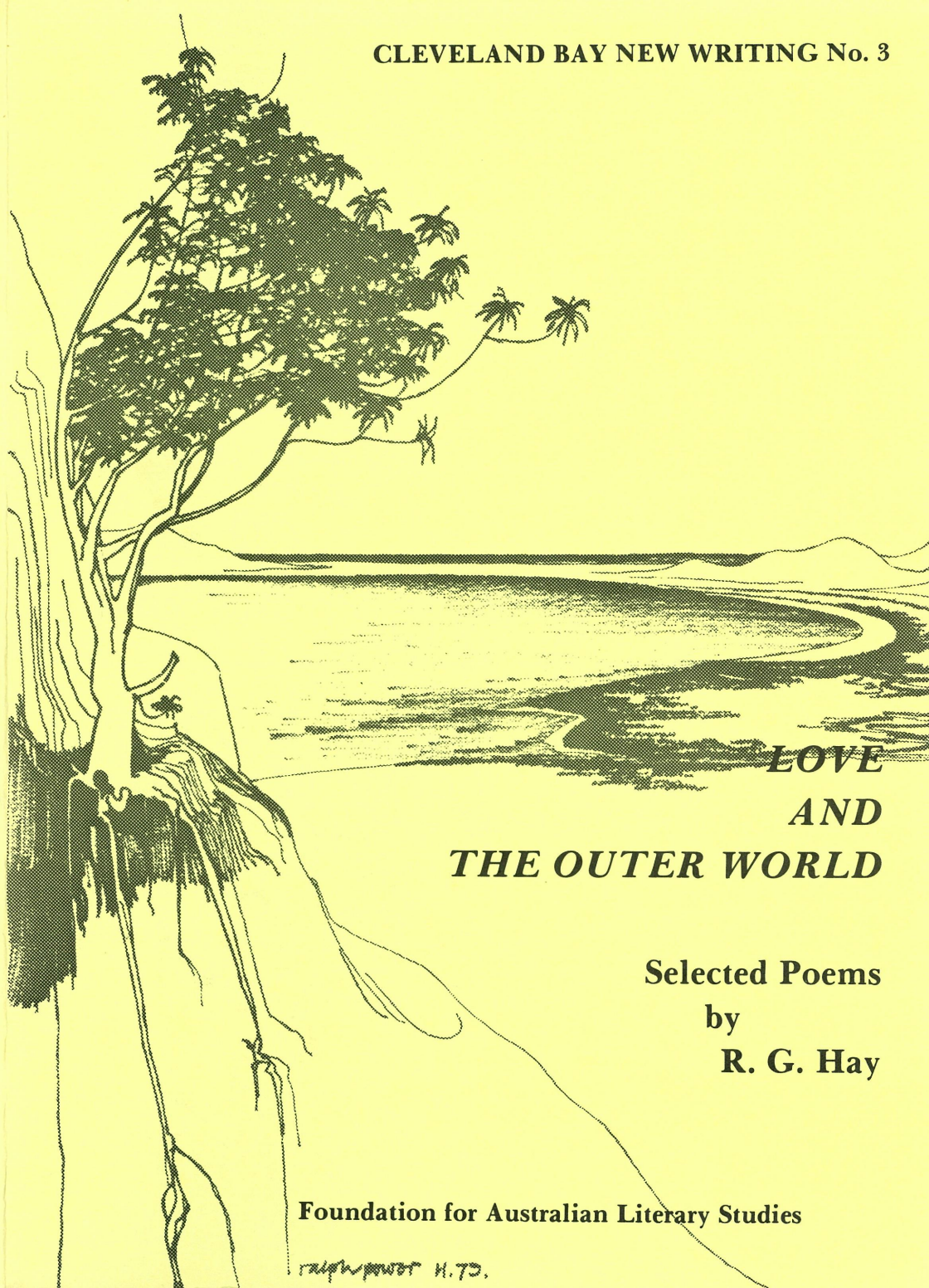


CLEVELAND BAY NEW WRITING No. 3



*LOVE
AND
THE OUTER WORLD*

Selected Poems
by
R. G. Hay

Foundation for Australian Literary Studies

1984/1985 H. 75.

Love and the Outer World

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R. G. Hay

Cleveland Bay New Writing Series No. 3



Foundation for Australian Literary Studies
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CONTENTS

THE OUTER WORLD

Ab urbe condita	10
After a Film about the Palm Island Strike	9
After Reading Four Quartets	30
Bluejay	12
Ceremonial Site	11
Curlews	13
1815	7
Exposure	32
First and Last Things	35
First Arrivals	6
Getting it Right	22
Honeyeater according to the book	14
Household Goddess	23
Is an Island?	5
It's called being human	34
Man's Estate	21
Miner	20
Natural Selection	19
Nox Est Perpetua Una Dormienda	33
On Reading Philosophy	29
On the Road	3
Pleasures of the flesh	31
Primum Mobile	25
Reading Southerly and Meditating Assorted Southerners	24
Self-defence	26
Semi-conductors are also semi-insulators	27
Swamp-Pheasant	16
To a Polite Academic Who Asked the Local Name	28
Turtle Season, Heron Island	17
Well Yes Parthenogenesis Would be Tidier	18
Yin:Yang	4

LOVE

Analogy	41
Artemis	42
An Autumn Night's Dream	45
Clodia in a Kaleidoscope	46
Déjà Vu, Almost	67
Effervescent	50
11 Ways of Looking at a Blonde	56
An Epiphany in a Picture Theatre	64
Eye and You	39
Honey and Myrtle	65
A Honeymoon Meditation	43
Indefinable	71
Initiation Rite	40
In Season?	44
It's probably not even a native grass	61
Life Support System	49
Living Together	48
Machismo	51
Making a Goat of Me	52
A Matter of Scale	70
The Moon, Honey, The Bees and So Forth	53
Poem in July	66
Post Something Watchamacallit	58
Prothalamion of a kind	59
Reflections of the Mind Body Dichotomy	54
Rose-in-Hand	69
Rosie — Three Views	62
The Spur	68
Talisman	60
Without an Upper Bound	55

FOREWORD

FOREWORD

In 1968 R.G. Hay was described as a widely published young Queensland poet. In the past sixteen years he has written steadily and been published even more widely, and a selection of his poems now makes a timely appearance. Although Hay's work takes some of its character from his native Central and Northern Queensland where he has lived for most of his life, he thinks of himself not as a regional but as an Australian poet. Reading *Love and the Outer World* we are struck by the unique Australian tone of Hay's voice as the poems move from one form to another. With an academic background, and writing criticism himself, Hay commands an overview of the possibilities available to poetry in the English language. Each poem here finds a place within a different mode of these possibilities, but the distinctive timbre of the poet's mind ensures that no poem merely echoes, however elegantly or drily, the traditional mode. Rather, like all good poets, in shaping language and form to his needs he extends the possibilities of Australian poetry.

There is, in fact, one natural voice which may adopt the accents of various personae — ranging from what he too deprecatingly calls “the worshipful troubadour stance” of some of the love poems, to the meditative, humane philosopher of “1815” and “It's called being human” — but whose tone and movement is always relaxed, steady and unaffected. In these poems the kind of tension needed to hold a work in place comes not from aesthetic devices, but from the poet's openness to experience balanced by a sensitive and canny reserve. It is here that his love poems find that inner drama without which love poetry does tend to be a pleasant troubadour tinkling. This reserve is both a delicacy of mind and a robust reservation about the extent of human felicity.

The process seen within Hay's poems, by which reserve is momentarily relaxed before gaining its habitual place in the poet's sensibility, gives them immediacy and poignancy. This immediacy, that is, the feeling that the experience is happening now in our own consciousness, is felt in a wry love poem like “Machismo”, in the reflective sympathy of “On the Road”, and in the sharp, deceptively relaxed brevity of “After a Film about the Palm Island Strike” which ends cuttingly:

of course
the aborigines wouldn't understand.
If they had, that first fleet
would never have got ashore.

No mere polemicist, Hay understands the nobler motives of colonialism and achieves the same immediacy when he writes of Lachlan Macquarie in "1815":

Fancy giving a man charge of a prison
who hates walls, who loathes barriers.

Many of the poems in *Love and the Outer World* refer in some way to Hay's childhood, which is presented as a country boyhood harried by no unduly harsh circumstances, but one that challenged, exacted moments of endurance, and consistently aroused curiosity and response. Childhood is not evoked for its own sake, but becomes an explanation of the present consciousness of the poet. The cumulative effect over a selection of poems is that we begin to know the poet and understand more intensely the experiences that the poems see through his eyes.

Although his poetry appears forthright, it does not cultivate naivety or ingenuousness. The surface simplicity in some instances is derived from the poet's going directly to the heart of his matter, and in other instances is derived from the indirectness of his approach. These latter are perhaps Hay's most characteristic poems, comprising a preamble, pleasing in itself because it is obviously directed though apparently non-committal, followed by a brief, dynamic statement. This structure, which is better described as movement, is seen in "Bluejay", which begins with eighteen lines of description shared between human and bird concerns, and ends with five separate but linked statements, not only personal to the poet but expressing a longing understood by much of humankind:

I'm not much for gods, but,
if I had to choose one,
I think it would be like a bluejay:
itself, and totally unconcerned with me.
Such a god and I might rub along.

Hay has written so much about birds and animals that a selection could well comprise his nature poems alone. He avoids two of the pitfalls of such poetry in that he writes accurately about a subject without sounding like a nature study text, and relates the human and the animal world without either anthropomorphism or sentimental depreciation of humanity. It is not easy to be original about the intrusion of the human into the animal world, but Hay succeeds in creating something new with the deft exactness of poems like "Curlews" and "Natural Selection".

This is a collection of immediately attractive poetry, disarmingly amiable at first encounter. Its relaxed tone suggests that we will meet no difficulties or unpleasant challenges, yet its calm statements engage our attention. It is true that *Love and the Outer World* avoids private imagery, stringent ellipses, anorexic phrases, recalcitrant grammar, and those fields of possible coherence waiting for the readerly spark to activate their meaning. Fields of meaning here are defined and clear, but unrestricted in the possibilities they open to the imagination. The experience is summed up in the poem “Déjà Vu, Almost” where the poet tells his beloved that when “Now you gaze horsebells” she restores again his child’s capacity for mystery and wonder:

One night I heard horsebells
clear tinkle from some world simple and light
asked dad where and
“They’re drovers’ horses going down the white road”.
The white road visioned, a desirable country

Laconic and decisive even when lines give the illusion of rambling, Hay’s poems deal knowledgeably with people, places, trees, birds, animals and ideas. Yet the poetry’s truth to life comes not from its realism only, but from its awareness and willing inclusion of the ideal world of the human imagination, “the white road visioned, a desirable country”.

Elizabeth Perkins
James Cook University

THE OUTER WORLD

On the Road

It wasn't one of those glamour rigs: I suspect the bloke bought it cheap and fifth hand. It looked like it had come a long way, and the header it carried wasn't exactly a prize load, I fancy. It stopped opposite the pub in this tiny town where we were having a drink. The driver got down, headed straight across the road, up the steps, into the bar. We were surprised: he didn't look the boozing kind, especially not on a job. Then, the far side, a youngish woman climbed slowly down: middling attractive, in T-shirt and shorts, looking somehow the other half of a couple. She carried an enormous wrench, started stoically to loosen the bolts on the bull-bars. The bloke reappeared with a bucket, filled it at the verandah tap. It's a complicated operation: drop the bull-bars, tip the bonnet forward, climb up and stand on the mudguard, pour in the water. Three buckets that semi took. I guessed they had only twenty or thirty kilometres more to go, hoped my guess was right, and they made it before the motor seized. They worked well together: had an understanding, like, but somehow their manner suggested they'd both be happier when they'd made enough to stay on the farm. She'd be mostly in the house, but sometimes when she took his smokeoh down the paddock, might get a wrench from the toolbox, tighten a nut or two on the harvester to amuse the kids, let them see mummy knows more than kitchens, remind herself and him of the days of their exile.

Yin:Yang

The motel was called *The Countryman*: that's about all I noticed when we arrived an hour after dark. A proper country town: the motel restaurant didn't work Sunday nights. The bloke was helpful but not hopeful: 'Kentucky Fried's about the only place open' he said. We searched: it was. The drive-in was showing too: and one church was in business. Country towns have changed a bit, but not much, since I was a young bloke drinking an occasional malted milk in the local cafe, ogling the waitress, hoping that her boyfriend would get chased by a bull: he always sauntered in five minutes before closing, grinned at us crestfallen young hopefuls filing out.

So Kentucky Fried it was: we thought some wine might help, reached the pub just as it shut, too. Well, just after, actually: not being locals, we didn't hazard the back door. We ate chicken-in-plastic, used up all the tea-bags, watched an awful movie on TV — Tyrone Power, honest: I couldn't stand him even when I was a milk-drinking hopeful, and Saturday night pictures was the week's highpoint. And so to bed, thinking the name apt, civilization far, and comfort a name.

Next morning I opened the metal louvres, looked out as country folk do, to see what the day promised. Looked out over two hundred hectares of ploughed ground. Dark soil, disc-harrowed, not a weed in sight, flat, with a farmhouse snuggled in trees on the far side of the paddock: a slight smell of dew lingering, a few crows flying hopefully about, and a pair of plovers breakfasting in middle distance. Otherwise still and quiet. I think the ideal would be a genuine mobile home: go to bed at night in a fair-sized city, wake next morning in farming country.

Is an Island?

In life he had a local fame, in death it
spread: forty miles up the road, buying petrol,
the bloke asked where I was headed
heard, and said 'Better watch them beach buggies —
feller killed in one last weekend'. Closer
there was raw grief: the English lady from New Zealand
who kept the motel, cooked old-style breakfast,
told the odd bitter story of the local boy made good
home half round the world for Christmas, filming
his boyhood beach when a wheel hit soft sand, stopped
film, boyhood, and the music. I forget his name
if I ever heard it, but recall him on chance cues.
Strange the way little townships think even strangers
would want to share what everyone naturally
feels: you'd think, though, a tourist place would
meet enough people to have learnt not to care.

First Arrivals

All very well for Phillip.

He's a sailor and it's all one sea
from Thames to this harbour.

Land, says Phillip, and means the shore,
room for a warehouse and timber for a wharf.

But land — you couldn't call it land;
it's rock or sand
and the twisted trees without shade:
hundreds and hundreds of trees
and all the shade my own shadow.

Land, he says, and means the shore
his kind will never conquer more,
sit round the edge and look at the sea
Ulysses' sea and Nelson's.

Land,
land's for the likes of me
and all that so far I've found
I can't understand.

I wish I were a seaman.

A road over the range, perhaps —
 but a road west over the range —
 that's Scotch logic and Scotch
 stubbornness.

The coast is north-south, the road
 goes inland, hence perpendicular, so
 west it goes.

But man, the country lies against it.
 South to north the Nepean flows, and,
 if you must go inland —
 and your convicts will go there too,
 run away to maybes not starve
 a week in the bush and come crawling back —
 go the way of the river, the way
 the land lies,
 south-west by south.

But no:

Caesar conquered Gaul, and here's
 this Scotch Caesar, no battles to fight, must
 force his way on the land.

Draws a line on the map and says
 here will be a road:

Hannibal crossed the Alps.

So there'll be a road and
 convicts cattle and the Lord knows what
 can run to hell.

A foolish home government to think
 Lachlan Macquarie and his oat-eating men
 would sit tame warders in
 some harbour locked prison.

Caesar and his legions building
 a new Gaul:

Lord, the man's drunk on his learning.

But his road will be built like Hadrian's wall
not to be dismantled except
stone by patient stone.

Not like the wall, though, to keep
Caledonian cattle-thieves out, but
a road to loose this prison scum
on the whole continent.

The man believes in reformations:
fresh air and hard work to teach virtue.

He'll go back to sit by his peat fire,
sip whisky in the mists and dream
of men and herds streaming west
in the harsh sunlight —

space to work out their own destinies.

The hills sit there, implacable.

Nemo me impune lacessit:

he draws a line on a map.

Fancy giving a man charge of a prison
who hates walls, who loathes barriers.

After a Film about the Palm Island Strike

It would seem natural
to manacle the troublesome, shift them
elsewhere: that was the custom
brought Phillip in the first place,
spread them — Norfolk Island, Hobart Town,
Coal River, Redcliffe.
Chain and ship them, tradition
of Botany Bay culture: of course
the aborigines wouldn't understand.
If they had, that first fleet
would never have got ashore.

Ab urbe condita

People speak to me
of the grandeur that was Rome:
and I recall that, after the battle of Cannae,
the Romans chose a right braw lad,
a ripe bonny lass, and
buried them alive.

By way of preparations
to repel Hannibal.

I'd settle for a more mundane civilisation
not built on such foundations.

Ceremonial Site

Once in an exam I answered a question
about Judith Wright's poem filled with patterned sound
so I went where the tourist map said Bora Ring.
Somewhere past a tobacco farm the road got lost
among pine-trees escaped from the forestry plots
but some kids on bicycles put us right.

I have to believe it was a sacred site, there
seemed no other reason to mark it, no-one
selling souvenir tea-towels or devonshire teas.
But I felt nothing numinous, wondered only
how anyone, black or white, could identify
that spot — Tibrogargan looms over fifty
square mile of similar country. Anyway
we learnt the colour of tobacco flowers
and the off-hand courtesy of country kids.

Bluejay

Shaw Nielson's god turned out not
to be terrible and thunder-blue.

This bird is no-wise terrible: but it
is thunder-blue.

We see a bird perched, half-obscured by leafage, or flying
through a brief gap in the trees:

“What's that bird?” Anne asks.

A bluejay.

She marvels that I can be so sure, so quick:

mostly I can't, but

bluejays sit so calm, blue,

fly so flap and glide,

always utterly bluejay-like.

I know no other bird so

indifferent to humankind:

neither frightened, nor curious,

beggar of food-scrap nor squatter in nesting sites.

I'm not much for gods, but,

if I had to choose one,

I think it would be like a bluejay:

itself, and totally unconcerned with me.

Such a god and I might rub along.

Curlews

Well, you hear them often enough,
but it was years before I saw one.
After night lectures, I passed an empty groundfloor room
and there it was
wandering between lectern and blackboard.
It darted under the desks
more awkward than any sprouting adolescent
no exit but the doorway I blocked.
A curlew scared witless is
rather prominent in a well-lit room.
But, one afternoon, driving out
in late slanting sunshine, I thought
perhaps I'd seen movement in the dappled shade
of a Moreton Bay Ash:
stopped the car and went to look closer.
Three curlews moved stealthily away —
no sudden flight, no panicked dash,
just flowing into the long grass:
I had to stare hard to be sure that
there were three birds and no fallen branches.

I suppose I didn't need curlews to learn
you can be relaxed and efficient
on your home territory
charge about like a headless chook
when spotlighted
before an unknown, problematic audience.

Honeyeater according to the book

Blue-faced I know but
not for years as that name
banana-bird always at the scraps
under the school: wondered whether
like a banana or likes bananas gave
the name.

Hot afternoons work done “Sir,
may I leave the room” interesting walk
to the distant dunny, bit of breeze
cement smooth cool on my feet under the school
always banana-birds at the scrap-bin.
Marble season stand at the bin one bite
chuck the sandwich guilt for the starving
millions in Asia never mind feed
the banana-birds anyway.

Blue-faced honeyeater indeed:
never think of birds with faces
heads with beaks one round eye in profile
faces two oval eyes triangle nose
bow-shaped mouth
a third, a third, a third, dad says.
Never goes right — he can sketch
not me hardly even write legibly
exercise, steel-pen, mum’s Swan Ink, blot
red-ink on the ruler, smudge
rip it out but no better next time
6-10 poor work 5-10 Repeat!

All the good little girls get 9½
maybe never see banana-birds:
don't look out the window, leave the room,
sharpen slate-pencils, fill ink-wells,
empty the bins, work in the garden.
Girls get taught to be different
9½-10 but what do they do when
no-one's there to tell them "Turn the page"?
Banana-birds around the scrap-bin are
an essential part of education
probably.

Swamp-Pheasant

The seaside you'd think seagulls
mewing and riding the wind:
but for me it was swamp-pheasants.
Not that there were no gulls, but
more was that lovely liquidly falling
call from the hillside scrub.
I tried to learn to whistle it
as a call to my dog, so that,
on hot dusty dry days, I'd have
an excuse to call like
a swamp-pheasant, recall
sea, beach, and the green moist hills
that flanked them.

In the open, like trying to cross a road,
it's a prominently awkward bird:
in the undergrowth
hard to see from a few metres and
remarkably agile.

These days I inhabit two worlds,
hearing the calls of crows, doves, chippies,
from my dry home and
the liquid notes of the swamp-pheasant:
almost as if lantana had
invaded the brigalow.

Turtle Season, Heron Island

Of course at meals everyone talked of turtles:
I saw tracks every time I walked round the island,
so I rose early each morning, went out at night
with a torch, but I still haven't seen a turtle
lay her eggs. The nearest I got was to watch one poor
creature, who'd tried, by her tracks, three places in
the wedge-shaped rock that eased passage from sea,
barred it from land, finally drag her blowing mass
over a just possible pass, and, endangered by three hours
sunlight and a falling tide, relievedly collapse
into water. She floated one luxurious breath,
metamorphosed from lumbering struggle to agile
resident, and paddled leisurely off to another year's
indolence in pastures of turtle-grass. But a season
of basking and sporting will bring her once more
to this terrible shore. I wonder whether, Othello-like,
she enchants her lover with tales of her desperate deeds.

Well Yes Parthenogenesis Would Be Tidier

Driving at noon down a summer road,
and mindful of my machine — it's all I own —
I was alarmed by a sudden dry whirring,
like the anguished shriek of an oil-less bearing:
so I stopped.

All about in the shimmering trees,
the mating cicadas drummed their ecstasies.

Natural Selection

Birds in our garden are not very common
so, when I heard a tiny pleasant song
I stopped shovelling and looked round
but the only possible source of the sound
seemed to be a fern clump far too small
to shelter any bird: so, no wiser, I
went back to work.

Shifting the fernclump later on
sudden scuttle of an ugly black cricket
and startled, with my spade I smashed it.
Then I remembered the song.

Miner

Once, on the way home from school,
I found a half-fledged micky miner
at the foot of a bimble-box:
the parent birds were fluttering round
chirping plaintively.

Dutifully kind to dumb creatures, I
picked it carefully up, carried it
home.

Well, to my home: the nest was high
and I no climber.

I put it in an old canary cage,
supplied water, birdseed borrowed
from next door.

Mum, although much in the bush,
was strange to the ways of birds:
dad cared only that I left the
cage-door open.

Next morning it was stiff and cold:
micky miners eat only insects.

Given that there was a cat in
every house around the sandy space where
I found it, I hardly think I hastened
its death. But then, I didn't save
its life, either.

When he was old, feeble, and facing death,
my father's one persistent wish was
to be allowed to die in his own home,
not in a hospital.

So often a wish to be kind
is not enough.

Man's Estate

As a boy, had a dog once ran into a burning slack heap
dragged itself home somehow on its front legs
lay in misery all afternoon, needing shooting
but dad, after the trenches, was too tender-hearted.
Uncle Clarry turned up, remember
in my pyjamas with him looking at the dog in lantern light
by morning he'd done what was necessary.

Grown-up, visited home, to be shown
an old cat with suppurating eye
deemed now my responsibility so
borrowed a twenty-two, held it just below
an ear, squeezed the trigger
almost, as the bullet went home
think it looked gratitude from the one good eye.

Sometimes a boy grown man growing old
gets to wondering.

Getting it Right

From the first, saw what was there
but in words in which it wasn't:
summer heat and dust, winter frost
the frustration of child muscles too feeble
for feats grown-ups took for granted
were endured without tears at seven
being Wallace, the Bruce, or Rob Roy —
thirty years before I read Russel Ward
fifteen to hear a song about an
Irish colonial boy.

Never mind the mate stuff, either, daring
to be a Daniel, taught to sing, daring
to stand alone: scared as shit mostly
but found myself still standing or
back on my feet somehow, bruised but
still breathing.

Found eventually words were the easy escape
manipulating the adult tokens brought
occasional praise, more often and more desired
being left alone.

Now at last I'm eye-level with
the recalcitrant words, and trying to
recall that exemplary spider.

Household Goddess

Well, that's how she might be for A.D. Hope and, as he wrote, for James McAuley too: them blokes are into all that classical stuff. For me it's otherwise. Sometimes I'm standing on an empty beach watching the waves, or in a busy street watching people, and I hear a soft voice murmur 'Bob', and turn and there she is smiling that slow smile of challenge: sometimes I'm driving miles from anywhere, enjoying the long solitude of scrub, and she appears beside me on the seat, puts a hand gentle on my knee and smiles: or I'm sitting late at night dreaming of wealth or fame, luxury or leisure, and she walks in, always with that maddening smile, and beginning to unbutton her dress. And I groan — to myself, for her rebuke is sharp — since I'm a lazy bugger and would rather not. Then I catch her eye, and think 'This time, my girl, you'll feel the lightning stroke' and fall to work or pleasure like the birds, or the cicadas, or those fish that fling themselves up on the beach on the highest wave of the year's highest tide to shed their seed: or whatever creature is impelled to act to bring into being that which is yet unborn. And afterwards, she still unsmitten, smiles, and murmurs 'Au revoir' and vanishes. And I think 'Next time, my girl, we'll see' and go back to the ordinary routines of the unreal world I inhabit in her absences.

Reading Southerly and Meditating Assorted Southerners

Why do reviewers always
— well, often, or mostly, or sometimes, but always
this is fiction, after all —
finish by saying, if the poet's still alive,
it's worth waiting to see what the bastard
comes up with next, and, if the poet happens
to be dead, what a pity the poor cow didn't
live to fulfil and so forth.

A poem is a poem is made is made-up
to be something made — fictive, factitious:
simply there, whatever it is.
Is not symptomatic of poetic development
nor reviewers consultants to underdeveloped muses.

Hardback publication hasn't happened to me yet, but I get
the occasional kind note from an editor:
'developing a witty sinewy style' one said
twenty years ago: developing, like big tits
only not in my case (honest, Vivian, I won't change
my sex; my style is, well, it's supposed
to develop or something — that's the polite
fiction and I'm always fictional and observe proper form)
but last month one didn't take to my
'literal occasional poems'. My poems are words
that fall intermittently as the fiction dictates:
aren't everyone's? A non-literal continuum would
be a world not a poem: fiction should be
mindful of what its facts allow.

Primum Mobile

The moving point
experiences movement
and nothing but.

To describe the locus
to look at the path afterwards
is history
may be useful
provides amply for contemplation
but is not the experience.

Moving points
make love
write poems
die.

Do not look on the moment
as history being born.

Now is now
is not the intersection of past and future:
future and past
are not.

The point is —
that the point is:
is moving;
is, in moving.

Self-defence

You phrase your contempt as 'Grasshopper mind!'
but why not say 'Like a hermit crab'?

Some minds grow like gastropods
sifting the limestone experience to fashion
a pattern elaborated all their lives
that keeps them safe.

But some, like the unlucky crustacean,
half armoured and powerful, half unfinished
and vulnerable, cannot build a shell:
they must make do with what they find
left lying about by some molluscan mind
and, if they're going to grow at all,
must always be questing a new, fitter, shell.

Semi-conductors are also semi-insulators

Yes, my room's a mess. 'Alfred' Carlyle is reputed to have said of Tennyson, 'is always carrying a piece of chaos with him, turning it into cosmos'. I hope I'm not so cosmetic as Alfred, but that, roughly, is my work too. Better, then, to be surrounded by mess. You, of course, are a tidy soul: a neat body, too. But what things lurk in swamps, under rotting logs, in deep scrub, live under water, or move on dark nights, you prefer not to think on: sometimes, though, your well-lit, disinfected, clockwork, deodorised life gets dull. So you come to look in my room, remind yourself of some of those unthinkable thoughts you wish to live safely insulated from. That's why all civilised minds keep a tame poet or two on their bookshelves. So, in a large view, I'm neatly pigeonholed in a role, too. Besides, it's a carefully chosen, cunningly fabricated mess: else I would have to walk outside, and who knows what waits out there?

To A Polite Academic Who Asked the Local Name

Well, I'm sorry, but we don't have a name for it.
I know that our language
like our customs and our desires
is supposed to be quaint
worth writing up, a learned footnote or two.

But a thing for picking mangoes
is just that:
if you want mangoes, you
borrow one, make one, find another way,
or wait for them to fall.

A thing is its function
or the use to which it's put.
Some things are nameless as too trivial
and some as safeguard against
talking about instead of doing.

I'm not sure how you write that up.

On Reading Philosophy

The words that nourish my mind
are those that like grass are found
simple in the sunlight close to the earth,
or cut and cured in the stacks of science
against time of dearth.

But there's no sustenance
in all your capitalised abstractions —
life dried to straw
and used to stuff a scarecrow.

After Reading Four Quartets

And perhaps, after all, that is
all. Not to utter what is unutterable
altogether, but to make a gesture:
not point, not be so explicit, but
assume a stance vaguely indicative.
Something moved in the bushes: whether
a ghost or a madman, a rat or a small
marsupial, or just an eddy rustling
dead leaves, one must not seek such
definition. There is, there was, there may be
noise.

Pleasures of the flesh

No, nymph — no immortality!
Grant me home, and Penelope:
I can't tell why, words are not my skill —
oh I can talk, when talk might lead to action,
but not an explanation —

say I will.

I will: and if the gods will otherwise,
I can only strive.

What's to your endless life?
For me, there's always death,
if striving should fail,
but, to live forever a life not my will —
no!

Just let me go.

Man plants his life like a tree,
and now mine fruits bitterly:
I chose to roam
for the sweet of coming home.
You think it's all Penelope,
you offer immortality, urge your beauty:
but all I wish —

I started something there, in Ithaca, at Troy:
all this I must finish.

If I were just a body,
I'd stay, forget Penelope:
but something there is that urges, strives,
so I have willed my life.

Let me go!

Exposure

Winter reserves the best of the beach
for musing poets, mating gulls, and mooning newly-weds,
keeping for those who dare to try to reach
fulfilment through what each most dreads —
exposure of the self naked to creation's elemental anguish —
the clear colour and pure water with which now she's lavish;
lapping them in gentlest sun and softest breeze
for comfort against the long night's cold unease.

Nox Est Perpetua Una Dormienda

Queen Victoria, cast in bronze,
and covered liberally with verdigris,
stands majestic in the winter sunshine.

Stands for what, in Brisbane, 1974?
The Empire, and its sun unsetting,
now eclipsed?

Respectability maybe,
and the persistence of habit:
too troublesome to shift her,
though she's not important enough to polish.

In rectitude she stands, but the lissome office girls
walk by.

It's called being human

Generations of peasants labour in the fields
the same field, the same labour,
perhaps to field and onlooker it seems
the same peasant.

But he knows himself an individual:
knows the recurrent seasons, crops,
field-labour, himself a part
yet not inevitably anonymous.

Let's stand, perhaps, one or two weeds to flower
shapes a ditch to a slightly different curve
aches to know it not just as work
though so much is necessity and inevitable
but, on some margin of felicity and grace,
his work.

First and Last Things

I lectured about modern life and modern poetry,
but the students kept looking past me
till at length I was driven to turn and see
what so compelled their attention:
and there, in a cupboard, hung a skeleton
with (some schoolgirl's macabre joke) lace panties on,
mocking our solemn talk of illusion and reality
with its stark assertion of mortality.
Modern poets too have brought their thoughtful imageries
like the lace panties
not as proper veneration for the place of love
but hopefully or wryly to conceal
what the futile images transparently reveal —
that their desiccating cerebration
has withered the parts that were means of creation.

LOVE

Eye and You

The world may provide an infinite array
of visible objects
but my eye is made in such a way
only one is ever in focus.
So of all the knowledge that might have been mine
all I've found true
is the clear grace you outline
in a world
where all else is a vague blur.

Initiation Rite

In some tribes weavers, before they work
stroke a live and patterned snake
believing this effective inspiration.

Wanting my poems to have
vitality, intelligence, and elegance
I was wondering if I might
caress you a little before I
sat down to write.

I suspect though, that once in contact
I would find stroking
a sufficient occupation.

Analogy

Warm in the sun on the river's bank we lay
watching paperbarks rustle in the breeze, and
an occasional waterbird sigh to a landing:
the world immersed in a luxury of quiet.

Then a speedboat waked the river, and a skier
bounced across the furrows and tumbled down
trying to shed his ski and plane barefoot
a manoeuvre that outreached his prowess.

No bones broken he picked up a tow
slid off in a shower of spray to try again.
All of this came back into my mind
when later, warm and wakeful, we lay in bed.

Artemis

There's more than one way to apprehend: as a kid
I could parrot that Easter comes after the first
full moon after the somethingth of March,
but I never associated the moon and Easter until,
grown a man, one Thursday before the break we
worked late, said our farewell 'Have a good
holiday' with an almost full moon already bright
in the evening sky. I remember one woman
especially, full and rounded like the moon and
how I thought Easter would be good, spent with
her. Now I always remember that the moon is
full at Easter: I'm not sure of the date but
I've learned a little about ripe divinities.

A Honeymoon Meditation

Barefoot nine-year-old playing
cricket on the road, I lobbed
the ball on a stone, hit the
rubbish-tin wicket. 'Whatta beaut
leg-break!' explained the
twelve-year-old batsman, out.

Spent years after that trying leg-breaks
top-spin and wrong-uns. Got them
too, but lost among full tosses and
long hops. Finally found I wasn't
a bad off-break bowler, learned
to earn wickets by patient persistence
not whizz the batsmen out with wizardry.

I wonder if that lithe dazzling nakedness
can learn to love at a finger-spinner's pace.

In Season?

One fits one's moods to the season lady.

I looked long as you lay so lovely
on the soft sand under the warm sun.

The sheoaks whispered what might be done:
the gentle breeze carried their gossip to the pale blue sky,
but not I

could disturb such a world
with that sort of word.

But when the sun sets and leaves us with winter
it is, perhaps, another matter.

An Autumn Night's Dream

You so perceptive and knowledgeable
and me not exactly unlearned either
walking hand-in-hand at night
down this ordinary city street
the air cool and clear and all the lights
like the lights of fairy-land, you said
and I agreed.

Thinking how banal, thinking how right
thinking magic casements opening on
but not the foam thinking I've never seen fairy-land
thinking, walking autumn nights with you
I have.

Clodia in a Kaleidoscope

i

Though, lady, to praise may be impertinence,
not to be moved to praise would show a lack of sense:
and though I lack all but my native five,
in them I dwell, and know you are alive.

ii

Whether I prefer that chastity lodestone
your behaviour or profligacy depends
I suppose on the chances of me
being invited to the party.

iii

Chaste, yet sweet
gars me greet:
sweet but chaste
seems such a waste.

iv

Your lips
grapes
not quite the shape
but inviting to crush
and sweet in the mouth:
wine instead
for turning my head.

v

So lightly lived my Clodia once alas
you might have thought that love was laughing gas.

vi

Greek sculptors carved splendid goddesses
but that their models were flesh I didn't believe
until I beheld your breasts:
this, as you know, is termed a conceit.

vii

Men that plough the earth and perish
yearn to make one furrow permanent:
women that walk the world and vanish
deserve to be enshrined, laughing an eternal moment:
but I know only anguish since you went.

Living Together

I don't know who taught you biology but
about plants they seem to have left you confused:
earth air water and light — fire of a sort
they take in elemental forms not
mediated by any other living thing.

Then, eating and being eaten
in a long Tennysonian chain
all your higher forms pursue their
self-important destinies.

Me, I like to think of lichen, high on a
bare wind-swept rock
fungus protecting algae and algae
nourishing the fungus and so an
irreducible dyad not self-sufficient but
mutually supportive, colonising barren waste
making soil. Alone in light and air and rain.
Lichen, I think, might justify its pride.

Life Support System

Flying to Fraser Island in the small plane
we bounced a bit in the breeze over the sandy hills,
sandhills I suppose they were, though far inland
and you clutched my hand for reassurance.
I tried to look unconcerned, and hoped you'd never
have occasion to discover that I can't buoy you
five hundred feet above the tree-tops.
Still, I suppose if the motor does fail
we'll both be rapidly dead, you'll hardly have
time to see that I let you fall, and be
disillusioned. Meanwhile hold tight my hand
if that makes a bumpy journey somehow
more sufferable.

Effervescent

You were scared in a car on a steep wide road,
terrified in a twin-engined plane on a clear day
at five hundred feet with a sandy beach below,
so I expected you'd find the fragile plastic bubble
of the helicopter hard to enter: I certainly did.
Instead you were like a kid buying a ticket
for the ferris wheel: perhaps you think bubbles
the proper objects to go floating about in air.

Machismo

Frogs terrify you, irrationally but effectively.

So, having a need to be useful, and anxious, by a display of bravado, to allay the irrationally terrified boy caring about people and apt with words, I nonchalantly lift frogs from a corner of the shower, or the toiletbowl, choke back my revulsion from their cold smooth feel and cast them out far into the wilderness of the back garden. And when a rampaging mouse invaded your underwear drawer, rustling your sleep and mincing pants and tampons I baited a cunning trap, bought from the corner shop, flung the brute's body triumphantly into the garbage can, almost awarding myself tail and ears. It's lucky that the looming terrors of your world are suitable sized beasts for me to flex protector of the hearth in skinny silhouette.

Making A Goat Of Me

After the picnic races, the tiny dance-floor
much too crowded, we sat outside and watched.
Some of the watchers, though, stirred by
the music, and the seethe of writhing
bodies, could not keep quiet their
humanity, began to dance in the dust
under an outside light.

Despite the grime they risked, the stifle
of dust they raised, those spilled-over
dancers under the naked light were
better tuned to the moonlit bush night,
prickling and quivering with its myriad life.

Later, driving home, I longed
to stop, light a fire, and shedding
my clothes, stamp barefoot on the earth
a paean of praise for your being.

Until I met your body, Dionysus
never seemed a credible god.

The Moon, Honey, The Bees and So Forth

Full moon at the autumn equinox,
this is as near as my year comes to stillness;
twenty-four hours without any darkness —
time pauses on the point of a cusp.

All afternoon and into night we've been still
reluctant to disturb this calm enclave in time
balanced on a knife-edge by our single will
over passion's Bayesian maelstrom.

Then a wisp of cloud crosses the moon
a drift of hair caresses my face
my moth-to-flame hands start their restless dance
and the walls come tumbling down.

Reflections of the Mind Body Dichotomy

Well, others have tumbled you in bed;
sometimes you tell me of them, before or after
talking coolly, ruminative, and I listen
dispassionately.

For I have dealt more indecently
than all those worthies
penetrating your poems, snaring you in mine,
delving, sometimes, into the same occasion
comparing your responses to my own,
poking my mind into all the crevices
and folds of your imagery
cradling you most unashamedly in my lines:
in or out of any court I'd cheerfully admit
we were intimate on all possible occasions
and in the intervals cerebrally commingled.

Without an Upper Bound

You are my perfect symbol
never in any way predictable
so never bringing to any situation
redundant information.

All other women are mostly superfluous
moving within a narrow range of probabilities
to complete a context.

But you are for me the perfect symbol
never in any situation predictable
the embodiment of free-will:
and I being the being I must suffer
bodies, my darling yes, bodies matter.

11 Ways of Looking at a Blonde

1

Among thirty uneasy people
the only domain of stillness
was the poised blonde head.

2

My mind vacillated
like the hands of a lover,
trying to caress everywhere a lithe blonde body.

3

The tall blonde woman
cut a slender red rose in her garden:
a jar in Tennessee was different
gardens are mulierocentric anyway.

4

A poet and a blonde
are two.
A poet and a poem and a blonde
are one.

5

I enjoy both the beauty of statement
and the beauty of implication.
The blonde draped
and the blonde naked.

6

In the shower cubicle
a naked blonde body:
the shadow on the frosted glass
a problematically unaware Salome.
So heads are lost.

7

O bloodless poets of Melbourne
why do you apostrophize obscure dark goddesses?
Have you not seen the blonde
walking barefoot
on a sunlit lawn?

8

I have touched golden moments
and limpid harmonies:
but I know how the blonde
has provided
that I may attain such knowledge.

9

When the blonde left
it defined
my knowledge of the void.

10

The breeze is nodding the roses:
the blonde must be sighing.

11

The clouds lowered all afternoon
it was thundering
and it was going to storm.
The blonde drowsed
loose-limbed on the double bed.

Post Something Whatchamacallit

And afterwards
with tousled hair childlike
you built a house of cards.

So we have learned to use our striving
not that you or I should conquer
but that as tonight arriving
where our pride holds us together
we build our love like a house of cards:
don't, my darling, breathe too hard.

Prothalamion of a kind

Not censoriously
regarded the rubbish basket in your bedroom:
but reflectively, even with sympathy
that overspill of empty bottles cigarette packets used tissues.

Discard seems decent for such things:
for people, I wondered wryly.

Yet, not wishing to live longer
than I am alive:
if I should cease catch fire on cue,
slake sometimes your need for tranquillity, or absorb
the overspill of fear and doubt
don't confuse the sentimental
preservation of a husk with
a proper mercy.

Talisman

Once long ago I tried olives,
found something in the taste I didn't like
and, cautious, retreated from possible displeasure
at the cost of blandness that was safe.

Now, though, trusting you, no longer
intent to wall out a hostile world, I've tried
again and found a complex pleasure
savouring that elusive weft of flavours.

One day, I start to hope, taking a bag
of olives, hand-in-hand we'll sally forth
to explore the fabled country of dragons
and asphodel.

It's probably not even a native grass.

Not that we have such obvious seasons, but
I knew a year had passed when in the sloping
sun I saw red natal incandescent by the road.
I suppose there's always been such grass, but
until you came and spoke of it I'd never
noticed how it fired to index one time of year.
Strange that a stranger should teach me
to see my own roadside: now a year has
been and you're a stranger no more, but again
the dying grass seeds its phoenix myth
whenever I drive into the sun.

Rosie — Three Views

I

A large dark red rose
two days before it begins to wither
in the midst of small pink buds,
snapdragons and geraniums,
and that is Rosie among the women of Yacca Hill,
the single orchid Eloise omitted.

Rosie —

it's hardly a name for an unshrewish Juno
except in that one connotation
but as Rosie she was famed,
the Railway Hotel barmaid.

II

It was somewhere in December and the sun was sizzling down
when I came in search of liquor to this God-forsaken town.
The first pub that I came to they looked at me like a dog
so I moved on for I didn't like their faces, and could do without
their grog.

The next pub that I came to it was nothing but a bar
and the drinkers were all drunkards, so I waved the place ta-ta.
But the third place that I came to it was made for blokes like me,
if I had to plan a heaven that's how paradise would be;
the mob were all hard-drinkers, though few were ever drunk,
and the place, well, if it wasn't perfumed, at least it never stunk.
The barmaid was a beauty and she seemed to take to me —
she could have tied me down for life but yet she left me free.

My cheque ran out as all cheques will
and I took the track feeling rather ill.

Yet of evenings with cattle when the moon is on the land
visions come to me of Rosie with a beer-jug in her hand
or the naked light upon her and her body sinking down
and I sometimes wish I'd settled for the rat-house life of town.

III

Like a butterfly

I

would spread our love

shove

words for a pin

in

the midst of it

wit

behind for cork

talk.

So capture for ever

our night by the river

and the discovery

of the life of the body.

But words like clumsy fingers

rub off the fragile scales

destroy the pattern

flatten life out.

So poetry fails

but discovery lingers.

An Epiphany in a Picture Theatre

Mousey, as you have said, an indifferent sort of light-brown,
undistinguished, as you claim:

but, caught in the beam from the projector,
your hair shone with the sheen of platinum:
so does your else ordinary self catch a glamour
from the illusion illuminating my mind.

Honey and Myrtle

North of Bowen the creeks were overflowing with flowering melaleuca, the heavy perfume spilling across the road and teasing me. I remembered the scent from a holiday once on the Noosa River, but that memory wasn't what tantalized me. I puzzled for a mile or two: it was nothing from my childhood — paperbarks didn't grow along our creeks — but it went deep. It does go deep, but it isn't long ago and far away: nor is it a creek, though it waters the arid places in my life. It was like some of the times we make love: a heavy wave into which I'm drawn to sweetly plunge, and almost drown, but with an acrid edge so that it never cloys. I know the convention is roses, and sometimes you have a rose mood, but mostly not so garden-flower, domesticated, but wild native of my landscape, close to the rhythms of that lean lovely earth of sudden contrasts: sweaty blonde hair untidy as the cream-yellow melaleuca brushes, but oh what an abundance of nectar, ambrosia, not celestial but here flowing through the parched and straggling scrub in which I spend my days.

Poem in July

Barefoot boys schoolward on frosty mornings
stub their toes on tree-roots and
slowly bleed like Shylock or Christians
hurts like any fleshed spirit, but
barefoot boys learn not to limp
or cry though can't stop tears or
risk speaking for a bit
in case of quavers.

Act tough eventually are tough,
although, if these days I avoid letting
you look me in the eye or
don't speak very much it's
just the maturity of a barefoot boy
stubbing his stumble through a winter day.

Déjà Vu, Almost

One night I heard horsebells
clear tinkle from some world simple and light
asked dad where and
'They're drovers' horses going down the white road.'
The white road visioned, a desirable country.
'Let me see.' Told it was too dark, too far
I persisted, till that patient man helped me try.

Set on the verandah rail I held high the lantern
peered out at the encircling dark
saw the lemon tree, almost the gate but
no horses, no white road.

Well, life's been lantern light
a lemon tree or two, I think a gate,
sometimes even grey loom of a night-bird.
But now you gaze horsebells and soon
I'm walking simple and light
down the white road.

The Spur

It was a pleasant resort at an interesting beach
a place to tempt even me to rise with the sun
and go to bed not long after it: an ambience
likely to encourage love-making in even the shy
and the sluggish. But, whether to drum up trade
for the bar, or protect the guests from the perils
of solitary intimacy, an entertainer entertained each night.
A famous TV personality whose fame had never
reached me, but there he unfailingly was, a large cheery
gentleman, a glass always at hand and a sad expression
when he thought no one was looking. Polite or curious we
suffered two nights of being entertained, but you are too
compassionate to laugh at the ludicrous when it wears
a human face. Sometimes now when I see a poem of yours
or mine in print, and begin to dream of fame, I recall
the beer gut and sad eyes of that famous entertainer.

Rose-in-Hand

You took the flower carelessly
not quite a rose but more than bud
in a gesture too gentle to say flaunted
too self-assured to say demurely,
and smiled above its crimson
unafraid to provoke the comparison.
Just as content to unfold slowly:
simple, and unashamed of the eternal mystery,
the soft and scented charm's efficiency,
by which all things come to be born.
You'll wear my rose as it should be worn.

A Matter of Scale

Discussing acoustics and perception, perhaps erudite topics for lovers, but natural we find, and do, you wondered whether anyone really has absolute pitch, hearing a note as itself alone, not as divergence from anything else; and explained your own ability to give names of notes by referring them to the limits of your range, long since fixed, identified, and stored accessible as an audile image.

Maybe I want too much, wanting myself seen simply as myself; but soon, I hope, you'll come at least to measure me by reference to yourself, your limits, and not as divergence from those remembered lovers, who form a scale that I find alien for the kind of melody I'd like to make my own.

Indefinable

To say the end
is easier than to see the end.

Life having a way
of slipping through the mesh of definition
and wise in its stupidity
not always knowing the limits.

So that whenever I say good-bye
frequentative temporal you will observe
I whistle in the dark
or take insurance against the inevitable
time you walk away.

Being alive and so free
to slip through any mesh
and escape all my laboured attempts
to frame a definition
or set limit to your liberty.

Leaving these mutilated traces
footprints in the wave-washed sand
evidence that once you walked with all your graces
this else forever barren strand.

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