

Goolangirie Pelicans I

Jim Puckridge

Goolangirie is largest of the Coongie Lakes, on Cooper Creek in central Australia. Jim's doctoral thesis (1999) concerned flooding in the lakes and the spectacular responses of the fauna. This poem is a longer version of one published in 2009, after Jim's passing, in a book (*Singing the Sea*: ISBN 978-0-646-51216-7) that draws on poems from *Friendly Street New Poets Seven* (Wakefield Press, 2002), *Best of Friends: The First Thirty Years of the Friendly Street Poets* (Wakefield Press, 2008) and *The Islander Arts Part* (Country Newspapers, 2008). This version is printed with kind permission of Jim's companion, Philippa Kneebone.

1

At dawn, the lake is still,
The trees wait on the sun.

Above, the first procession comes
Of fifty or a hundred birds,
Each mesmerized, absorbed,
And following a dreaming trail
We cannot see,
Skeletal serpent
Sliding dunes of air,
White vertebrae as faithful to the spine
As if still sheathed in flesh,
They pass, they pass.

The sun now strikes across the lake,
The trees feed,
Their leaves licking.

2

The sun across our necks
We stoop down dunes
To water white as ice.
Our eyes shrink
And we sink beneath the sun
Under,
Up to our hats.

All around, the dunes pant
Their hot breath
In clouds that bud and blossom
Incandescent, to the sun.

All afternoon the pelicans pass
In grave processions to the south.
One serpent turns
And winds a slow coil
Up a trunk of air.
Others like the veils of Salome
Are wound into the dance,
And slow as skirts
Swirl high and higher
Up amongst the clouds,
Wings white and dark and white
With each slow turn,
Until they tower in the sky,
Each bird surrendered
To this convocation of its kind,
A thunderhead of pelicans,
Medusa,
Swinging slow her snake-entangled hair,
Ancient, elemental.

Smaller than swallows now
They swarm like motes,
Bright molecules,
Embedded in the giant helix
Turning still,
Until some strands, then more and more
Unwind and spread,
Float free, uncertain,
Then like chromosomes
Are drawn on unseen spindles
To the south.

Stuck in the lake
Beneath sun-battered hats
We wait and calculate.

3

Sky and water one skin
The outboard saws the lake in half
And ruptured muscle churns behind.

We stop.
The white lake quakes around.
We undulate.

The pelicans ashore are still,
Secure in multitudes;
In row on row, strange corn -
White stems suspending pods
Pulsating without wind -
Enormous crop
They cram horizons, seed the lake and sky.

We float among them,
Count and photograph and sweat.
I grip the outboard throttle
Like a grenade.