

Waterlines to a Kingfisher

*Time wears us down and away...
like water on glass, like footfalls on marble stairs
Step by step until we are edgeless and smoothed out.*
—Charles Wright.

The morning river after rain is a mud mirror,
And in its stain-glass surface, a lattice work of river-oak
Shadows float under the ribbed canoe.

A sage meniscus rises

To the gunwale and out beyond the oars a sunken forest
Of scribbly gum stretches like God's infant attempt at drawing
Straight lines.

Naked with their chests out, the gums know

Everything will pass through—water returns to water,
Dust will find its grave. Out of the flow, a sacred kingfisher
Settles on a dead branch;

his sapphire waistcoat is a sunbeam

Sermon to the bass below and anyone who cares listen.

Above the canopy, a lone eagle weaves a cloud
As if the sky were a great loom, and her work had just begun.
In Zarathustra's teaching,

water is the mother of life,

And as a runnel weeps down the wood I wonder if the flecks
Will be enough for purity or whether noon has already passed.ⁱ
The kingfisher dives,

its wings like arrow fletches, homing

On minnows amid the reeds. On return, his feathers
A polychrome frieze more vivid than the palace of Darius
At Susa. This is the way of all things

—the halcyon air

Barely at a murmur, the water unflinching in its firmness.

It is said, the kingfisher was the first to dream of land
After the great flood; leaving the ark early, its plumage stained
By the pigments God left

as he painted the earth again.

Here, in ripples off the bow, the world exists in watercolour
—The cerulean sky ensnared by the reflections of grey gums
And the cross-hatched

sandstone of ridgelines; the light an echo

A million years in the making. Today life seems a refraction,
The riverbed in an upward bend—the closeness of a moment
Only half grasped. In the slow shutter of my eye,

the kingfisher

Becomes a sapphire trail-light as thoughts collapse in a blur.

—

In the eddies, bloodwood leaves are a deluge offering
From the forest—silent, like the drowned voices of the wind.
And this memory,

hanging in a glass box, loses its lustre

As the river pulls away.ⁱⁱ A bare-nosed wombat buries itself
Above the bank—digging a failed waterline liturgy.
Water will wear its way

to the bedrock and in the shallows

Moss makes its ramshackle house. Yellow rock orchids flower
Over the boulders along Nelson's Creek; like the flaming tongues
Of Pentecost they speak in signs and know that,

if righteousness

Comes for sight of the kingfisher—it flies just as quick.

ⁱ In Zoroastrianism the *Yasna* ceremony can only be performed between sunrise and noon. It culminates in an 'offering to the waters' which serves to strengthen and purify them and thus life.

ⁱⁱ In Victorian England tens of thousands of Kingfishers were stuffed and hung in parlours for decoration, as a talisman, or as weathervanes.