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Bushwalk

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Bushwalk *by Brian Hawkins*

You go down the ridge
 In rain, cowed like a monk
 In your blue raincoat, down
 Through the mystical forest
 Of Antarctic Beech, down
 Through the forest of mighty eucalypts,
 Down through the Crabapples littering the track
 With acidic fruit, down
 Through the tangle, past
 The turn-off to the old mine,
 Down through the drier
 Eucalypt forest, over tree-falls,
 Into the lush rainforest that glissades
 From the lower slopes into
 Sunday Creek, Sunday Creek
 Preening herself
 In a luminous mist, her cobbles
 Slicked and shining. Then crunching,
 Clinking and splashing
 Downstream, the rain
 Withdrawing like the hands of a priest
 Into cloud-robos,
 The water cold, the air grey, pebble banks
 Where stands of River Oak saplings
 Worship in unison
 The flood of five months ago,
 Pointing the way
 To the Bellinger. At the river you turn
 Upstream, looking for a place
 To camp, the light dwindling,
 And throw down your pack on wet leaves
 On a rainforest flat
 While the greyness steepens into black
 And the stone walls on the far side of the river
 Dissolve into the sound
 Of travelling water.

Dry and warm in your sleeping bag
 Under the fly, you eat
 A small dinner, lie back and enter
 Not sleep exactly
 But suspended animation
 For 12 hours, woken once

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By the sound of a tree dropping a branch,
Woken other times
By nothing, each time
Checking the numbers
On your watch, gibberish,
Meaningless symbols
That track the progress of the frail canoe
In which you voyage
Between the shadows of afternoon and the shadows of dawn.

Morning grey, a weak
And unenthusiastic fanfare
By a few birds
That soon break off,
The gargling of the river
Mining into your consciousness,
Automatic rising and tea-making,
Envious glances
At a distant ridge
That is wearing a crown of gold
Where the sun's hands are running down it,
The sky over the valley colourless,
Like water, assuming,
As you begin to march
Upstream, seeking the light,
A stone-washed, then a violent blue –
Like a shout of triumph over the rain.

You come round a bend
And the sun, waiting for you,
Whacks you in the face.
Everywhere before you, layers of pouring water
Are spread, like the sun's table,
With the dimpled brilliance of tin-foil,
Sudden jags and flashes of golden light
Like rings of lightning spreading out from your ankles
That move through the stream
As cold as an ice-bucket –
Crowds of water jostling forwards
Towards the turnstile of your propped legs,
Brushing past you and into the past.

Then your way leads into shadows
Once more, the pink bar
Of rock at the mouth
Of Crescent Creek, which you go up,

Instantly entering the mortuary
 Of the rainforest,
 Treading a floor of decay
 While tall trees regard you without interest –
 Strangler Fig with its trunk
 Like a slurry of maggots, Black Booyong
 Whose leaves are like spread palms,
 Trifoliate Bonewood,
 Glittering Steelwood
 And Turnipwood with green swordfish for arms.

You stand beneath the haunted table
 Of a *Ficus obliqua*, the ground around you
 Littered with morsels
 From a feast which noone is eating,
 The pale branches –
 Acres above you –
 Empty as the moon.
 It is like a monastery
 Whose inhabitants have all been put to the sword
 And only the great columns remain.
 A Yellow-throated Scrubwren
 Calls, a child playing in the ruins.

Gazing at the face of a hunted king
 In dark creekwater,
 You stare at the flickering streambed
 Where everything is covered in a rust-coloured silt
 That, shifting focus,
 Becomes a photographic plate
 Developing irregular masses
 Of foliage
 And white cracks of sky.
 Like the kindly face
 Of a Miyazaki potato-spirit,
 A squat boulder, anointed
 By a shaft of silver
 That has traveled all the way from the sun,
 Glows with benevolence,
 A stone with no sword in it.
 Tiny beings
 Dog-fight on the clayey water
 And all your troubles drop away like fleas.

You return to the everyday river,
 Turn up Anderson's Creek

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And are stopped in your tracks
By the dream-like vision
Of a waterfall
On the far side of a green pool,
Embraced by the stony arms
Of mountains,
Blowing icy spray at you
And telling you to go away.

Which you do, returning
To the Bellingen and plodding upstream
Through dark channels, by banks thronged
With slender Coachwoods
Like ranks of swimmers teetering, about to race,
And gazing sometimes
Almost with disbelief
At the blue heart of the sky
In which, for effect only,
A solitary fleece
Is floating, dispersing
And coalescing. That there could be such a world
Of pleasure and light; that it could be attainable.

You arrive where a spindly Hoop Pine
Marks the entrance
Of a nameless creek into the river,
A terrain of small to medium sized boulders
Bleached white – and shining,
Because you have had the good fortune
To stumble on this place in the middle
Of its one daily hour of sunshine –
The sun like a waspish star
Sagging further every minute
Towards a ragged forested ridgeline
Where you will soon be walking –
And you take off your jumper
And thermal tops and spread them,
Together with the sopping shirt
You wore in the rain yesterday,
Like gaudy planarians
On various glowing stones,
Yourself luxuriating
At the far end of the hour-glass,
The corner of the stream that the sun
Will hit longest before its fingers
Trail away into the hills,

Splashing your mouth with jets of incomparable fresh water
 And feeding your belly with cheese and biscuits that are just passable.

The carpet of sunlight is pulled from under your feet;
 Your things are all drowning in shadow,
 Not much drier than before: the gorge's
 Ration of daylight has been exceeded
 And, before the shivers begin,
 You fill up your water-bag and set out
 Up the nearest spur, a baleful outgrowth
 Of rotten rock, rotting vegetation
 And devious vines that snare and rake you
 With flails of shark's teeth – Petermannia
 The whippy lasso; Cassytha, Devil's Twine,
 Prickly Supplejack and, higher up,
 Smilax australis, the flexible green saw
 That dreams of severing ankles, shins and thighs
 Clean from their bodies; but thank god
 No Calamus, the Lawyer Cane, whose stems
 Dwell in the centre of a cloud of spines
 That are actually quite soft and supple to the touch
 But whose dangling tentacles, as fine as hair,
 Will catch you and scratch at you like feral cats,
 Against the grain – an unpleasant ascent
 Until, higher, the gradient lessens
 And a calm, uncluttered forest
 Of White Mahogany and other peaceable trees
 Succeeds the spiteful mob below;
 Then you reach the top, a narrow walkway
 Inhabited at head height by a whirling cloud
 Of sticks and branches, not offensive
 Plants in themselves – Blueberry Ash,
 Leucopogon, Forest Oak – but scratchy to walk through
 When every step sends seven blunt-edged spears
 Scoring the arms, the forehead, the bleeding shins
 Until, dropping down into what seems
 To be a saddle, a composed Eucalypt forest again occurs
 With Brush Box, Coastal Blackbutt, New England Blackbutt
 And – Jesus Christ!
 That thing behind the trees like the dome of Saint Paul's!
 Can this be the volcanic plug I have heard about
 But which I imagined, seeing it is not marked on the map
 Interrupting the smooth flow of contours,
 As a broken finger of rock maybe five, maybe ten metres high,
 Not this colossal – thing!
 A bald thumb fifty, sixty metres tall – more – higher –

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Towering like Goliath over the weak trees,
The weak shrubs, every living thing
With the authority of ever-during stone.

Worshipful impulses well up within you like vomit;
Your body tingling, your throat dry, you throw down your pack
And hurry to where you will be able to take the measure
Of this monster, to at least be able to see it
Without an intervening screen of forest.
You go left, but the land slopes away
Into a funnel that will end, you fear,
Nowhere. You snap a picture
Of the forested spurs on the other side of Cooks Creek
Far, far beneath you, framed on the right by a gigantic,
Lumpish boulder; then you scamper round
Onto the other side, the right hand side, of the monolith
And make your way down
Beneath walls of purple stone, level after level
Down through a mighty forest of Blue Gums and Flooded Gums,
To where there is a flattening, even – the world be praised! –
What appears to be a platform – it is a platform,
Starred with Grass-trees that you push through
Onto a dark pavement of stone, with *Leptospermums*
And *Plectranthus* whose scent makes the mind shimmer
And an immaculate view
Of the volcanic obelisk, side on, Point Lookout
Sphinx-like behind it, a myriad ridges, beneath you
Cooks Creek, Anderson's Creek and the bowl of The Crescent
Thronged with rainforest, Majors Point, Darkie Point,
Cliffs and headlands you've never heard of,
Valleys without names, Gumbaynggirr country,
The sun descending like the head of a shining daisy,
Blinding, flare-like, about to touch the obelisk and not scorch it,
Flashing like a bronze shield – ardent – a mirror –
Signalling to the tottering brain
That falls back, that fails to interpret, though burning
With love and imagination,
While you gorge yourself with photos.

Back at the saddle you make tea,
String up a rope – you will not need
A fly tonight, the sky is without flaw –
And hang up your clothes, still damp,
Still wet, listening to the birds
As the day dies, the great rock
Greedy stockpiling the last of the light

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To warm its cold flanks – then in the darkness,
 The first hush of nightfall,
 Like a breath of jasmine on the summer air,
 Comes the wild, wilful rambling
 Of a Bassian Thrush.
 You don't normally light fires, the smoke interferes with your breathing
 But tonight you scrape away a mass of brown leaves
 And ribbons of fallen bark to make a ring of dirt
 In which you place two leaves of notepaper, some drier gum-leaves
 And skinny twigs, and set it alight, watching the purple flame curl
 Across the paper and bite into the leaves,
 Adding larger and larger sticks, some of which burn
 While some merely hiss and flatten out, like snakes enjoying
 The opulence of warmth, until there is a branch as thick as your wrist
 Mosaiced with coals, bright and red,
 Slowly crumbling into silver-haired ash
 Above the living red-purple heart
 Of the furnace
 That streams with heat like wind flattening a lake –
 A gorgeous spectacular, a violet Moulin Rouge
 Watched by an audience of two socks draped across a leaning stick,
 A scarlet jumper hanging from a stake
 And two groundlings, open-mouthed shoes propped up
 To get a better view of the radiance.
 After dinner you lie back – the wind playing with the crowns
 Of the trees overhead, a fingernail moon
 Clipping the ridge at your back, stars
 Blinking on and off behind the swaying treetops,
 The unseen obelisk simply a large,
 Ovaloid absence of stars –
 And wonder, burning incense
 Before the great stone buddha.

Morning fresh from the kiln of creation,
 You are awake for the dawn but not
 Out of your sleeping bag and on the platform
 Before the sun is already up and climbing, hanging behind the Crescent and
 caressing
 The pink-orange-grey cliffs of the plug
 Of the old Ebor Volcano – 20 million years young –
 With the fondness of long acquaintance,
 And the arms of the Grass-trees are all flung wide
 Like sea-anemones, like khaki pompoms
 To receive the light –
 Like wild hair beneath wizened penises – and the Plectranthus,
 Whose pale spearmint-shaped leaves have been

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Bruised and molested, is releasing odorous benison into a sky
Bright with admiration. Like a young god –
In heart if not body – you recline bare-chested on the dark rock
Letting the morning envenom you like alcohol.
A Peregrine Falcon arrives and kicks up a fuss,
Perching on a tree and yakking at you
But it needn't worry, you weren't even thinking of nesting here;
A Lewin's Honeyeater and a female Regent Bowerbird
Fossick in the crown of a tree at eye-level –
A Euodia? – two Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes swoop among the foliage like
tropic-birds
And on the way back to camp a Rose Robin with the voice of spring
Serenades you from a very small, very high balcony.

The fire is now a grey smear
Of powder on the forest floor,
With black sticks pointing to it
Which you pick up and hurl
End over end into the bush,
Disperse the ashes and cover the bare earth
With dry leaves and bark ribbons, so that tomorrow
A newcomer would think the place virgin;
Then you saddle up and make your way
Back along the ridge where you arrived yesterday,
Then further, pushing through the shoving
Head-high porcupine of bare twigs
Until after two uncomfortable hours you reach the knoll
From which you will descend
On a broad and pleasant ridge
That starts off with Eucalypt forest, ends
In a gloomy palace of Coachwoods
Rising out of a maroon and ferny mulch
And deposits you back on the Bellinger,
On a stretch of river enjoying
Its ten minutes of lunchtime sunlight for the day.
Now off you go downstream, marveling
At the gorge's green underworld
That seems sunken here, beyond
The reach of time, or the sun –
Reaches of river cobbled with piazzas
Of glistening stones that will not dry
Until October, mouldy trees, pits of verdure the world has forgotten,
Evolution gliding overhead on silken lines
Into the future, leaving these primal chambers unsullied
For shade- and moisture-loving creatures to claim
And copulate in as formerly, as always, when,

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Epochs before the sun
 Like a young spark emerged and dried
 Its wings in the oven-blast of creation,
 This same innocence was going on –
 Reflections that end
 At the sight of a nasty little canyon
 Section, a deep pool with steep and slippery walls
 Of stone, for if there is one thing
 You hate, it is sidling
 On wet strata angled towards a gulf
 Where stones wait to wound you, with nothing to hold onto
 But filmy ferns that have nothing to hold onto –
 So you attempt the canyon
 At river level, hoping to hug
 The sculpted walls without falling,
 And lo and behold it is easily done,
 You are out the other side smiling
 Where another canyon awaits you, and beyond it another,
 A tortuous snake of canyons
 Whose far end is a dozen bends of the river away,
 But which, thanks to the drought, you get through,
 Wading through pools no more than thigh deep
 Or scrambling over the smooth bookends of stone
 That channel the wilful river
 Until at last there is a pool too deep to wade,
 With walls too high to scale –
 The last in the series –
 And you must take off your pack, your front-facing bumbag
 That has the camera wrapped in a plastic jacket in it,
 Take off your jumper and khaki shirt, place them on a ledge,
 Lower your shrinking body into the water and, hyperventilating madly,
 Ferry your stuff from one side of the pool to the other
 Held above your head, then stand gasping, laughing on the dry sand
 On the riverbank, thanking the mercies of the wilderness
 For the warm, soft jumper you will put on
 As soon as your skin is drier.
 Now it is not far to the Hoop Pine
 And the unnamed side creek you saw yesterday,
 Where you drink water until you feel you could throw up
 And try to discover the source of the leak in your water-bottle
 (You cannot), then haul yourself up a spur again,
 A steep but open spur with Grey Myrtle
 Trunks to hang onto and use your scrawny arms
 To pull up your burning legs, then gentling and opening out
 Into a wonderful rocky ridge
 Clothed in well-mannered sclerophyll, not much understorey

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Apart from the Sandfly Zieria, flowering with tiny frilly maids' caps,
And a Prostanthera
Whose leaves you keep on grabbing and crushing
To release their minty scent,
With, a hundred or so metres from the start,
A serendipitous pile
Of boulders, which you climb for a heart-aching view
Of the valley of the upper Bellinger, showing in profile
Both the spur you ascended yesterday
And the one you descended this morning,
With all the canyony section of river hidden between them,
The valley of the unnamed creek
And behind it, the ridge on which you will spend tonight,
A shimmering wilderness of iridescent green
Ridges and valleys, troughs of purple shadow beneath a canopy
Of purest caerulean, the sun raining
Down beams of splendour on Earth's rippling mantle,
The odd picture-book cloud on fire with inspiration, burning to sail
Beyond the boundaries of the known world.

Enough gawking, now comes the hard work
Of the up, the up and the up
Through a sunny wilderness,
The gain in altitude measured
By the disappearance of the Prostantheras and Zierias
And the appearance of Blueberry Ashes
And the good Smilax – glycyphylla –
With its sarsaparillary leaves that you chew
For their tot of sweetness.
Once again you reach the top of a ridge,
Proceeding along it until
There is a saddle with a modicum of flat ground
Among the New England Blackbutts,
And reflecting that an extra
Half hour of walking is unlikely to discover a better
Place to camp, you gleefully lighten your shoulders,
Stringing up between trees
A rope on which, if the weather threatens, you can rig the fly,
And on which in the meantime you drape whatever is damp,
Then brew tea and, sitting on your tattered old ground-sheet,
Watch the golden comet of the sun
Streaming towards New England.

That night there is no fire – the wind comes and goes –
The flat ground is not as extensive as you thought –
And you sleep uncomfortably, muscles rigid

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To prevent sliding,
 Something is prowling through the forest,
 Crackling over the leaves, coming towards you
 Then with a growl as you sit up and turn on the torch
 Springing into a tree and regarding you with eyes like red moons,
 Higher and higher up the tree, wisps of bark floating down,
 Staring at you in disbelief
 And grunting with outrage –
 A Mountain Brushtail Possum
 Encountering a human for the first time.

Up with the dawn in the morning, you get going early –
 This, the last day of the walk –
 Sweating already at seven
 In a strange humidity,
 A bank of grey haze
 That has trawled down from the north.
 At around eight you dash your shin
 With eye-watering momentum
 Into a jagged stake-like stick sticking out of the ground
 At 45 degrees, like a pike,
 Pause to bend down
 And extract a solid chip of wood
 From the gluey wound, leg
 Streaming with blood, and keep walking
 As numbing shock creeps over the injured limb.
 Down you go, down, down
 Another generous old-growth spur,
 Tilting steeply at the last
 And throwing up a tangle of sharp-toothed *Petermannia*
 To antagonise you
 Before placating you with a subtropical rainforest flat
 By Platypus Creek, where you wash out the wound,
 Make it better with a bandaid
 And hobble ecstatically up and down through the rainforest
 For an hour, photographing Birdsnest Ferns and Elkhorns
 In a blaze of yellow-green light.

Coming down, the leg was tender,
 But going up it is fine,
 And as you head up the Grasstree Ridge,
 The thousand vertical metres ahead of you
 Really a formality, you have again that joy,
 Exhilaration,
 Clarity of mind and heart
 That has been with you so often these days

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And that is what you came for.
You are blessed, and the best blessing
Is to know it. As if signaling
For a final time the excellence of this world,
As you ascend the ridge you are granted
A lovely discovery. Everywhere the Blueberry Ash
Has been flaunting its miniature berries,
Blue as the blue on the Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs'
Blazing blue-and-white jerseys at kick-off:
And now you are shown the use of those berries.
Your favourite birds, almost, the comical nomads
Whose mysterious wanderings intrigue you
So much, the Topknot Pigeons – they are here!
A flock of thirty birds
As you trudge up the ridge
Abandons the Blueberry Ashes where they have been feeding
And shoots through the forest around you
Like a powerful wind, surging on grey wings
Elsewhere, to the next feeding ground,
Away into the wilderness,
Disappearing almost before you can register
Their unmistakable banded tails.

Brian Hawkins is a poet and ecologist living on the mid north coast of New South Wales. His first collection of poetry, *Darkwood Poems*, was published in 2009.