

Short-list

- 'After rain in various guises along Bell's Line Road'
John Stokes, ACT

After rain in various guises along Bell's Line of Road

This ground is harder than I ever knew;
feels like it's been drying out for an ice age,
like it's still resisting; timber to Young Bell's axe
after the light-footed maiden passes
crying after the crowbar sings.

This ground has swallowed the double blaze
and the hot shadows scribbling on sunlight.
A democracy of massacres has left it speechless
its tongue dun-coloured. Its silences,
its flesh, are too far gone.

Death and songs along the trade routes,
the compass, the lash and the almanacs
crowding into the cave, the signal
tilting in oil. Hoddle and traffic. Not much
now, to go on.

Such was the entering. And the abandoning
and all warmth's sheathing. She, the lost one,
grips and welcomes blind, in panic
like an echo loosening on scree
and flying upward. Nothing.

But listen to the hard leaves tipping:
a pause before the onward rush.
The bird hangs upside down in the branches...