

## The Sodium Detectives

*J. P. Quinton*

Not waving shows I'm rude, *an outsider*;  
we three had driven and driven and drove: our sons were left behind.

We crossed Mistake Creek, ate tortilla chips with marmite sandwiches,  
and caught details of the burning back behind the burning off —

we were looking for murderers, those who knew how to kill,  
who had tricked and were given the scalpel, the thermometer.

We stood on the white chalk, what was left of the carcass,  
we brainstormed and reconstructed the scene,

we placed lettered signs by the evidence and photographed  
and touched the tall salmon gum, as old as the golf course.

We saw the Eurotrash quartz cairns, the crumbling air reef, balanced,  
like golf 'greens' made of sump oil, an eye ruse, the dam an infinity pool

— overlooking the salt-pan Camm River.

Compelled to walk, to let the word work against the machine  
a search party of three, sent, by our own orders, to look for sodium

to crystallise the pseudo-scorpions, and the motorbike frogs  
in the waterholes below the sluice, there's Mum and Dad arguing,

the truce broken by a parking ticket, Mum and Dad arguing at Hyden:  
the holiday highlight, 'Wave Rock' prevents my best work, my ability

to solve the case, to be as high as possible, with the haircut Dad hated.  
Beckoning my sisters, who weren't sure, to ride the wave.

It's *okay* to play, to play like the roo and willy-wag-tail chasing  
the ute doing forty, beyond the fence, between the acacias;

whose interaction I now take as forgiveness; the retired couple,  
the Asian family, the German girls, us whiteys, drinking tea and coffee

and discussing ball tampering, *Dark Emu*,  
whose interactions I now take as forgiveness.

Flies fill our backs, our throats fill with flies, show us how black flies are sodium.  
Are symptoms and soil decomposition. *Goodbye River*, we say on arrival,

and the green lake dries up, like pale green boogies, rolled and flicked  
at the idling V8, evidence of evidence tampered, models questioned.

The discussion derailed, we squeezed the bulldozer driver for information,  
but he played dumb. Obfuscated leads. Salt is like chalk on a blackboard,

lines written as punishment; a ditch-witch outstretched, exhibit X,  
the hollow grey melaleuca spires are dream-catchers, resort owners' detritus,

or poor finch perches, take your pick, the arachnids have left.  
In The Dead Sea bodies float and confirm the wives' tale:

few lust for steak and kidney pies when the butcher is the last shop to shut,  
avoid the cave, avoid the roadhouse coffee, avoid the semi-arid

from October to April, avoid the flagpole and the big flag flapping in post-  
Anzac afterglow. *The Currawong flocks, a witness said, once turned day to night.*

*Finches acned the air, and ate our wheat, so we shot them out  
of the sky, the way we shot the stream from the earth.*

It's the self-appointed detectives who stake out the half-dead mulga,  
and the half-blue-half-pink-lake, who pace the white and speak of self-seeding,

of future generations, who know the suspects; the contra-endangered  
those protected by proxy votes, who have lost sight of their motive

and kill by habit, burning back the thin strips, scrambling satellite images,  
they don't know the victim, don't want to know the victim.

They follow orders to rip out the riparian remnants. *If we'd known,  
they say, if someone had simply told us the stream would turn white*

*that the soap wouldn't lather, and that the tourists would turn back,  
we would have done everything we could, would have changed our tune,*

*we would have planted a few salt-bush, if only we were told,  
if only someone spoke up ...*

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