

COOLGARDIE

*Griffin Watkins*

From here, the stumpy, corvine hills lie like giants  
done to death under weights of hot stone.

From here, to each quivering, mirage-purple horizon  
the desert struts mean fusilages of burnished leaf and  
twig.

The sun burns its callous fuse, leaching plant and soil,  
dissolving the sky and the colours of men's eyes.

This is the gold country where the stunted gimlet trees  
scythe drugged motions above the somnolent red earth.

This is the Midas land, owning a mythology as bright and  
hard as the minerals it conceals.

*The burnt land reels its bitter mirth,  
Sour odours rise from the smeechy earth.*

And what of the endeavours of those who have gone  
to their last and lasting dream?

They pioneered this barren delirium of blood-red soil  
and thirsting trees.

Should they still dream of gold, it is because they spent  
their lives grubbing for it among these cruel geologies.

Yet, more weights of gold than all their grinning skulls  
could ever hope to calculate still lie below the ridges.

And old men, with memories of other men's good luck, still  
peck, like effigies of doom, about these barren hills.

And still the gold-lust burns in the barrels of their eyes.

*Locked in their dream they move tired feet  
Through the landscape's barbarous heat.*

Once, this name and place boomed loud enough for men  
two thousand miles away to hear.  
They came in droves. They came like ragged birds with  
little more than courage, energy and mateship to combat  
this most implacable of antagonists.  
And if this blunt landscape would not love them, they  
bore it no grudge as they struggled to bend some small  
part of it to their wills.  
This land, meanwhile, kept them lean, alert and knowledgeable  
in the ways of dusty Death.

*And many came who spilt their bones  
Among Coolgardie's brutal stones.*

And through their dooms Coolgardie became a synonym for gold.  
In spite of typhoid, shortage of water, heat, flies and dust  
this raw part of the western desert became a town.  
And what most prevailed was comradeship, which adversity  
tempered to memorable strengths as, in this most inhospitable  
of places, the gold-hunters fashioned their own history.  
They became their own epics. And gold was railed to Perth.

*Creed did not matter, nor place of birth  
Where they built this town and ransacked the  
earth.*

This hole-pocked landscape with its mounds of mullock  
shows where they scratched their lives away.  
Until the red land caught them tight and packed their  
bones with its dry argument.  
And too few left today to celebrate their ruins, who  
laboured mightily beneath a sweat of earth, weight of sun.  
What then has greater durability than gold?  
Only the Word which records and gives us leave to participate  
in lives now lost to men.  
The Word it is that has the classic look and makes each  
man's tragedy a little of our own.

*And as their bones lie now freed of lust,  
Their histories becoming ours by trust,  
So let their lives survive their dust  
Until the gold they sought has turned to rust.*