On Habitually Learning from Trees, Fire & Other Issues Related to Art & Survival

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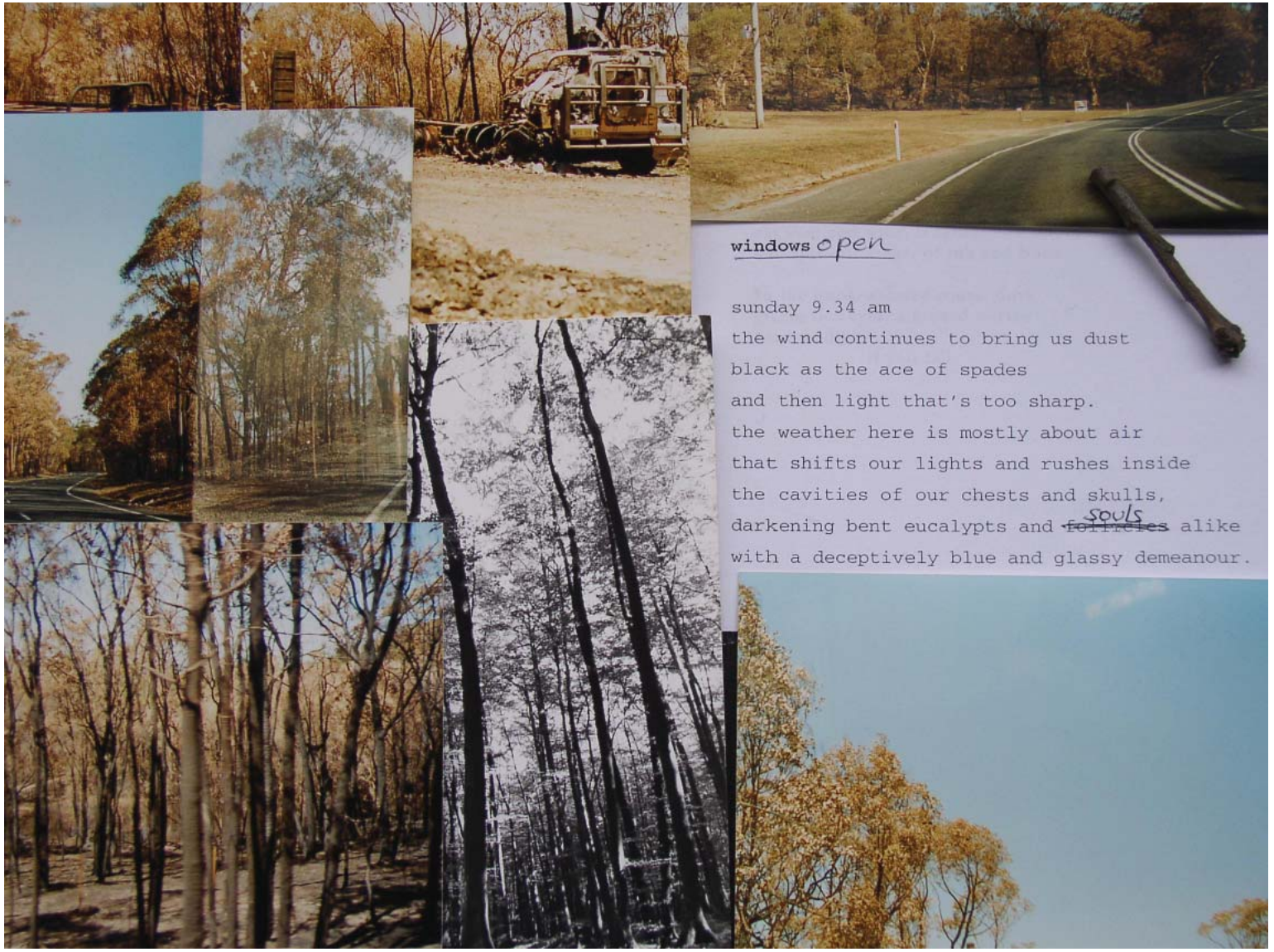
The texts and images play with the idea of habits and habitats. Coupling the two emphasises relationships, the line between homely comfort and self-destructive excess is hard to find and keep, especially as one flips unannounced into the other if you don't watch it. The places we inhabit and the routines we keep, however sensible and/or sober, are like the skin of a balloon, creating form by familiar actions, even an apparently separate inner space - if that skin wasn't terrifyingly soft and porous. A cut or burn is enough to create the unimaginable. If systematically interrupted in your most banal and physical routines, you'll have to work hard to not go mad. Meanwhile, the mad work hard to maintain a self-semblance despite regular tearing. Prisons and hospitals use this to advantage; all wounds, if you survive, will heal, prettily or not, their shape responding to the healing regime. You shape yourself or find yourself shaped. The pain of bursting identity can be contained by peaceful regularity and medication. Finding that skin which makes life possible involves learning what best to do when and where, be it cornflakes or cocaine. Literally space-ing time, as in knowing when to expect whom to be where and doing what, is how anthropologist Mary Douglas defines being at home. Inside, we make and remake ourselves, continuously and usually unnoticed, as we grow and shed skin, too. It is terrifying when this is interrupted - suddenly you sense a falling, find all firmness and solidity a mere imagination you lack the ability to conjure up.


windows open
sunday 9.34 am
the wind continues to bring us dust
black as the ace of spades
and then light that's too sharp.
the weather here is mostly about air
that shifts our lights and rushes inside
the cavities of our chests and skulls,
darkening bent eucalypts and ~~follicles~~ souls alike
with a deceptively blue and glassy demeanour.

An unknown place, any unknown place perhaps, is ruled by inexplicable forces. There are three Australian rural seasons, flood, drought, fire. The list contains no "and", as it goes round, and "fire" is last, but also beginning or middle. Flood and drought balance between excess and lack, changing easily into another. Fire is more sudden, more noticeably destructive. It forces you to decide. Writing or drawing can require you to stand still and as if absolutely naked before your task; as in love, death, and pruning decisions, not much of what you've got and who you are in the world can help you here. When somebody's house burns down, they need to start again, and I look extra hard at the news to pray for them and learn from their eyes about starting again. You always fail most of the real, secret task you set yourself in creating, that emotional bit which moves and pulls you along, without you quite understanding. If you did, the game would end. Sometimes it hurts to stand still but you need to, so you can decide. Even in a fire you might stand still, briefly. You need to focus a little extra for decisions you take with all your heart. It's not just the risk. If it must be right, you can't just do as you learnt or always do or like doing. You look for the best answer you know, like it or not. You don't fear getting burnt too little or too much when it comes to survival.

away from town. Life there's too short,
shorter than memory, believe it or not,
and disrespectful of the facts
that nothing changes, mouths are shut.

Twothousandandfour

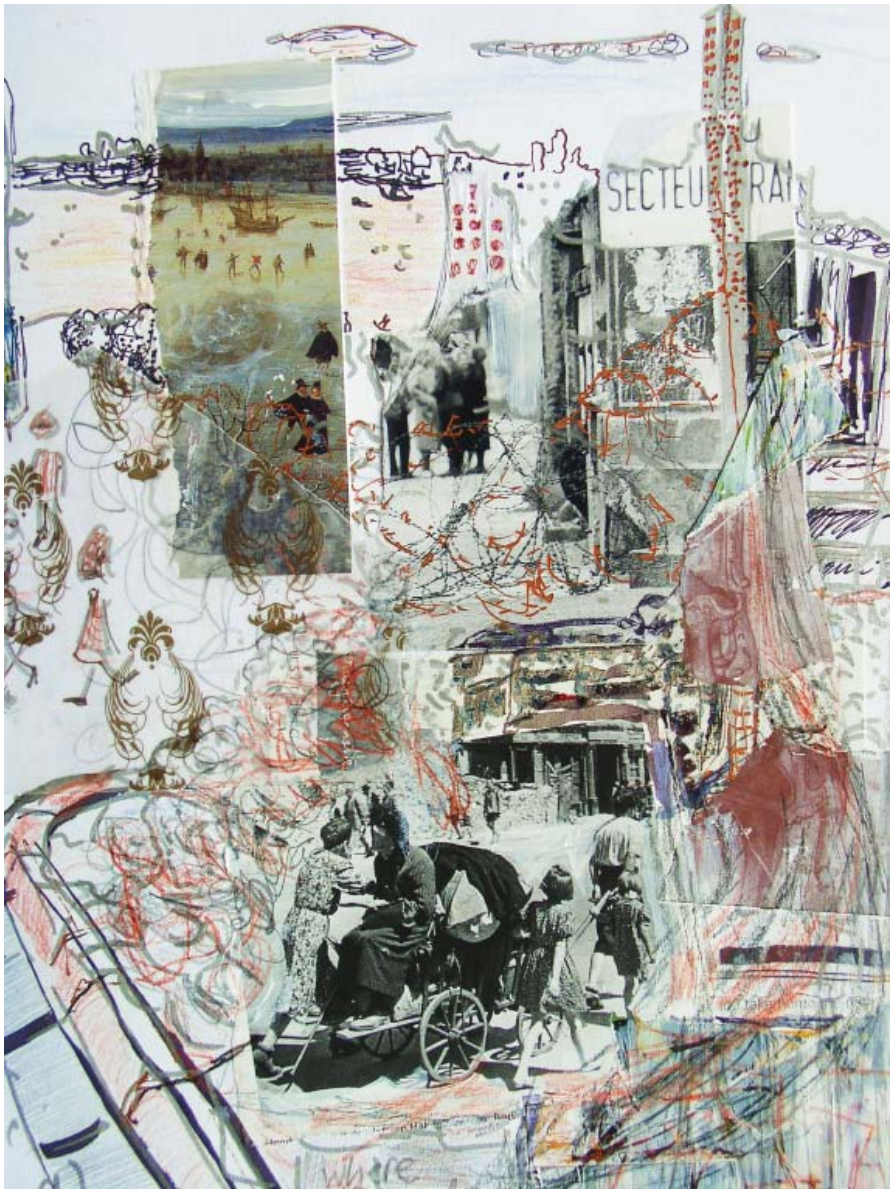
Much gets done in five generations.
In my grandmother's family,
one hundred and fifty vintages of Riesling,
or less, depending on the wars.
They wouldn't stop the vines.
But without bottles and arms,
without pruning and spraying and holding,
grapes rot on the slopes.
Or more like them, they'd say so,
and let nobody see the back
who hadn't seen the front cellar first,
to learn forgetting kindness
the *badisch* vintner's way.

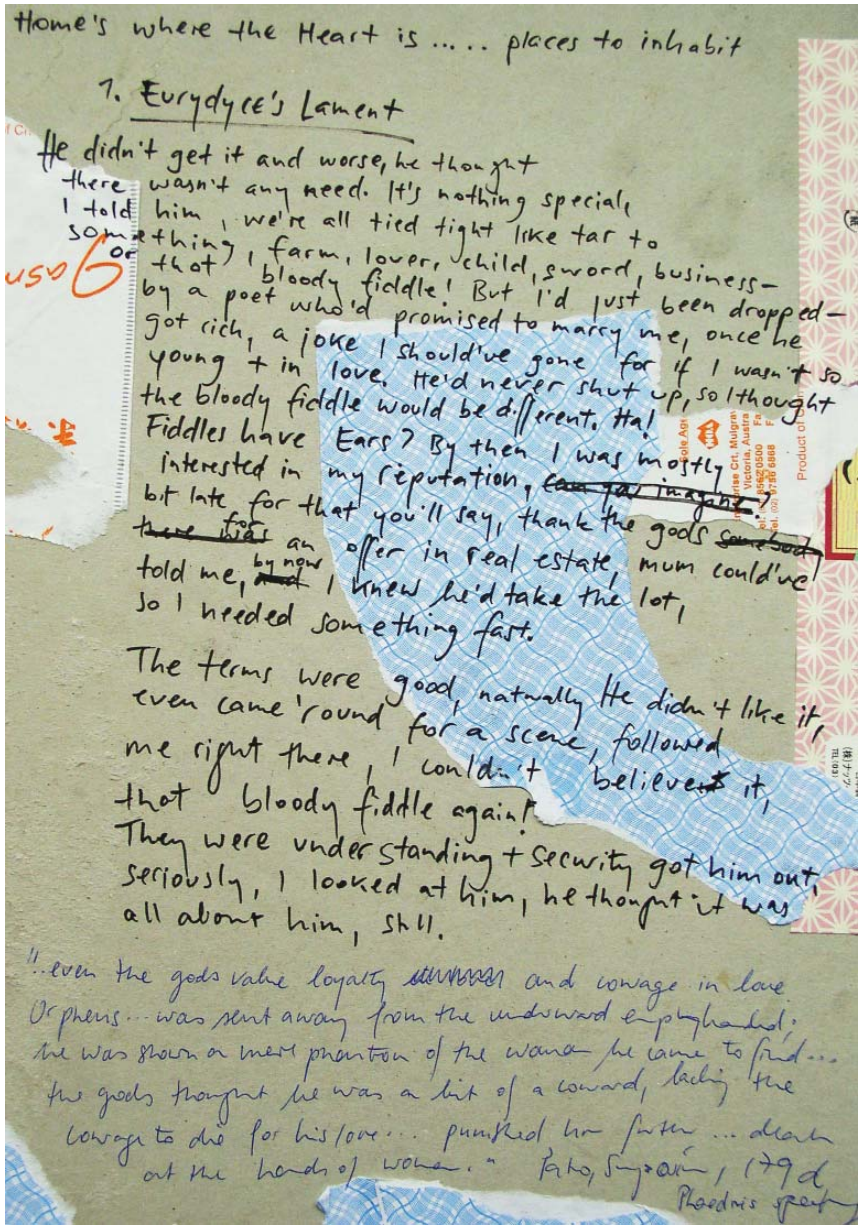
Reichs grew and shrunk, borders floppy
like field demarcations when the taxman comes.
Today, I suspect, the fields are useless,
toxic and yielding, as patriotic mock
of ancient skill and countryside, the wine
bought up each year by bureaucrats to spill -
who cares. The crafty family tree
(another thing you had to buy and chuck)
proves little, but that peasants move,
while speakers puff on soil and root,
and turn them into ashes, if they can.

The vintners know how to begin,
it's similar each time: Heads down,
unlock the front to strangers ,
keep the kids - unless they're useless -

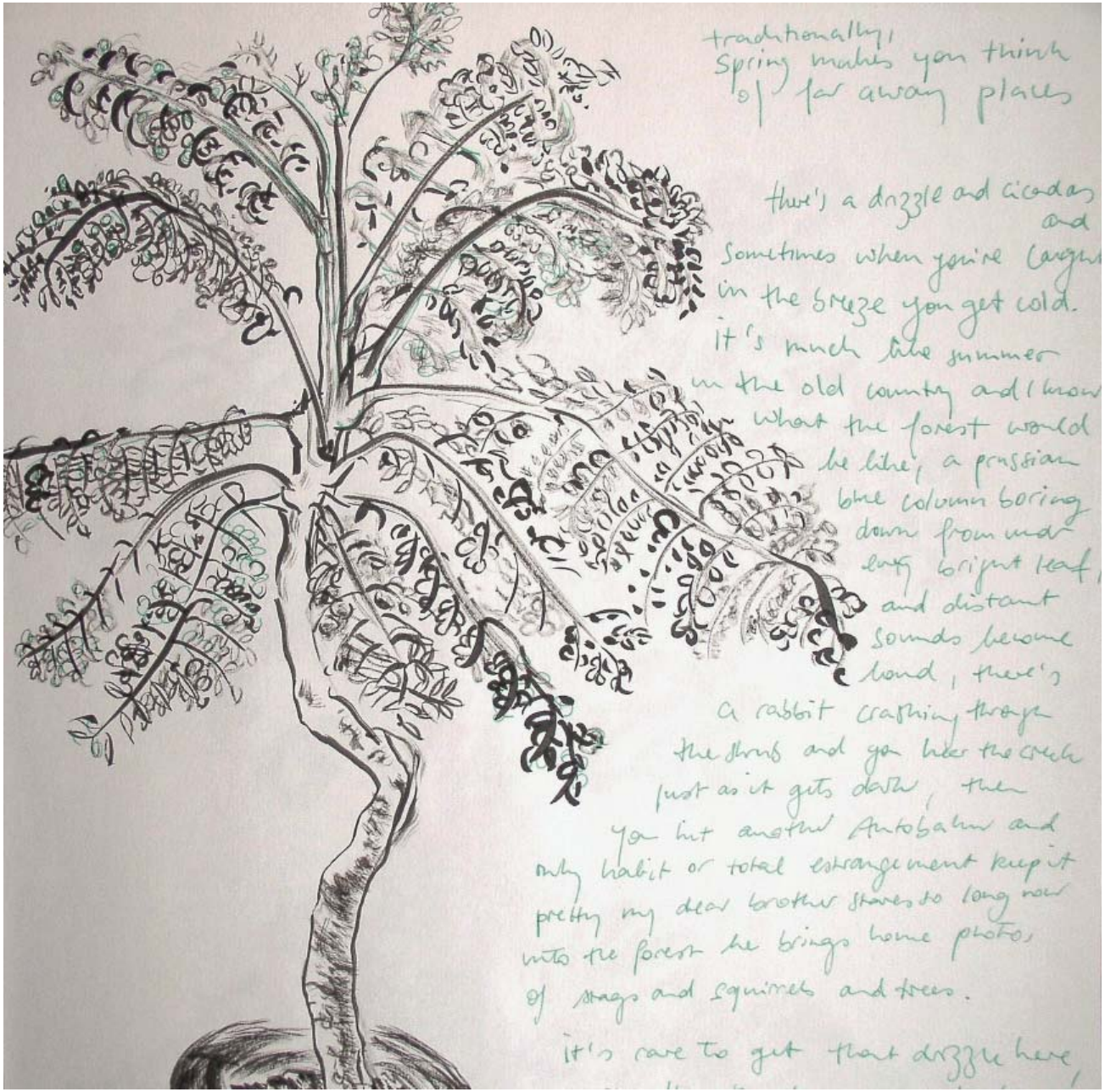
e fascinatea.

When we started, many plants wouldn't survive. After a while, you recognise which shape of leaf will stand the wind and sun. The plants grew a place on the balcony. That place could be a rockshelf on a mountainside, protected from the coldest and hottest westerlies and their sandy or ashen load by the peak itself, whipped hard from the south where ever branches leave the rock shelter. The sea is close enough for easterly winds to carry its smell, while the northerly is hot with storm. The winds change to their whim, and according to time of day. There's an air corridor from our flat right towards and past the mountains. Distant bushfires bring red fog, and very distant burn-off is like spice at night. When there's a black and firm wind at dawn, it brings first warm and stale city air, followed by eucalypt and smoke. Then it settles on a cold clear smell of rock and tree and water that hurts me with wanting to be there.




Home's where the Heart is ..... places to inhabit
7. Eurydyce's Lament
He didn't get it and worse, he thought
there wasn't any need. It's nothing special,
I told him, we're all tied tight like tar to
something, farm, lover, child, sword, business-
that bloody fiddle! But I'd just been dropped-
by a poet who'd promised to marry me, once he
got rich, a joke I should've gone for if I wasn't so
young + in love. He'd never shut up, so I thought
the bloody fiddle would be different. Ha!
Fiddles have Ears? By then I was mostly
interested in my reputation,
bit late for that you'll say, thank the gods
an offer in real estate, mum could've
told me, I knew he'd take the lot,
so I needed something fast.
The terms were good, naturally He didn't like it,
even came 'round for a scene, followed
me right there, I couldn't believe it,
that bloody fiddle again!
They were understanding + Security got him out,
seriously, I looked at him, he thought it was
all about him, Shll.
"..even the gods value loyalty and courage in love
Orpheus... was sent away from the underworld empty-handed:
he was shown an image/phantom of the woman he came to find...
the gods thought he was a bit of a coward, lacking the
courage to die for his love... punished him further ... death
at the hands of women." Plato, Symposium, 179d
Phaedrus speech

I spend most time at home working and being sick, and miss being outside and in the bush. Potted trees and the weather became friends, locating me in a natural space that does and doesn't exist. It would exist if there weren't houses, which means it doesn't exist, as the houses are here; yet they're also part of a natural habitat they're replacing and adding to, like everything else. Our apartment block is covered in spiders, and busy with five species of birds eating them and fighting over the best seats. The persistence required to grow things and the patience and care to accept how they do it are good for healing. There, you hope and wait for something you can't imagine, yet must make yourself believe. Looking at the trees growing no matter what can help. Some religions recommend ritual at this point, to make your body carry the load in what seems like mindless repetition. Without the comfort of telling yourself that you're just going through the motions, perhaps you couldn't do it at all.


traditionally!
Spring makes you think
of far away places
there's a drizzle and cicadas
and
Sometimes when you're caught
in the breeze you get cold.
it's much like summer
in the old country and I know
what the forest would
be like, a prussian
blue column boring
down from under
every bright leaf,
and distant
sounds become
loud, there's
a rabbit crashing through
the shrub and you hear the creek
just as it gets dark, then
you hit another Autobahn and
only habit or total estrangement keep it
pretty my dear brother stares so long now
into the forest he brings home photos
of stags and squirrels and trees.
it's rare to get that drizzle here

Despite its great age, the Wollemi pine was recently discovered, and is therefore new to art. Drawing it, I need to find out how it is constructed, and decide how to aestheticise, where to exaggerate, where to reduce. Another moment for waiting. You can deceive yourself though, leaving things open, unresolved too long just because you're dealing with something unfamiliar. You might end up with an ever-more elaborate sign saying, unresolved here. Creating something is a losing battle, the interesting line, if I can find it, comes from what I conjure up in persisting, nevertheless, and its shape from how I move in doing so. The cities portrayed are ludicrously young in comparison to the Wollomi, despite being from the old country. When I go back to Germany to visit, I feel the past burning like fire under the pavement. That presence is so strong, the locals have to get used to it, adapt, swim in it and breathe it like fish, they're young once too, and you just eat when you grow, you don't ask first. Visitors feel or imagine ubiquitous historical terror, there's good examples in Australian literature. From the inside, you're trapped and make a home of it - or emigrate. Of course, when you come back visiting, there's this absolute break between the inside and the outside view. That's another job for the trees, standing there and knowing how to be still and see things come together which everybody knows are apart.