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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.