

## Roo Borson / AUTUMN RECORD

Yoshino  
cherries:  
autumn  
in the underworld.

It was March, the beginning of autumn in the southern hemisphere, and we had just seen Yoshino cherries — the famous trees, that is — for the first time. Except this wasn't Yoshino, and they weren't blossoming. Instead the leaves were a dry late-summer green, even after the drizzle that had come and gone, alternating with fog, all day. Walking high up along the path that threads one side of the ravine, black dripping foliage below, dry sky above, there was a clear sense of being in two places at once: two continents, two ideas, each a museum and a wilderness. Yoshino and Mt Lofty. Later that night, under the reading lamp, for a moment my eyes close: light of another day, crickets singing in the long daylight grass.

Often now by the river there are fragments of dead things, sometimes no more than a couple of shining fish scales, or a tail unattached to anything. This week so far I've seen a whole duck carcass that had been mauled and started to blacken, and something else: the picked-clean skeleton of a tiny nestling — though when I crouched down beside it, it seemed to be made of fish bones. My eyes, even my teeth, are not what they used to be — so whatever I say now I have to say with a lisp.

All night possums on the roof  
play leaping sliding games —  
and now the rain.

I try to think of what it must be like — to have a mating season, like the brush-tailed possums. We're watching television with the lights out when the thunder begins on the roof: galloping, followed by a drawn-out rhythmic wheezing, wild and strange. Then they leap into the trees and are gone. All day long the persistent sense of descending damp concrete stairs; leaf tips, rooftops, can be all alight with afternoon sun, yet we're in an underworld. Rooms at night so completely dark there is neither right nor left, no past or future. Lifting back the curtain, there might be a dot of light — but this too, whatever is visible, is just another temperature of the one monotonous dimension, which is darkness.

A forensic gloom of hairs, leaves, pollen, petals, fur, burrs, seeds, segments of casuarina, the dusky red threads of the bottlebrush. Every day the carpets accumulate new decorations, beside which the shoes take on a festive air, having fetched them in. Certain plants are only now coming into flower: new candles on the sawtooth banksias, bursts of red and yellow in the eucalyptus. Yesterday an elderly man on the bus had a minute green flower caught in his hair. It must have fallen from a tree as he passed under it.

To learn from an old master might be better —  
but there's only the brimming grass,  
the young river.

How easily last year's growth, some of it over twelve feet high, simply slumps toward the ground and is gone. And now the new unruly grass, a brilliant green along the banks. I found a baby bird, all skin and skeleton, no feathers as yet, gawky as a young turkey but no more than three inches long, shivering at the edge of the path. It couldn't walk, would tip over if it tried, its beak heavier than its legs. All the adult birds were off on the river, paying no attention. Coots and swans, pelicans, navy-chested swamp-hens. I scooped up the orphan with a magazine and carried it to the zoo nearby, where a keeper was called. Instantly she took it into her hands, crooning over it, then just as quickly scolded me, saying I'd have to take it back to the spot where I'd found it, that all I could do now was to leave it by the river again with its human scent.

Saturdays are market days. Beautiful white cheeses in wheels and semi-circles. Chunks of the pumpkin they call “blue” because of its softly glossy bluish skin, a complexion roughened by buff-colored seams and patches. Garlic chives, and varieties of green and purple water-plants that take their bitterness from the mineralized water in which they anchor themselves and grow. The high roof of the block-long market building protects everything under it: sheepskins, boots, cans of coconut milk and jars of mayonnaise, breads baked in the shapes of loaves and turtles, used television sets that may or may not work when you plug them in, huge proteas, lavishly silvered with furry edging, standing in plastic buckets. Above the best of the apple stands (Fuji and still-green Golden Delicious from the cooler hills outside the city), a Boobook owl has taken shelter on one of the thick cross-beams. It sleeps, eyes shut, its flat clock-face utterly calm amidst the hubbub of the market (though one imagines the quiet of nighttime when the gates will be locked, and mice dare to crisscross the expanse for bits of fallen food), the bigger vegetable stalls with their callers, each one louder and auctioning off the remainders at lower prices than the next, “Everything fifty cents but me!” and offering slices of overripe melon or bruised peach.

There are days when everything seems to be in parables. Reflections draped along the river, a young tree (I don't know what kind) half in autumn, half in spring — pink-veined blossoms on the one side, dried burgundy leaves on the other, shaking in the wind. It seems the seasons here confuse all but the native species, this tree joining the jacarandas, which have flowered for the third time in a single year. I can find no evidence of grafting on the young trunk, no scar. The fleshy blossoms on the half-tree's naked boughs are reminiscent of spring, but only as an emblem is reminiscent, or a keepsake by which one is still implicated in the events of one's past. Certainly nothing like the rafts of cherry and plum which, filling the eyes in springtime, can temporarily blind us.

Instead a faint thrill, that old feeling of dread over the simplest things.



Finally the rain comes, strumming the roof.  
Two or three letters in the letterbox.

The new calendar? Same pictures as last year.

You can always tell the first real rain of autumn. Even if it's only the first few drops, they announce themselves by resonating a little more hollowly, and that much more resolutely, demonstrating that summer has indeed been broken and will not be returning. As the dark falls earlier and earlier, whatever had been shrugged off among the summer drinks and gaiety as if it were some ghost of private idealism, not only outmoded but useless, comes back now with renewed longing. Home, security, permanence. A society structured on kindness. Friendship undisfigured by envy.



Eighth anniversary of my mother's death.  
I warm myself  
in her red mittens.

Today I waited out a rainstorm under an umbrella at an outdoor  
cafe. The place was deserted except for several crows — fanning and  
folding their wings, and in that way too staying dry in the rain.

Lately I've come across a curious sort of litter, scattered widely and evenly beneath a certain stand of pines. Not just needles, though there are dry needles underneath, but bits and pieces of shredded cone. And now I see that overhead, cockatoos, each balancing on one foot among the boughs, grasping a chewed-off cone in the other, are eating ripe pine seeds, shredding the tough cones with their tough-as-nails bills, and in the process littering the path below. Farther along a car has been pushed halfway into the river. It must have taken at least two people to accomplish this: the reeds all around it are flattened. A policeman and police dog emerge from the riverbank where they've been searching, and head off into the flowering wasteground along the old rail line, bottles and cans aglint beneath the net of purple morning glories.

Policeman and police dog, on duty:  
neither returns my smile.

Once, early in the morning, I happened upon a few drops of still-wet blood. This was on the university grounds, and I could see a broken ground-floor window in a nearby building. I followed the trail, the drops getting smaller and further apart as I went, all the way to the State Library, where they simply stopped. Things like this happen in broad daylight, when help is nowhere near. Another time, not far from here, I came upon someone crouched in the shadows beneath the overpass. He stood up with his pants down, not even bothering to wipe himself, and looked straight into my face.

Going through clothes that haven't been touched  
since the final weeks of early spring,

I find wads of tissue,  
tickets to performances I'd forgotten we attended.

Rain, then a dust storm (those of us unlucky enough to be waiting for the bus shield our eyes by leaning into the back of the person ahead of us in line) — followed by innumerable minute white flies which must have hatched all at once or else been carried by the wind in the wake of the cyclone which, the late afternoon news tells us, has destroyed two towns in the far northwest. They settle in the backyard pomegranate tree, and rise and shift and settle again as the gusts wane. The cats, usually so disdainful of surprises, explore with barely trembling steps their changed circumstances.

The leaves of the ornamental plums and apricots, the plane trees, the various deciduous imports and fruit trees, are finally down. The city looks newly swept. No one about (it's Sunday), but an empty phone-box outside the Mobil station keeps ringing and ringing.

Today I enter a room in which all the people I've known who are dead now are lined up as figurines on a mantelpiece facing the wall, no more than a foot high, made of some hard substance, wood or pottery, each with an arm bent upward at the elbow, fingers raised in some symbolic configuration, whose meaning, it is clear, is inaccessible to me.

On waking, though, what seems most strange is that there was no fire in the hearth.

I had never expected poetry to provide for anything beyond itself, but now I feel unhappy with poetry — or with myself — for not exceeding those expectations. The feeling is the feeling of reaching the end of Montale's poems to his dead wife just as it's becoming too dark to read, the lights coming on in the city below just as the stars too are coming out, as you wait for someone you love and depend on to be finished with some chore and come back with the car. The grasses are tasseled with seed, the crickets beginning, in stops and starts, suggestive trills. All of this happens in memory of course, recalled under the lamp's warmth as you lie in bed with your eyes closed, too tired to read. Later they'll sound more insistent: exploratory, expository, epistolary, before becoming exhausted.



"After prose has said all it can, or at least all that it is decent for it to attempt, poems rise to have their say." (Earl Miner, translator and commentator.) The Japanese, still writing in classical Chinese while adapting literature to their own purposes, were the first to compose poetic diaries. But there's only so much that even poetry can attempt. As the weeks go on, the crickets begin singing in the daytime too, as though wearying, or muddled, looking straight into daytime's true face as though it were darkness.

And where, in all of this, is autumn?

"Does it reside in the ink? But the ink is used up." (Chu Lu, painter.)

"All dark lines, and subordinate subjects of regret." (From another dream.)

The poems rise up (now, as then), but the feeling isn't in poetry.

When no one is present,  
but it appears that someone is present,  
autumn is here.