

Kristin Hannaford

A Poetics of Wonder

Catalogue of New South Wales Exhibits: World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893.

Exhibit #1371: a collection of thirteen Australian indigenous animals of New South Wales all prepared, stuffed and mounted by Mrs. Ada Jane Robu of 'Tost & Robu', William St, Sydney.

In 1893 there is wonder in us all.
That awakening from grainy sleep,
our wet-lipped bewilderment
in the strange presence of a beast.
An animal dislocated and out of time,
frozen in its Linnaean counter-
lunch assembly line.

How best to address this congregation?
Those gathered here in glass
as if considering disaster.
Harried species question,
'Is it bushfire, extinction or flood?'

Creatures from fable or novelty:
false-handed, brush-tailed, fox-faced;
the paradox of the duck-billed,
web-footed, beaver-tailed fraud
revered and mounted on mossy plinth.
Arboreal and nocturnal orders
suspended or affixed

via tiers of eucalypt.

Cruciform.

Such is the cabinet quietude
of diorama.

A patagium expanse
of membrane always billowing,
ankle to wrist, elbow to ankle,
awaiting the surety of footage,
of landfall.

Animals swaddled
in their slaughterhouse pelage
of winter coat, sternal secretions
reddened as wound.

A small animal pageant of welded metal greys.
Always the *scratch, scratch scratch*—
dulled marsupial nails that grind the perpetual night
of stasis, the dull hours of putrefaction.

Pointed snout insectivores.
Those of the bipedal hop. Carnivores.
Grey and white spotted exotics
from a pouched underworld
of the strange. Spoon-nosed folivores.
Creatures conjured from a mélange
of myth and science, stare blankly
into our eyes—
our wide, dim portals opening
to let it all in.

Spectacle and tragedy wired
and stuffed in the chaise
lounge, parlour-room aesthetic
of wonderment. Wander past
and marvel at elusive sap-suckers
and omnivores;
animal objects who amplify
the distortions
of interior wilderness.

Sarcophagus: E18184

"Dear Sir, We have received a very rare specimen of a carved sarcophagus from New Caledonia, containing a skeleton of a native chief and would be pleased if inspect same with view to purchase, Yours Sincerely, Tost and Robu" Dec 16th 1909.

What do you think of this, do you think the story is to be trusted?
—Internal Memorandum: Robert Etheridge, Curator of the Australian Museum, Jan 12th 1910.

Bring him down from the mountain,
untie the ropes of vegetation
and keep bringing him down
to this earthly elevation.
A slide of rock, a wash of scree—
ground the night and body of this man
thrust from his resting place
into the bleached bones of light,
let us observe
the cave's opened tomb:

hard-wooded casing bound with sinnet;
ropey knotted tendons

of woven *pteropus* (flying fox fur)
to strap death's carved dimensions.

Note the 'highest mountain district'
diagonals razoring beneath
the square-faced censure
 of its chief, *Rouendjar*—
a man of the tribe '*Aubias*',
subject to our imminent inspection.

Percy Grainger Gets Dressed

Australian composer Percy Grainger had a penchant for eccentric clothing. He wore clothes made of brightly coloured Australian bath towels and loved beadwork. He visited Tost and Robu's Martin Place store in 1909, purchasing beads and other exotic curios. Photographs of his self-adornment in these beads 'as native' exist in Melbourne at the Grainger Museum.

Today it is too hot, even for towelling.
Looped *skyblue & scarlet* too restrictive
 on a day when the weather calls
for grass skirts & beading, armbands
& a serious countenance.

 Composer
as 'native', I feel the sugarcane workers
thresh a song for freedom in the swish
of my skirt. This beard of *blue & white*
beads tinkling a blackbirding folksong
on the bare expanses of my hollow chest.