

Orpheus, in the desert

Morning light, the first day of his crossing
red dirt striped to soft maroon
he walks into dry land, remembering
the precise curve of her cheek;
sees it everywhere, in rounded granite
at his back, in cumulus drifts banked
against days of azure, now softened
to pearl-shell dawn.

Sand ripples out to the cloud-line, as if
the ocean crept here in the night
and dried to dust, waves frozen in grit
until the next hard easterly should sweep
it's sculptor's hand across the land,
etch new dips and ridges, like the line
of her lips opened on breath; he thinks
of Styx and Acheron.

Night water, velvet under ferryman's oar
but here riverbeds are empty, waiting
on melodies of rain, notes of droplets,
fast-stoked torrents, a finer music
than gold-strung wires beneath his touch.
Harp of his longings; in this country
artesian underworlds spread vast silence
over her reflection.

Sun rays scrape his knuckles, not soft
in the valley of silt and spinifex. Spirits
start to fade, tall wandjina, stately, graceful
in their floating strides; late evening
they'll return, heads rimmed in constellations
Southern Cross at their fingertips, searching
he catches a glimpse of his love's pale shape
among the ghosts.

Dark shadow on the sand, wedgetail
circles in the light, watchful amber eye
the colour of a harp's polished curve. Heat draws
serpents from dark dreams, their scales
brown or yellow-striped, too close an echo
- that bite - her slender finger punctured
he still sees her tumble down the path, so deep
the well of Hades' sleep.

In this land he might start fresh, change
his name, rewrite his travel-worn lament,
decide to call her 'swallowtail' or 'xenica',
watch her new wings flash their gift, released
from the prison of his heart. Might file
for migrant status, invoke Aegean blue
and oracles, myth's long, unwinding thread
washed by wider skies.

He stoops, scoops up sand, lets it trail
thin ribbons on the wind. Even here, rains
will fall, paint countless blooms
to dusk's horizon, nectar bowls for her
uncurling tongue, southern land's ambrosia.
His footstep's rhythm sets the beat, hand describes
an arch of hills, plucks from sunbaked air
tendrils of sweet liberty.