

Sweeney's Homage to Dennis from the Wheatbelt to the Perth Coastal Plain, River, Ocean

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The closer and closer
they get to us
the more they become
big, lumbering boats.

“Romanticism in the 1990s,” Dennis Haskell

All that elegance of perception
blown out like a southern storm,
an earlier days television-tube scenario.

How could romanticism keep
hold of the ropes, the phantom boats
off the coast offering curios,

yes, their eye on the prize – white dunes,
seagulls that fly inland morphing
into the red tails of cockatoos, the river

with bars and trees that hold water,
lozenged under skin? Beware bills of lading
signed in London, poems in tight

forms adapted from the French, Italian,
Latin, Greek... and those sails so full-blown
then so dull with late sun shining through

as the Fremantle Doctor fails to bring
home its crew. All of this awaited you,
moving from East to West, a large

step across the fullness of continent,
lines thrown out to Singapore, Malaysia,

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undersea cables for conversations

of welcome, connection, dialects –
the local ways you inflect and augment,
a critical eye to occupation, to those pilot

lights, those navigation markers, buoys.
No casual sailing a way through – unconvinced
by masts and hulls, sailcloth and rudders,

but momentarily caught in the figurative.
This is where you return home from your sailings –
to your berth of riverwater, your scraping down.

It's a harsh kind of humour – a no
bullshit issue with the light
Wallace Stevens tried to pin down

and also release so far away... but you
know the difference and its lack,
share images of flight and returns.

And dry and vulnerable as it is
in the romantic collapse of the pastoral
up here over the Scarp – the crops

of wheat adrift and wavering with shifts
in ocean temperatures – we wish the harvest
through, headers casting off to get the job

done before fire takes the lot. These
sailings we watch from our vantage points –
hoping for perceptions we can't haul in, or trim.