



Axon: Creative Explorations, Vol 10, No 2, December 2020

FIVE POEMS ABOUT AUSTRALIA

Marianne Boruch

Backdrop and reason

During late summer into winter, March through July 2019, an enormous privilege befell me: I spent five months observing the astonishing wildlife of Australia to prepare to write a sequence of poems. To that end, and as an American Fulbright Senior Scholar, I was welcomed into the International Poetry Studies Institute at the University of Canberra while also — with my husband — volunteering at Tidbinbilla, that cherished nature reserve, and briefly at ACT Wildlife to help bottle-feed orphaned joeys. Elsewhere I was engaged in conversations with poets and wildlife people throughout the country, including the Outback.

The 'neo-ancient/medieval bestiary' I sought to write from this rich experience is now complete, a book-length sequence. Its recounting kept adding up: a look at underwater wonders two hours offshore from Port Douglas; the thousands, if not millions of termite palaces in Western Australia and the Northern Territory; the way a museum taxidermist re-ups a young Red Kangaroo from the 1930s with new wire and foam. My mind was blown again and again.

Yet as those poems of the natural world made it to the page mainly during the months *after*, half a world and an ocean away, stranger things began to happen. In some cases as I wrote, the animals themselves began to speak, among them an emu — hit by a reckless driver in the Outback — back from the dead three times in the book to mull its fate and ours; a koala angered enough at human naiveté to set the record straight, a fiercely unrepentant Crown-of-Thorns starfish defending its reef-destroying hungers. Other points to pin down my species and time travel: Pliny's first bestiary, his 37-book *Historia Naturalis*, the annoying smart-ass intrusions of one snarky archangel who in the end only wishes to be a sulphur-crested cockatoo, the human history of Australia including an Indigenous Elder's advice sometimes getting through my thick head.

It was scary and thrilling to write these poems; I was stunned by what they unfolded. The *me* in all of it began to shrink accordingly. I'm not sure how much is diatribe or manifesto in this work but perhaps some of the pieces go back to a universal ache and rage and loss, certainly among the ancient reasons for poetry.

As I wrote through the American fall and winter, friends in Canberra and elsewhere sent me deeply unnerving emails about the great fires that had started shortly after we left at the beginning of August. That is a story best left to Australian poets. But the smoke and heat — and tragedy, both human and animal — haunt these poems regardless. The bushfires' effect was a worldwide grief. And go well beyond climate change's roster of what has perished and what has not — yet.

Last June I turned 70 years old. I've written poems since childhood, such as they are. This oldest and most beloved literary genre still mystifies me. I know less and less what a poem is, why it exists at all, how it should be shaped, what exactly it can discover. I do know you throw away the key every time you sit down to write, and that the new wheel you could invent might crush you in the process.

But it's an addiction, this losing yourself to the world in the making.

SHE OF THE RESCUE CENTRE ANSWERED

first thing —

Someone is poisoning magpies. *Keep the bodies
out of the freezer. We'll study their livers.*

People suck! she said, hanging up. But the Indigenous Elder
could have told me that.

On the wall, a poster. Bogong moths roosting in vacant caves,
loving the cool air. Migrations go haywire in drought.

Another call: someone's hit a roo.

The joey's sweet but going crazy on the sunporch.
This afternoon, okay. We'll come by.

She still could be shaking her head. *Bloody drivers.*
It's the glare, she thinks aloud. They could not see to see.

Dickinson wrote nearly exactly that to
nail down a last moment, just after *And then
the windows failed* I can't tell cause from effect,
one overlay from another.

As for the magpie, its liver surely tried to clear, to strain

the poison. Fast or slow, I bet the bird —
 how many? — flew just fine for a while in screechy loops.
 Then to fall, to try *up* again, and failing,
 shiny black/white feathers run aground near the roses

Most raucous caroling in the garden, silent for once.

Is that what alerted the caller? Behind the house,
 a sudden. It was vast.

THE CROWN-OF-THORNS STARFISH LIKE

The Crown-of-Thorns Starfish like
 something off a holy card
 creeps over for a taste of the sweet hard coral's

every colour on earth under the sea.
Saint Crown-of-Thorns Starfish to you, it says,

so many want me dead. Here's the divers' clever drill —

Injected vinegar stops my luminous breakfast.
 Right. I go rigid, then kaput.
 My 'forever enemy' (gee thanks, Great-

Chain-of-Being), the Triton Snail also sits
 on that jury of urgent-despicable ways to end me.

Thus the hate I hoard like a charm!

Even for water those Tritons wallow in — divers
 drop by drop *that* to herd
 the gaggle of us for easy culling, the snails'

faintest scent shot through the waves until panic
 drives me to those needles and cheap acids.

Oh I ache to be left alone to *my own devices* (okay,

I adore clichés) in these mountains and valleys
underwater warmed by human time and indifference
where I am *nocturnally inclined*,

my flamboyant spines of terror upright, off my 21 flattened
ferris-wheel arms to *iridesce* me purple by dusk.

(You like that? *iridesce*? My new verbs shine!)

Toward supper too I creep and I creep (love that part, I'm fast),
then triumphantly lower my open gut to grind up
those Coral fluttering their hearts out. Yum.

My heart? There's nothing new in the world
but the oldest hungers. Only three questions I ever or anyone —

Can I eat it? Will it eat me? Can I have sex with it?

Quiz: How many acres of your precious reef
do I masticate in 30 days? ('masticate' = *chew, munch, crunch*
in Spellcheck's downhome options. Imagine the audio.)

Check me out, idiots: <https://www.aims.gov.au/cots> ...
Then give it up — my reef, my reef, MY reef!

As for my own personal predator, those 'protected' Tritons —

going down, comrades! Their fabulous shells snatched
for cold cash. See? You can't kick out every one of me.
Native Species! I'm born bad to these parts,

merely oversexed, overeating,
over-making more of me, and more.

I'm grim. I'm beautiful. As the world.

A KANGAROO IN FLIGHT

or bent forward, set to spring off bark
some poet cut, flattened out and began to paint
a century ago the Indigenous way, this straight-up interplanetary
anatomy lesson: elusive sphere of belly clearly in there,
skinny star routes linked-up and down the body's
galactic interior, small planets blue and green for
brain, heart then the big clanging bent legs jet-streamed at the ready,
those little dino arms that could clip bloody anything
or chuck a wee joey to a pouch, once-moving parts frozen
in the painting as if laid bare
by the first oldest X-ray for the ever-after black endless
in profile: how I might dream if I were
half roo myself in release and let go of my
human-haves-and-never-had-really
better thrown to graveyards I whistle past,
why not, and leap —

OUT THERE FOR THE FAMOUS BALLOONS —

the colourful sort that go up with little baskets of
people under but we got the day wrong
or the time.

By accident then, because we heard it first,

people around creeped it up.

Just to be clear: Janus got stamped to silver and bronze
for centuries, his head doubled in profile
to stare left *and* right, no way to stop

whatever future or take-your-pick past.

A coin Pliny must have fished out of his robe
looking down, thinking twice — both ways — and kept.

FOUR WAYS TO REMEMBER THE KOALA

- 1) It never was a bear.
- 2) It slept 23 hours a day in the tops of trees.
- 3) And children said: when does it pee?
And grown-ups said: when does it, you know ...
- 4) It was never not endearing.

*The nerve of you humans thinking how I thought. Or if I thought!
Such a load of....*

Who are you to write my elegy? The Indigenous Elder was right.

*Put this in your poetry: Let it be known
I peed via dream and dreamed
a future when I fucked.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marianne Boruch

Marianne Boruch's ten books of poetry include *The Anti-Grief* (Copper Canyon Press, 2019). She has written three essay collections about poetry, most recently *The Little Death of Self* (University of Michigan Press, 2017), and a memoir, *The Glimpse Traveler* (Indiana University Press, 2011). An eleventh collection, *Bestiary Dark*, is forthcoming from Copper Canyon. Among her honours are the Cecil Hemley Award from the Poetry Society of America, the Kingsley-Tufts Poetry Award, fellowships/residencies from the Fulbright Commission (in Scotland and Australia), the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center, MacDowell, Yaddo, Djerassi, the Anderson Center (Red Wing, MN), and two American national parks (Denali and Isle Royale). Going rogue and emeritus in 2018 from Purdue University where she established the MFA program in 1987, Boruch continues to teach in the graduate low-residency Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College, Swannanoa, NC.

URL: <https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-vol-10-no-2-dec-2020/five-poems-about-australia>

[Privacy policy](#) [Copyright](#)

Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973