

Revising Casuarinas

You begin, as these days you do, with revision:

*I ask when people tell me I'm not to re-work
my early poems: Am I to have learned nothing?*²

I think history should be what it is, and say so:

Don't maim your babies. Show me new things.

And you do, laying on the table this shrapnel
of lines, stones gathered along the way, rolled
about in the palm. *You've not lost your gift* I say,
and you haven't, but the pen once surely held
trembles in corrections. Sunlight etches shadows
in the fruit bowl, among the papers carefully
placed. *I'm translating Rilke, but this is mine,
listen to this. . .* As you read, I remember you
on a path to the sea among the casuarinas
near Bundeena. I remember the shadows
those lean green needles made on the dirt,
like the sketches in one of your books.

I remember standing on the heath, watching
a storm as it nested on the waves, lightning
like the spindly legs of a heron. The first seeds
of rain. We were such poets, in that wildness.

You realise I said, as thunder blundered about us,
we're the tallest things for miles out here.

Squat-running to the car, I said *Nature's OK,
but in its place.* Once, I suggested we spend
days trekking Kosciuszko, find some barren spot
to camp in, those treeless distances of snow
and sphagnum moss, granite breaking the ground
like bones. *Where does one shower?*² you asked. . .

Putting away your poems, we go to lunch now.

You move so slowly, each step a wilderness,

a vastness like the moon. When we get there,
you pick at your food, looking for anything
of pleasure. *I'm in no pain* you say, impromptu,
but I'm unsteady now. . . You look tired,
and I think I'd better go soon. Solitude
was always your diet. Driving away, I pick
about in our lives, find that day I was caught
out by convention at a wedding, needed
a jacket and borrowed yours. How small
it was, my hands bulging from the sleeves.
How clumsy I felt. . . When I get home,
I go for a walk in the early dusk, its richer
blend of shadows, and I think of the time I first
saw you, the conference where you dismantled
a preceding post-modernist. Not everything
is acceptable. In the brewed cool of sunset,
I read your love for the world, for seeing,
and all that becomes nature, its attendance.
Again the wind crashes through the casuarinas -
that suddenness, like the first intimations
of a poem. Leaves scribble lines in the sky,
its indigo blush, and sounds grow loud,
more like themselves as the wind gets stronger,
beating at blades and petioles, frail twigs
and the burred bark of trunks. Then
a calm. . . The next morning, I visit my parents
at the crematorium, their small brass beds
neatly tucked into the brick symmetry
of the dead. Their names are all that's left,
that and their love, spanning separate lives -
his thirty-six years, her sixty-seven, those
thirty-one eternities denied them. Rain swarms
in the air, so I don't stay long. I touch the letters,
each an era, the ring of a Californian redwood,

and leave them to get on with being gone.

I think of my poems, how time will burn them.

What's gained, other than all that I've learned?