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# Golden Whistler

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JOHN KINSELLA

*Golden Whistler*

I've heard it for years, its mezzo soprano  
overwhelming the jam trees, charging the dry roots  
of flooded gums in a place where water is increasingly scarce,  
the gullies leading down to the river choked  
and reconfigured; and in the air aromatic with wattle bloom  
and pesticides, it shakes the glass sky  
around the mountain. It stops short of a high note  
when a rifle cracks over the range, barely audible  
though unmistakable. The firebreaks dried and cracking now  
where I started towards the stand of gums,  
the hay cutting in full swing, so quails, insects, and reptiles  
only just awake make fractal escapes against the clean lines  
of the cut, and I hear the golden whistler and look up;  
on the twist of a dead branch it sits, letting rip  
with a song wound up with the season: I see it.  
A first, in over thirty years of hearing and not clearly  
seeing: black face with white beneath, a yellow-gold belly  
like the collective spark of all birds remaining, its immense  
voice pivoting on the tip of its tiny triangular beak.  
The whistler darts over to a jam tree near the fence;  
it has perched a few feet away, looking me straight  
in the eye. In the eye of the storm  
it is not silent as we're told: it's where expectations  
grow and decisions are made. In a few hours,  
I will fly in a round-about way back to Cambridge.  
The pain of Huntingdon Life Sciences, of university  
experiments on farm animals just behind the college there,  
merges with the kangaroo shoots, foxes impaled on posts,  
and sheep bulldozed into pits here... but with me goes the song  
of the Golden Whistler, and out of the eye of the storm,  
an affirmation: operatic, visual, overwhelming,  
an impulse to say that it doesn't have to be this way.