



THE GRASSFIRE STANZAS

August, and black centres expand on the afternoon paddock.
Dilating on a match in widening margins, they lift
a splintering murmur; they fume out of used-up grass
that's been walked, since summer, into infinite swirled licks.

The man imposing spring here swats with his branch, controlling it:
only small things may come to a head, in this settlement pattern.

Fretted with small flame, the aspiring islands leave
odd plumes behind. Smuts shower up every thermal
to float down long stairs. Aggregate smoke attracts a kestrel.

Eruption of darkness from far down under roots
is the aspect of these cores, on the undulating farmland;
dense black is withered into web, inside a low singing;
it is dried and loosened, on the surface; it is made weak.

The green feed that shelters beneath its taller death yearly
is unharmed, under new loaf soot. Arriving hawks teeter
and plunge continually, working over the hopping outskirts.

The blackenings are balanced, on a gradient of dryness
in the almost-still air, between dying thinly away
and stripping the whole countryside. Joining, they never gain
more than they lose. They spread away from their high moments.

The man carries smoke wrapped in bark, and keeps applying it
starting new circles. He is burning the passive ocean
around his ark of buildings and his lifeboat water.

It wasn't this man, but it was man, sing the agile
exclamatory birds, who taught them this rapt hunting
(strike! in the updrafts, snap! of hardwood pods).
Humans found the fire here. It is inherent. They learn,
wave after wave of them, how to touch the country.

Sterilizing reed distaffs, the fire edges on to a dam;
it circuits across a cow-track; new surf starts riding outward
and a nippy kestrel feeds from its foot, over cooling mergers.

It's the sun that is touched, and dies in expansion, mincing,
making the round dance, foretelling its future, driving
the frantic lives outwards. The sun that answers the bark tip
is discharged in many little songs, to forestall a symphony.

Cattle come, with stilted bounding calves. They look across the
ripple lines of heat, and shake their armed heads at them;
at random, then, they step over. Grazing smudged black country
they become the beasts of Tartarus. Wavering, moving out over
dung-smouldering ground still covered with its uncovering.

NOTES

"The Grassfire Stanzas" is taken from *The People's Otherworld* (1983).
Tartarus: the deepest region of the Underworld of Greek myth, where the most wicked were
punished. (It was said that it took nine days and nine nights for an anvil to fall from
the earth's surface to the very bottom of Tartarus.) Hesiod and Virgil's description of
Tartarus had an important influence on later Christian ideas of Hell, especially Dante's.

BURNING OFF by Geoffrey Dutton

We let fire rip, we blacken the pale-gold acres,
But being farmers, we do it cautiously,
Sneaking first by the red clods of the firebreak
With our hack-burn, cautiously watching it with water,
Drawing safe rings around our sacred trees.

Then inside the windward fence, moored at by the neighbour's cows,
We drag the bouncing rake with its flaring straw bundle
And little wisps of flame snuggle into the stubble
Not yet revealing their true hunger. For fire
Is passionate of all plants, and becomes them,
Furious as creepers, sullen as thistles,
And sows its seed like bees on the wind.

Just now the flames run forward like children
In spurts and zigzags, not staying to argue
With the indomitable green of summer-loving weeds
Left standing proudly, horrible horehound, splendid artichoke.

This fire may be a child, but it does not tell its secrets,
How if it jumped the firebreak it would grow up a giant
Leaping from treetops, exploding the safest green.

For fire incorporates all the elements,
It makes air visible and angry,
It advances lashing like rain, there's a shield of shimmer
Before it streaming like a fish-shop window,
Its black clouds loom full as thunderstorms.

It flushes out earth's secrets, some of them terrible,
As once a black tomcat with its fur on fire
Sprang over two firebreaks and lit the neighbour's paddock.
Now a quail rockets lurchingly off
Pursued by a slanting goshawk,
And four shrewd whistling eagles hang high
Waiting for delicacies, grilled mouse or lizard.

It is all over, Earth exhausted sighs
In little volcanoes of smoking dung.
Fire seems to be a barren passion, uniting all,
Leaving nothing behind to fill the absence of all colour.

But watch the tractor going home across the blackness,
That instant trail the evidence of unharmed earth
Ready for rain, and the first, most vivid green
Springing electric from the paddock's night.

NOTES

"Burning Off" is one of the poems chosen by Les Murray for the *New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* (1986), and it probably influenced him when writing "The Grassfire Stanzas". Like Les Murray, Geoffrey Dutton (b. 1922) was brought up on a livestock farm in southern Australia.