THREE POEMS BY THOMAS SHAPCOTT

Richard Wagner at Schloss Donndorf,
Bayreuth, 1873

The porcelain stove is not efficient. 
It is too efficient, it dries me out. It drives me out
into the park: yesterday in this beech grove
foliage stopped me: some first leaves striking
off the mirror of autumn, already, like cupped hands around a
stove,
golden yet disconsolate. There should be light and warmth,
if only in my bones — this morning the smell of linden,
the blossoms littering their scurf and fragrance
tickled me up, Cosima says. I detest spring,
I hate more the last days of linden summer,
stiffening finger-pods under the leaf groups. Wasted seed.
I'm sick of playing Bach in E Flat Minor. I'm sick
of being in love, of falling, of falling out
of overheated rooms in search of search (children
were outside last night, why?)

This park is an imposture.
I do not believe in the lake; I ache at the edge, leaning
on the rustic bridge. I think I will dream the Rhine in flood,
pillars of flame, Gods in our petty squabbles searching into us,
aching into our very bones. I think I will dream linden forests
as a prayer — what prayer? The prayer for a god
stares at the myth that believes the power of music can ever ease
this scald of seeing one first leaf repeat autumn’s search.
The prayer sees gold stain all green things
bound into the rot of air.
This is the richest summer
I have ever known. Inside
there will be coffee, warmed clothes, anxious looks again —
the larger my theatre, the more visible (you’d believe they would see)
the burn of loneliness within. My axe will strike each linden
within the seed. I’ll bring the whole world down, within
an orchestral song that is learning never to come to a point of repose
— my design will power such a conflagration it will take sixty years
to achieve. My theme: the loneliness of one who finds the porcelain stove
too drying, too uncertain, too certain, too hot, too cold. My theme:
the loneliness of one defying autumn in the planned garden. My theme:
one who has planted gardens to transfigure your world,
who has opened a prospect here, landscaped a glade. Theme: Power.
Theme: one who is crowded by devotion into the shade of beech trees,
linden. A stove that is not efficient, a heart likewise, an anger at leaves, loves, loveliness — an anger, always,
at the unspoken presence of fire, even in damp.
Walking in Circles

There was the time out on the Nullabor when we realized bluebush had wiped out all trace of the dirt track. I looked up at flat sky, appalled. Not even wind-trees could identify place. A cloud over the sun and direction vanishes.

Now, pushing through autumn tangles of Canadian bush thick underfelt-footed, gold, crackling out moisture with swamp rumours, our footprints are rubbed out by peatbog. We see horizontal. We remain vertical. We return to log-rot quizzed fifteen minutes before. Rain overhang, leaf overhang, branch cording them tight, everything repeated. You promised us the confidence of old logger’s tracks but we are in this together, lost, European as the idea of the circle.
Silence

for Fay Zwicky

"suggest there comes a point in one's life when silence is called for."
— Fay Zwicky, radio interview 20.9.1979

1

As if we should have been engineered for silence we cry out in the very act of birth to express anger at our pulse we cram head and shoulder through lips to the cavern. Darkness supposes us already full-grip, toes splayed in ironcap boots, terrestrial. Air holds us now entirely within its opening. No sound of lips, no closing.

2

Smetana in his dream of deafness envied Beethoven the sanity of no hearing. He himself, jabbed by a long high A, turned sound to a silence aching with yellow teeth.

3

"But having conceived of it, man must bring it to be."
Here on the sand floor well in from the shaft skeletal friction fondles our clothes.
Breath takes our time. The urge
is to tap messages, move the walls back.
They close in. Silence
is the dream that earth
is immobile. The earth is a body,
settling.

4

“Space is a vast silence.” Space is the tuning-board
of energy, meteor displacement, pizzicato.
Silence may be called for but the music
of the spheres has unheard pitch — is that the same? Louis Jullien told Berlioz
it was perfect A, the terrestrial globe revolving in space in his ear, God as a blue cloud.
Whatever we dream, it is not silence.
Whatever we call for, it has a body.

5

Spliced by word strands
the rope jarrs, a conjurer’s trick
heading upward. Out of this basket
snake music
turns out the whole cave
like a pocket
full of clicking stones.
Fossils remember motion.
Inside those stern boots
someone’s toes are tapping.
We have designs against time,
but that is to say
we have conceived of God.
Who holds us
in his mouth, considering.