

*In Praise of Cicadas*

As a child I found something disturbing in the resolution of *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. Aesop's fable—the original, I am told, features an ant and a *cicada*—centres its moral lesson, on the virtue of productivity. 'Prepare for the future', like the ant, who works the whole of a long, hot summer. Be not like the cicada, who squanders its summer doing nothing more than singing ecstatically under the sun. Come winter, the ant has built itself a shelter and put aside more than enough food to see it through, where the cicada has nothing and is refused help from the ant who sends it away to die in the cold. A story of resentment: that the ant, in its dedication to work, was never the more death-affirming than in its capacity for cruelty. And who but the cicada could sympathise more with the proud anti-work ethic of the slacker?

\*

I have not yet read this fable when, as a child, my parents receive my report card which includes the wilting enthusiasm of one teacher: '*. . . If only she would dedicate herself to her work as thoroughly and as meticulously as she works to avoid it.*'

\*

As part of its mating cycle, the cicada will sing all summer. Blissed out under the sun, glorified and vibrating, almost to the point of dissolving. Sun worshipers, all of them. Like the two aspects of a heartbeat, cicadas contract and relax part of their exoskeletons to produce their clicking sound. Rarely singing alone, Cicadas form a salacious choir; singing and pissing from the treetops. That sound, so akin to the steady parching of sun-bleaching grass; the wavering heat that rises from the pavement. Summer, and the cicadas will unleash their joy in *not* working, but instead enraptured in a sweet blur of static white noise.

\*

I deliver, once in childhood, a report on the cicada: Here, its general morphology—a body segmented into three parts: abdomen, thorax, head. The abdomen, fat and grub-like, shingle-backed. Across some 3,000 species the cicada ranges in colour from dun brown, yellowish or black, to royal blue with red-lined segments. Chartreuse, peach or dusty rose-red. The cicada's eyes are compound like a fly's and are set far apart on its broad head. Those eyes, large and sad, range from black, to virulent green, to red or even candy-stripe. Its wings are crushed cellophane, scattered with a perplexing venation. The wings divide into two parts, posterior and anterior. These thin and transparent lunula sit astride the body, almost in the fashion of the common housefly's. But oh, the variation—a black mourning veil, or a milky blue-green, a pearlescent pale yellow. Their species names, as though selected by Enid Blyton. Here, these are the Green Grocers, and those, there? The Blue Moons. And those? Yellow Mondays.

\*

Curious, that across every retelling of Aesop's fable, the cicada's disinclination to work is never inscribed as slothfulness but instead as exuberant expenditure.

There it is, the *Palapsalta ligneocauda*, the Lime Tree-Buzzer, which, as per its name has a thin metallic green-gold abdomen, a narrow bronze head and slender, dragon-fly-like gold-banded wings. Native to the Kimberly region in WA. Its song is comprised of a brief and whirring siren followed by bursts of percussive buzzes. Then, on the north-coast, the *Palapsalta Belli*, the Pilbara Tree-Buzzer, related to the Lime Tree-Buzzer. You can see their similarities in the *Belli's* green-brown body and grass-yellow legs. Its song, a series of flourishes that are followed, like the Lime, with a punctuated chirruping. And then there, along the west coast of WA, is the *Arenopsaltria fullo*, or Sandgrinder, truly the most beautiful of all cicadas, a gemmy's or jeweller's vision: onyx body with white banding on the abdomen, thick gold venation along the wings and scalloping the body. Their song, a tireless and discordant waveform.

\*

Both the cicada and the slacker are versed in the art of deception. Where the slacker may perfect their ability to evade work through a forged sick note, a decoy, the cicada engages a more hideous luxury: it constructs a perfect replica of its larval, childhood self. This body-double, this whole-cloth exoskeleton is, for a short time at least, the cicada's *real* body. Real, until the adult cicada bursts through this old skin. This second skin, sloughed-off whole, and retaining the shape of a living wingless juvenile cicada, may function as a decoy for predators that would otherwise try to snare the adult cicada. Full exoskeletons or, *exuviae*. Literally, *things stripped from the body*. The remains, the hollowed shell of a childhood.

\*

I am a child when I first receive a lesson in laziness. My class is at the library. It is summer. I am bored and I am restless. My teacher reprimands me for being lazy. My crime? Swinging my legs from my chair. My teacher tells me that it is *lazy* to swing my legs. I have, of course, been called *lazy* many times. For watching TV instead of studying; for pitching my rubbish into the bin rather than carrying it over. On this day, my laziness is the transgression of fidgeting. It speaks through excess, rather than languor. I cannot tell the teacher what our lesson is about when she asks me to recite her instructions. Why? Because I have far too much of a compulsion to be doing anything else. Laziness, an unwillingness to do things properly. Laziness, an explosive vitality. But I am still young and stupid. I ask: *How? How is it lazy to swing my legs?* I am sent to the other end of the library. Quiet time as punishment. Select a book, sit on your own and read so as not to distract the other children. I lift it from the lower shelf. Carry it in both hands, it is nearly half my size. A thin picture book of *Aesop's Fables*. A moral lesson, a lesson in virtue.