BELOKA DAWN

Rusty Connley was a bushman, a cattleman and most of all a gentleman. He had a love of the bush and environmental values that anyone calling themself a "greenie" could well aspire to.

He rolls the cow at daybreak, as a pink glow trails the sky,
she's held to life for five long weeks, he's given up wondering why,
the last of half the herd to go since bushfires flamed the park,
but she won't give in, and he won't give up, and he rolls her after dark.
He lost them in explosions before the raging bushfire's path,
and he saw them die of shock and lack of feed in the aftermath.
They perished deep in winter snows, too weak to fight the cold,
they were paralysed at calving, and the wild dog took their toll.

His eyes raise to the ridges, grey and wasted as the moon,
and he gazes at the grassy flats where he aches to take them soon.
The finest feed in thirty years, but the grass will waste and die,
they locked him out before the snowmelt with a scientific lie.
Before the thaw revealed the grasses, those advisors far away,
had predicted desolation, and they banned him, come what may.
But the fires have roamed these ranges now for thirty thousands years,
the bush responds as it always has and defies the expert's fears.

For fifty years he's mustered stock to mountain summer feed,
and roamed it with his mattock, to dig out briar and weed.
He helped the first bush walkers to find the shelter of his hut,
and guided rescue parties to find lost tourists, torn and cut.
If he's locked out, the rest of us will lose sights we've never seen,
for he alone knows all the tracks, the valleys and the streams.
So now his cattle eat the paddocks out along the valley floor,
first muster missed in fifty years – will he muster any more?

He owns a swathe of valley land that's never felt the plough,
a bushman's quiet nature reserve, he'll have to fence it now.
So it's pull and shift the burned out fence, four days of sweat and strife,
but every tea break underscores the gentle rhythm of his life.
He listens intently to the bush for every creatures call,
he'll know if they've survived or died, he cares about them all.
You learn a lot from pitching in and sharing someone's toil,
but I reckon that I learned the most while we watched the billy boil.



He used to spray the blackberries to give native plants a chance,
but now they clog the gullies and no more the wildflowers dance.
His granddad lit cool autumn fires that crept slow along the ground,
but now litter lines the forest floor and the hot fires leap and bound.
Both banned by city officials, living fifty years apart,
a legacy of bush ignorance, that tears and breaks his heart.
He feels a bitter anger at the mismanagement at hand,
for in a strange way like the Koori, he is wedded to this land.

A mournful bellow wakes him, it's the cow that must surely die,
his face turns to the mountains where his spirit will one day fly.
And he remembers the pain and heartbreak that his forbears came to know,
when they were taxed for crossing borders and their shorthorns died in snow.
But they gamely battled onward, and overcame their loss,
for it's fighting city officials spawned the spirit of the Southern Cross.
So he rolls the cow at daybreak and she rises, gamely, to her feet.
For love, persistence and stubbornness are bloody hard things to beat!