

CORNELIS VLEESKINS

FOR YOUNG TOM PETRIE
Bunya festival, Blackall Range
circa 1839

1 CRY FOR THE DEAD

A snapped twig. Movement around last night's fire
this morning's smouldering ashes. Another twig.
A stir of dried leaves. Blowing warmth and flame
In a signal to those early birds whose job it is
to lead the sun back from his nightrest.

A signal
for the stirring tribe to let forth an unholy rant
a sing-song *cry for the dead*

but no, young Tom . . .
not a mourning for that 'pigeon-toe' my late wife
or that 'big-head' who slew her

No. Not a mourning.
A morning. A morning call, cajoling the old ones
full of cunning, they'd like to sleep in.
We too are cunning: without tricks and flattery,
without oaths and curses, the old ones will not rise
to re-create the land we walk on

This is a cry for
the dead, the old ones to come

Re-paint these rocks
these trees these gullies re-make the day
out of this chaos night

Camp is struck as
sun's light throws stickshadows across the landscape.

2 TO CLIMB A TREE

Bunya: your father, young Tom, and his friend
gave it a foreign name: *Araucdria bidwillii*
as though all these trees were but many arms
of the one man.

This is not so. Each tree
is named for its owner given him by his father
and his father's father.

If a man were to climb
a tree which does not belong to him
he would find it barren
for the trees know
their owner.

In the season each man climbs
his trees using a vine around the trunk
(unlike other trees where the trunk is notched
to aid the climber, no man scars his bunya
for to pain the tree would cause it to be barren)
He breaks open the first cone
checks that the nuts
are ripe and that no-one has done bad magic on the tree

then throws the cones to those who wait below
who gather the nuts in dilly bags
take these
to the waiting roasting fire the waiting feast
the wallabies the snakes the yams the eggs the grubs

Each tree belongs to only one man and only one man
can climb each tree
but the feast the nuts
taste best when roasted and shared with all the tribes

3 THIS FALLEN TREE THIS PRONE BODY

They go up a grassy spur. A dog runs between the legs of one of the men. The man stands rooted like a tree. Calls the dog back to run again between his legs. If the dog had not retraced its tracks both would have been struck dead . . .

A tree has fallen half across the path. The leading man takes a bush from the roadside and throws it on the path. All walk quietly around the fallen tree. To walk under a fallen tree would cause a swelling of the body. And death . . .

A man sleeps on the creekbank. A man drops his dilly bag in the path of those following. Retrieved or wakened, the obstacle is avoided. To step over a man or any of his belongings means death . . .

Young Tom entices a dog to run between his legs. Young Tom walks under the fallen tree, crawls under a fence. Young Tom invites the whole tribe to step across his prone body. Young Tom tries to explain that it is all superstition: *You see, I didn't die . . .*

Oh, but you are white. White men have different laws.