

■ “Immortelle” and “Variations on the Theme of Gorges”

by John C. Ryan

John Charles Ryan is a botanical poet and scholar whose published poetry includes *Seeing Trees: A Poetic Arboretum* (2020, Pinyon Publishing, with Glen Phillips), *The Earth Decides* (2017, Cyberwit), and *Two With Nature* (2012, Fremantle Press). He has written extensively about the plant life of North America, Australia, and Southeast Asia. His recent project, *The Botanical Imagination*, investigated the potential of poetry to inspire appreciation of the natural world and to redefine human-plant relationships. The project employed creative, critical, and community approaches related to the botanical diversity of the Tablelands region of northern New South Wales, Australia.

The Northern Tablelands—or New England Tablelands—is a high plateau landscape unique for its geological, faunal, and floristic variety. Intensively cleared since the 1800s, the bioregion encompasses deeply incised gorges around which a conservation network, including the Oxley Wild Rivers National Park, has recently developed. In response to the Tablelands ecosystem, the author—a poet and scholar trained in literary studies and botanical science—wrote a series of poems about its flora between 2017 and 2020. The poems address not only the beauty and rarity of the plants but also the urgent environmental threats to the region.

In the poem “Immortelle,” the speaker examines a pressed specimen of golden everlasting (*Xerochrysum bracteatum*) at the Beadle Herbarium, University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales. The poem contemplates the name “immortelle” as well as the classificatory impulses of colonial-era botanical science that have transfigured the living plant into a two-dimensional doppelgänger. In contrast, “Variations on the Theme of Gorges” comprises ten three-line haiku poems written while the author camped near Wollomombi Falls outside of Armidale. The haiku are designed to be austere and bare—just like the gorges themselves. This sequence of short poems evokes the tradition of Japanese and Chinese monk-poets who composed formal verse in the seclusion of wilderness environments.

Immortelle

In a manila folder
at the Beadle Herbarium,
the golden everlasting
Xerochrysum bracteatum
with its faded papery bracts.

Collected at Wollomombi
in the nineteenth century,
it was known in Europe
then as *immortelle*.

The immortal specimen.

Its dried rootlets adhere
to miniscule cosmoses of soil.

Its lanky stems appear
gasping for last breath. It itches
to fulfill some chthonic
covenant, which will remain
broken until the right
time comes to us.

And when it does,
we will overbrim with
blessing. Gums, geckos and
echidnas, too, will welcome
kin home. What is this feeling
shared among us? What
commonness tugs like gravity
at us? Without one another,
what will become of us?

Variations on the Theme of Gorges

1.

At Wollomombi
burning gorge-wattles borrow
the spume of the falls.

2.

Near Dangar's lookout
brush-tailed wallabies escape
the gape of walkers.

3.

Under coachwood a
lyrebird struts with aplomb but
forgets to greet us.

4.

Clinging to the lip
of a scenic vista herbs
as fragrant as thyme.

5.

A mother possum
claws the coarse skin of a tree,
her dusk-eyes squinting.

6.

The kangaroo bounds
across the water-logged track,
a forest stream purls.

7.

Craving its quiet
the rare grevillea bush
wants no visitors.

8.

En route to Walcha
memories of stone orchids
laden with storm-drift.

9.

Three-tiered waterfall
where a tired nature poet
once lost his footing.

10.

Restless night in camp
awoke to the earsplitting
furore of gorge-talk.