surging grey

each leaf of the spinning gum
is a silver owl's face

and at nightfall we almost disappear –
quiet settling among the houses

the moon breathing silver
the rain weaving the air