

The Great Northern

Mike Ladd

Perth so far behind and Port Headland's murdered country.
Broome smells of frangipani and acrid smoke,
sounds of crows and whistling kites and turbo props
lining up the airport down the tin barrel of the street.
Wealthy whites, pearly whites, old whites on tours.
Red sand and milk crates of the black town camp:
an apartheid smouldering at the dump.
Past Derby, the fineness of bauhinia, corymbia,
pindan and kurrajong, understory of dry-season grass.
Brutalities of numberplates: F I F O, "Fit In or Fuck Off."
Oppressive conformism pretending to be larrikin.
Red road train on a red road.
Boab's upturned tap root into the blue.
Salties moving far inland, pushed by higher tides.
Termite mounds, morphing into ancestors at twilight,
brown-red sepulchres or lions in their prides.
The names need re-claiming.
Why King Leopold Range? Old slaver and hand-chopper.
And Lord Kimberley, who is he to overwrite the land?
The real names are in the rock crevices and caves:
Windjana, Jandamurra, Imintji: kingfisher country.
At Warmun, Queenie McKenzie painted the massacres,
a Gija human worth less than a bullock on that frontier.
Now Rover Thomas's owl-dreaming looks down from the wall
at steak and chips in the roadhouse café.
Stopping on a side-track tonight, all still, all silent.
Moon snow on the boab. Then, a curlew cry.

Mike Ladd is a writer who lives on Kaurna land. He has published ten collections of poetry and prose. His most recent is *Dream Tetras*, a collaboration with visual artist Cathy Brooks, published by Wakefield Press in 2022.