

Roger Vickery

Our Greater Souls

*That greater soul which itself is but an effluence, however
far projected or detached by tract of time.*

—Charles Harpur, 'Dawn in the Mountains'.¹

Harpur, broken-nailed farmer, baiter of Bunyip Aristos,
poet by tallow candle, penny dreadful playmaker,
saw the Walbunja people spaded and panned away
like specks in a miner's dish. He called it slaughter.²

And he lamented for ring-cut gums, vanishing birds,
billabong mothers losing their blue-tinged, white-wreathed
water lilies to sand-slug from the Sideling Gold Mine.
I have also lamented here, beside log fires that rolled

and twisted like storm-called worms from Dune.
Bare-chested, I killed a red-bellied black for daring
to intrude on my brother's cairn. I regret the death,
my sick bravado, walking across moon-shorn clay

and tussocks, lost in the hope of staying lost.
Filaments of past and passing meaning flicker here
in magic lantern shows Harpur would recognise.
Wounded weekend father, sower of hard seeds

¹ Charles Harpur, 'Dawn in the Mountains', colonial writer and settler in the Araluen Valley.

² 'An Aboriginal Mother's Lament' (26 July 1845): 'All charred and blasted by the fire / The white man kindled there / And fed with our slaughtered kindred'.

in my son, hoping they might help his solo growth,
I saw a ghost gum crash beside his head and screamed
Harpur's scream. His son was killed by a faulty gun
not far from there. The pain leeches his claim on life.

My brother lost his family to a bloody road. We thought
he might quit without his wife and child. But he scrambled
up as a scraper must when life that old brute sank
its fangs in his neck. He dug a pit in mossy loam,

filled it with their dust, erected a cairn of glittery quartz,
built a log cabin lit with hurricane lamps, stuffed rags
into the gaps, shivered in that stinky gloom. He wandered
paddocks, cried and brooded. Almost healed.

We held bush races here before insurance gangs bailed
us up. Dueda River gallopers, pony express bags on pommels
carved Banjo worship furrows across the ford. One night by
a campfire a young bloke fresh from Goulburn gaol

wanted to throw me into the flames for talking book club talk.
Big Fergus, a one-eyed veteran of Araluen's hippy years,
settled him down with his Rooster Cogburn stare.
A whip cracker wearing coke-bottle glasses, sliced

a smoke from my father's lips. *Heard you like 'em halved,*
the cracker quipped. Dad returned for a second crack.
Eight years later we awled his dust into the cairn.
Miners from Harpur's time drove stakes to prove their claims.

I name mine for my companions. Restless fly catchers,
Cunningham's skinks, slender endangered graylings, eastern
kangaroos with grudges against Fergus's peacock, Jurassic-sized
goannas swaying like retired farmers on Braidwood market days.

This land always was and always will be Walbunja land.
Harpur and my clan would never howl down that claim.
All we ask are visiting rights.

Our greater souls toss here.