

## Channel Country

All rivers flow inland from the Great Divide.  
Each year big rains leave the Diamantina  
in flood. Water spreads into channels

sinks in slow streams to lakes down south.

Drifts of bark and twigs catch in the fork  
of trees like forgotten nests of the cockatoo.

Lines of mud mark the slurry rushing through.

Tiny micro-life survives in soil washed down  
with the spill. Drying in silt it lifts off, flies  
on the wind in a red-dust storm.

Crustaceans survive the dry season buried  
under sand. They wait for the big wet, breed  
in the warmth of great rivers rising.

✓ Spangled perch adapt to life in puddles.

Frogs too lie under silt for years, waiting  
for floods to take them into deeper water.

Ngarangerri pelicans fly in from the south  
nest each year on the banks of Lake Eyre.

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After the summer spell, rivers shrink  
to a string of waterholes drying in the heat  
Chains of salt pans shimmer like snow.

The wet season ends once more in a heat haze.  
A smell of yellow hangs on the air. Insects

search for honey among flowering gidgee,  
keep up a steady burr as if intoxicated  
by nectar. Warm sunlight after rain.

Little corellas fly low over lignum brush,  
swing and dip on a Spinifex stalk, waiting  
for a spider to come their way.

A tiny planigale returns to find a home  
in clay-pans cracking in the sun, a baby  
secure in the pouch. She disturbs

a swarm of gnats lifting from moist shadows

sends them flitting too fast for the naked eye  
to catch, their span of a life shorter than a day.  
An easy prey to stillness, sharp eyes

quick tongues waiting in the tussock grass.

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Saltbush runs wild on the Mallee plain  
On the road heading West, trees thrive  
from run-off after rain. Dusty leaves

sweeten the soil, draw up the bitter salts  
from streams flowing from the inland sea.

Honey-eaters no bigger than a leaf  
shimmer and dash, hang upside down,  
their red breasts unseen among the dazzle

of cherries ripening on a quandong tree.

A Pygmy Glider hovers over flowering scrub,  
steers her way with a feathery tail, to pluck  
the sap of mulga blossoms. Tiny as a mouse

she builds her handball nest in tree trunks  
or takes a ready-made instead. Cradles  
her litter in sandy pockets out of danger.

Knows the value of silence, as a goanna  
shuffles by, rifling the sand. Or the paw  
of a feral cat. Night hunters, raiders

in the night clearing her world of shadows.