

Fire Breathing

Victoria, 2019-2020: Devastating wildfires blaze across southeastern Australia as a result of a prolonged heat wave and drought created by climate change.

Birds dropping out of the sky: burning,
and dropping out of the sky. Stars gone,
sun gone, nothing but thick darkness and fear:
ghosts wander dangerously in the smoke.

Dread has its own clarity, its own sharp edges—
no-one is the same having felt it. Too late to leave,
roads closed, flight cut off, people huddled together
close to water. The wind is about to shift.

Salvation is a crop-duster, a tanker truck, an island.
Escape no longer somewhere *out there* but only
anywhere the flames cannot go. Hands blindly
grasping, voices murmuring prayers, then

lightning flashing, bursts of brightness: lightning
but with no storm—fire-generated, a singular thing,
it crackles. By morning, Mallacoota has no power
under skies as black and dark as midnight;

by noon, fire trucks form rings around those trapped
to protect them from flames coming closer and faster.
Told to go into the water, any water, if the sirens wail
a warning. Most people will never know

how loud a fire is. It howls and screams, a voice almost
human. Some say it sounds like a freight train; others,
the voice of a dragon, the sound of a world ending
in pain. Piercing strobes of flashing lights

from emergency vehicles glitter-reflecting houses in ruins,
ashes of past lifetimes gone should anyone be left here
to mourn over them: a garden, a wall, a shop, burning,
leaving no more time to even dream

of what might be, too late for finding love, or learning
a new language, or following a vision cherished back
when sweet sunset days drifted into starry nights and life
was nothing but promise. Promises burn.

Visions burn. People burn. A heating world made manifest
in a desperate fire-breathing earth, in wild bushfires
that devour everything, and one day we'll look back
and say we never took the time

to say good-bye to the koalas.