From *The Blue Plateau*

Mark Tredinnick

**Sky**

‘Who ever doubted that the earth fell from the sky?’
— Galvin, ‘Misericord’

‘Half the wind is in the mind
And half in the mind of the wind’
— Galvin, ‘Explication of an Imaginary Text’

The heads of thirty kangaroos, all attention, stand up like wooden idols from the native grasses bunched in the paddock by Potter’s Cottages. Jim sees them, as usual, before I do, a mob of eastern greys. He points them out and then I see them too, long moments since they have had me in their sights. We are what they’re concentrating on, rapt in prayerful attention: large, four-legged, two-headed things, moving slowly through the high grass. Jim’s attention has moved on. He points out a fox making off toward the dam, away from us, and he steers Bully over to get a closer look. ‘Looks like he knows these tussocks,’ Jim says. ‘The old bugger. See him? There he goes.’ I don’t see him, but he’s there. A newcomer to this place, like us and our horses, and even more at home; so at home he can lose himself in it like a ghost.

Our veering sharply from a slow straight line after the fox makes the roos bolt for the timber. We turn the horses’ heads and follow—not that we’re giving chase, just that we are headed the same way, home. Jim nudges his horse, I press

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my heels to Stocky’s sides, and we push west through the grasses, which crowd about us, so many clustered bristles on the head of a broom, upturned to sweep the sky. Only, there’s ground beneath them, and the horses find it and carry us softly through. We are the afternoon’s breath. We are passing among these grasses like a thought through someone’s mind. We are a few words that rise, get uttered and lost, like the fox, like the roos, like the afternoon itself.

If you asked the roos, who have now bounded in their elegant panic for the cover of shadows they resemble, they would probably say the thought we embody is threat or nuisance; plain trouble. And they may be right, though they seem to have learned that we mostly go without weapons these days. What the fox spells—for animals with a far longer lineage here in this valley than the fox itself, smaller marsupials than the roos—what the fox spells for them is doom. ‘Where’s the rifle, Jim?’ I say. I, who haven’t even seen the fox.

The palomino sidesteps a strand of blackberry hiding in the tussocks as though it were barbed wire unfurling—and it might as well be. And then his horse and mine break into a run for the ridge and the timber, the sooner to be home on the other side, and we go along with the horses and their hurry. We sweep through the last of the pasture and into the shadow of the ridge. I have fallen into the horse’s rhythm; our bodies are thinking together. If it were not so much like riding through belly-high grass toward the timber, I would tell you that this metered rise and fall, this stress and unstress, feels like cantering in dactyls through cloud.

It’s early June. As we set out to look over a few of the horses Jim agists in these paddocks, he pointed to the sky, which was blue, a little grubby with the morning’s haze and fug, now largely dissolved by the wind.

‘It’s two years since I saw a cloud like that,’ he says, his head bent back. A skein of high cirrus, fraying and bone white, is drawn taut across the sky, north to south—ice, braided by wind. High up in heaven’s blue fields the winds are screaming. Down here in the blond grasses of the Kanimbla, sunlight pools and the air lies still. None of the violence of the upper air reaches down below the ridge, and we ride as though on the floor of a deep sea, while a storm distresses the surface. ‘I wonder what it is shapes a cloud just that way, once in a long while,’ Jim says. Weather just like this, he knows, over just this piece of ground. Two years ago one afternoon in winter, the quality of the light and the gesture of the wind were just like this, and the air was just as dry and cold as it is up there today. To remember this, to recall the shape of a cloud and guess at its provenance, is to belong to this place as the roos belong.

Half way round the horses, we stop by Jim’s mother’s house. Jim’s twin brother, Lachlan, is there working in the yard. He reckons the clouds this morning were
an odd colour, full of dust all the way from South Australia and all the dry country in between, country fallen into drought. The afternoon is now so clear, Jim and I find it hard to believe in Lachlan’s theory that the sky is stricken with drought, like the land it has journeyed over. But as afternoon wears on, and we ride among the horses, the cloud rolls east, the sun passes west, and, as it falls, throws light among filaments the sky remembers from the morning. They flare pink. The sky’s taut membrane is marbled like flesh, and blood runs through it. In the last of the light we see that Lach was right. Evening makes a sunset out of all that red dust. And, coming down the gravel road to the shed at half past four, Jim points north to where the ridges float in a pale blue tide, the last of the day at the bottom of the sky.

The way Jim looks at a horse is the way some men look at a car. He loves it, he knows its sins and virtues, its signature moves; he works with it; he enjoys the way it carries him across the ground; and when it breaks or grows old, he says goodbye and lets it go. He sells it or he puts it down, as he did last week with the blue colt whose grave, stove in now by the dogs, we stood by just now.

‘You dig a hole till you find rock,’ says Jim. ‘Then you lay the horse’s body on the rock and backfill. You make a mound over it, and let it settle flat. You need to dig down to rock—otherwise there’d be a hollow.’ The dogs have dug a hole down a meter or more looking for horseflesh, but have come up short, this time. The blue colt lies undisturbed, returning to earth.

‘People get sentimental about animals,’ says Jim. Among the horses we look in on this afternoon is a white mare twenty-eight years old who has just twenty-five percent vision in one eye. She’s seven-eighths blind. Jim shows me how she comes right up close to check us out; and I watch as she makes her way in the paddock, head lowered, half-steps, feeling for danger. She shies when she comes up close to a pony with hairy hoofs. ‘That one’s over thirty,’ says Jim.

He’s happy enough to take the agistment fees, but he’s mystified by people who keep these animals as pets, retire them here, and rarely visit them. When a horse of Jim’s is too old or sick to ride, it’s time to sell her. So he says, and he’s done it, I know. We come across Max, an old fit appaloosa, blue and white, who chooses the long way around a ditch of water, just to keep his feet dry, making away from us. Max was one of the horses Jim used for riders, until he got sick of the way he would never walk; just wanted to stand or run. Jim sold him to an old guy, a retired butcher, who left him down here. ‘Tom comes down from Blackheath once a month with a saddle and bridle. Catches Max, rides him over to say hello to us, rides him back and is gone for another month or so.’

Another old mare with a limp, a bay pushing thirty, belongs to a woman who moved to Tasmania three years back. ‘She rings me one night.’ Jim says. ‘“How much would cost to ship her down?” she asks. “To Tasmania. A horse thirty years old. “Way more than it’s worth,” I tell her. So she asked me to keep the horse here. She should of put the mare down. But I couldn’t bring myself to say it. A thousand odd dollars a year is a lot to spend to keep an old horse alive.’
‘And look at this old thing...’ Our afternoon ride among the elderly continues. These nags don’t look old to me, and if they’re suffering they aren’t showing it. It could be the kindness of the light they graze in. That could make anyone feel pretty good. And soft-hearted.

I haven’t ridden for months. We push the horses along—the afternoon is failing, and we still have a way to go. I am thinking how sore I’ll be tomorrow. I’m thinking how this is the best I have felt for weeks, out here in the air, on a horse in a valley. We move at a steady canter past the old woolshed and the cottages Jim’s brother has built there beside them in their image. Jim bends and opens another gate, lets me pass, bends and pulls it to, and we ride on toward another that opens onto the tufted pastures behind Potter’s Cottages. We are talking as we ride, and I am thinking how smart that feels when Jim’s mobile phone rings. It is held to his belt, and it makes a sound like a frog in a swamp, a frog in some agony. At a fast canter among this stand of young eucalypts, he reaches down with his right hand, pulls the phone from his belt, looks at the number on the screen, presses the talk button and says ‘What’s happening?’ At a canter, without breaking stride. This is what cowboys do these days.

This cowboy has just turned forty-five, and it turns out there’s a party for him tonight up on the ridgetop. Jim thinks it’s just a cookout with a couple of friends. ‘Won’t be long,’ he tells Judith. ‘Righto.’ And slips the phone back onto his belt. Still at a canter.

He looks at the sky and says ‘It’s going to be pretty cold up there tonight. The wind’s getting up, and it blows like buggery on that ridge.’ He doesn’t know it, but Judith has fifty people coming tonight to freeze up there with Jim, to let him know he’ll be out to pasture soon himself.

We have trouble with the gate into Potter’s. The post, which is new, has shrunk in the dry weather and pulled the chain tight so that Jim has to take pliers from his belt and bend the hook so it clears the eye. He gets it done, and we go through. That’s when we become two doubts in the mind of a mob of roos. That’s when we enter the cloud of grass, raining toward the sky.

‘I guess it’s what you grow up with,’ Jim says, getting back to this afternoon’s theme. Which is tough-mindedness. ‘When we were kids and Dad came in and said there was an old cow or some bloody thing that needed a bullet, there’d be a fight for the job. You know, Lach’d be going on about how Jim had shot the last one and how it was his turn. Wasn’t that we liked the killing. It wasn’t that we were cruel. It was just a job with a gun—that made it one of the good jobs, of course. And I guess we knew that there are times when keeping an animal alive is putting good money after bad.’

‘So when this blue colt gets stuck in the fence the other week and tears a tendon, Judith comes down here with the vet, who’s telling her how he can get the horse right in a year or so, but he doesn’t mention that it’ll cost a few thousand dollars and the horse will never be what he was. So I ring the girl who owns him, and tell her I think we’ll have to put him down. She was upset, but
she saw the sense in it. And Mary, you know who takes rides out down here, her $500 horse slips the other week and his hernia pops out. She asks me what she should do, and I tell her she should do what she thinks best. Well she spent $1500 and put it right—for now. So now she’s got a $500 horse with a dodgy back, and she’s $1500 poorer. Anyway, the horse is alive. Mary loves it, and she’s happy. Not to mention broke.’

I think about asking Jim what he’d do if Bully, the palomino he loves, or Tsar, or my horse Stock, got crook. But I don’t.

I look up at the sky again. At the darkening scarps, at the pale grasses. I was wrong about the quality of the light that touches them and colours the cloud. It isn’t kind; it is just true. It doesn’t care. It knows nothing about pity—though it seems right to me that we should. We need to be careful, though, whom we think our pity serves. Are we sparing ourselves or an animal? What is right, I am thinking, is what has about it the quality of this light; whatever helps to keep such stern beauty alive. Sometimes in the life of a man or woman that will be pity or patience or mercy; sometimes it will be a bullet.

I am thinking also about the spiral of fallen willow leaves the wind dreamt up like spun sugar beside my horse that afternoon at Jim’s mother’s place. It rose from the lawn as we were stopped to talk with Jim’s cousin and his two girls, who were laughing at the pink bows they’d tied in their terrier’s hair. They had a fire going there in the yard. What I saw rise was a yellow willy-willy, bright and brittle as a shell, raised by strings pulled by the sky. What my horse saw was a ghost, and he spooked. Maybe he was right. Who knows what the animals sense, things that are true, that are lost on us in our self-possession. Anyway, the wind let the leaves go as fast as it had herded them and breathed them skywards, and they collapsed onto the lawn again. We rode down to the bottomland by the creek to check on three more horses, who came fast to meet us—well, not us, but our horses, old friends, maybe, or new enemies. This was a vegetable garden and an orchard when Jim was a boy. It is the creek’s wide floodplain. I am coming to know his life, this valley’s form, in fragments. Both of them piece themselves together in their own good time, in a rhythm of their own, which articulates them more truly, acquaints me better with their music, than a more orderly approach could ever manage. We turn and canter back to the old elms, shot of their leaves, the ones the wind conjured into a ghost just now. The yellow leaves had fallen from trees, tall now, planted long before Jim was born, planted to make a turning circle behind the house. We are riding among memories again, and discarded dreams.

As we ride past Jim’s new house (which one of Jim’s daughters has named after an American Indian word meaning ‘place of large moons’) Judith comes out and waves. ‘We’ won’t have any horses ridden through here, thanks,’ she says and laughs. Jim sings out to ask if she remembered to drench the horses. She says she has. ‘Andy tried to spit his out again, but I caught him and he got more than half
of it down in the end.’ ‘Get a move on down there, you boys,’ she says. ‘We’ve gotta be going.’

By the shed a spent fire smokes in a circle of sandstone rocks Jim has built by the yards. I can feel the warmth the stones radiate. There’s a billy hanging in the smoke. ‘Now wouldn’t it be nice if we had the time to sit and drink some hot tea by that fire,’ says Jim. But we don’t. We unsaddle and unbride the horses, hang the leathers in one of the retired containers where they’re stored. Jim fixes their feed and stirs it around under the tap. We wait till the horses have eaten. Then we open the gate to the yard and let them water at the tank. They stand a bit in the last of the daylight, looking, each of them, for his mob. It must feel good—it even feels good to watch them—looking into the evening, fed and watered and done carrying men, done spooking at blackberry and whirlwind, ready to find your mates and graze down the night.

Judith comes down and hurries Jim away. He saunters to the house flicking through a book I’ve given him. It’s about a meadow, a valley of grass not unlike this one, but at the mercy of a different sky. I drive up out of the valley toward my home on the ridge. On the way I see a lyrebird, making away with his furled lace tail into the bracken beside the road. He looks black, like a shadow puppet on the grey screen of dusk. And then it’s night, and I let the Jeep peer ahead astigmatically into the darkness, taking me home, up along the road that Les Maxwell made, skyward.

The sky has fallen—pieces of it. Down below the escarpment, and away down in the Burrongorang and among the Wild Dogs, cloud sits like snowdrift. Cold air gathers below the lip of these deep canyons at night. By morning, it is piled, usually, to the height of the talus slopes. Unlike snow, it hangs—it never becomes ground. It wants to find the sky again. The air is warmer above the trough of the valley floor. Moisture—transpiration of trees, breath of streams—rising out of the winter ground meets the mass of warm, dry air fallen to the feet of the cliffs, and is held there. This morning, after a still, cold night, the valley floor has become a cloud forest. It has sucked down the sky.

As I watch from above, five white cockatoos fly out from under it and take up perches on eucalypts clear of the white air, above the Leura Forest. White birds fly below me, made small by distance, above the dark timber, out of this piece of incompetent sky. I am higher in the sky than they are, three hundred meters or more, up in the warming air of morning on the lip of the escarpment. And the cloud is lower than all of us. The world is upside down. The birds look so substantial, so material, against the ineffable cloud mass, I wonder how they stay up—or is it down? They are silent this morning. Cloud seems to insist upon silence. The birds wait for the sky to lift to its usual height. They will have to sit it out another hour or two for the day is cold, and won’t be really warm till midday.

But it is not the sky that has fallen into the valley. It is the valley—its dream, its breath—that has tried to leave, to reach the sky, and been stopped. The
valley’s utterance will be heard, though; the sky will lift, in time. Nothing holds for good. Water after all is stronger than rock, and sky is stronger and older than everything. High above me now I notice that a sheet of altocumulus has flowed in from the south, to keep us all in our place. But it too will pass. In an hour or two the cockatoos will have their valley back, the air will all be blue again from top to bottom, and the night prayers of the Kedumba will have dissolved the sky’s resistance, been accepted and forgotten.

Dream

A Saturday morning in early July. A few days after first snow. Heavy clouds approach but the morning, though cool, is too insouciant for snowfall. In this light, which is subdued but clear, the escarpment, the face of the King’s Tableland, dreams. Light comes from the rock, or so it seems. It suggests repose, a deep and restful intelligence, a contained, embodied, implacable state of knowing. All of the stories that have unfolded, fallen from rivers, settled into tough strata, ridden high and resisted wind; all the stories of occupation by gods and myths, by weather and its eternal vagaries, by black cockatoo and black woman and man and more lately white: all these are chanting silently in this morning sandstone light. They are the dream of the place, of this earth. In the dreams this place bears and utters in the blue breath it transpires, the cloud it makes and sometimes holds down deep in its broken belly, was there ever a dream of my treading here? I hold this plateau country in my mind, as real and true as any form or person, but does it hold me? Was I a part of its plan, its long slow unfolding, its dignified unmaking? In Gundungurra lore, the man—and the woman too—takes the name of the place where his mother quickened with him. The place is the father of the child, and so he holds to it and cares for it, his mother, his father place, his home. The place and the woman conceive of the child. Did the Kedumba valley, did the wide blue plateau, conceive of me in some way like this?

I am embarrassed to ask my mother where she was when she conceived me, and I have no reason to think it was anywhere within the skirts of the plateau. But maybe in the passage of the great rivers, the inundation of the sea, the settling of the swamp, the unbearably incremental laying down of the rock, the trauma of its uplift or tilt or weathering and crazing, the coming of the grasses and the trees, the running of the rivers, the falling of the waters, the colonisation of the birds—whylla, jakura, kookaburra, currowong, frogmouth—maybe I was a thought this place had, an idea lodged within a grain that formed part of this wide mass of rock, then was loosed one day by riverwork and carried across the country’s gullies, scouring them a little deeper, a forgettable part of their inevitable shaping. I may have been an idea the plateau sat with a while and forgot till now. Then again, if I thought more truly like a rock or eroded valley, this would not even be a fancy I would entertain. I came here in a certain year—that is all. If I want to see that coming as the dream that arises, the cloud that sits, the idea that dawns out of geological time, I guess I may. But see if the plateau cares. It’s just that I don’t want to be the dreamer: I want to be the dream.
Dusk gathers. Off in the scrub where the paddock ends and the trees begin, a fence wire sings. Les Maxwell hears the sound where he sits on the balcony, and he knows what it is. This quickening beat, this swift plangent phrase of rising notes is the song of a taut metal strand struck with wire-cutters, pulled more taut until its pitch is perfect. It is the sound of wire strung between ironbark posts and tuned. This phrase travels into the distance, along the creek, among the sedge and sheoaks, the bracken, sweet, sharp and blue—it is the music, he thinks, of a stone skipped across the skin of a pool. And it stops and sinks. The cold silence resumes. The water’s surface regathers its poise. The dusk deepens into night. Then the wire sings again, coming closer this time. And stops. But no one is stringing wire. No one is fencing. Les is down here by himself. The music is made by lyrebirds recalling a sound that came to the valley in the twenties. How could the birds remember so long, he wonders. When he was a child, Les heard them recite it here, in the Kedumba, by the house at dusk; he heard them sing it down in the Kowmung as he cut cedar in the thirties; he heard them along by the Jump-up as he carried the mail by saddle horse to Camden. He has heard them sing the cross saws passing through felled mountain ash; the axes sinking into flesh of cedar, the adzes shaping blocks of stringybark. And he has heard them singing the sound the men made testing wire fence. He knows, then, this is one of their lyrics, this water sound of singing wire.

He empties the last of the flagon into his mug, drops the flagon off the balcony onto the grass, where it joins another, and he drinks the red wine down. And he wonders, as he often wonders these days, if he has heard what he has heard, or has only remembered it, or dreamed it up out of wine and solitude. Like he dreamed, a little while back, he saw his dead father walking up the front steps. The old man looked so real Les get up to greet him or something, and fell off the balcony. He was still lying there when the Water Board blokes found him a day later, maybe two. Another afternoon, he dreamed he saw an old black fella coming at him from the creek. The black fella was real enough, and his intention stark, his spear raised, his mouth open singing war and get off me bloody land, so real Les reached for his rifle and fired off a shot. But it wasn’t a Gundungurra warrior; not this time. It was a bushwalker, lost and looking for the road up the Kedumba Walls, and she was lucky Les was drunk or she’d be lying on the ground here still, out by his granddad’s grave. Nice girl too. Les smiles remembering it, and shakes his head. He is ashamed of himself, but only a little.

And it’s black now. He listens for the lyrebird to sing of fences again. But now he hears nothing. He thinks it must have been a dream. For how can a bird remember what a valley has forgotten? What a valley has drowned.
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