

ELIZABETH PERKINS

NEIGHBOURS IN A THICKET

Poems by David Malouf, University of Queensland Press, 1974.

David Malouf was born and educated in Brisbane and travelled and taught abroad before taking a position at the University of Sydney. His first novel, *Johnno*, was published this year by the University of Queensland Press. *Neighbours in a Thicket* is his second collection of poetry, and like his earlier collection, *bicycle and other poems*, these poems are derived from his first years in Queensland and his later experiences and reflections on life.

The title of the collection suggests that David Malouf does not see the world as a savage jungle, but as a rich growth of life which nevertheless can also conceal danger. In this thicket we are all neighbours.

A town is a meeting-place: hands at the trestle table
passing down through a family a cup to be drunk from and kept
safe
a while out of children's reach; a group of neighbours
setting forth at dawn into unknown country, and where they stop to
shoe a horse,
or gnaw hard tack, is where their names shall ring for
centuries.
The journey is into time.

from *Between Towns*

David Malouf writes with unusual sensitivity and wisdom. Family relationships and friendships mean much to this poet, and he does not accept them complacently or abandon them carelessly:

Well, keeping
touch is a tricky business, hit and miss.
I miss you still. Old friends like ghosts step through
us.
My mind's so often ajar these days, who knows
who might venture in? And though I don't expect replies
to letters I don't send, still something passes
between us: a space long empty suddenly glows.

from *With the Earlier Deaths*

His acceptance of life is reassuring at a time when much poetry concentrates on expressing a troubled awareness of the divided self. David Malouf's poems have a quiet wisdom that has obviously been acquired slowly and with difficulty, and they engage the reader seriously:

Stocktaking: what have I put
away out of these seven
fat years to be used
against the seven lean?

Postcards of travel: slow
Rhine barges towing
cathedrals through fog,
towards dawn the Aegean

breaking dolphin-backed
with islands. Twice
in a cool decade love
that wrings us dry wrung me
dry.

Decade's End

Here we have poetry that catches and holds the attention without noise or startling gimmickry of style. Each poem moves outward from the poet's birthplace to bring a Brisbane suburb or the fishing harbour or Deception Bay into the same focus as Cuba or Florence or Katsangani. In this steady perspective the Trojan plains and contemporary battlefields are gravely contemplated and evaluated.

Without noisy derision David Malouf's poems pass thoughtful judgement on the superficialities of past and present civilization:

eternal it is not,
with its telephone numbers
and children's games, graffiti
chipped from the ruins of a third declension.
The New Jerusalem -
Rome-Babylon.

Which is what we should expect
of course. Lake water
was warm but temporary,
fire blistered. It is earth
we long for, and air -
a location of variable
weathers and lovers,
of pigeons levitating over
rooftops. Double agents
unfaithful to both worlds,
we watch a red Ferrari, hellbent, scream
through four gears, careering
off, coasting home.

from Eternal City

Although these are reflective poems, there is a feeling that they were written out of doors, and landscapes in Sydney, Queensland, Ravenna or northern Europe are evoked as part of the whole meaning of a poem. David Malouf also finds meaning for the present in bringing to life the past, but all his philosophy of life is conveyed in poetry, not in preaching.

It is a major achievement to bring together so much experience with such perception without becoming solemn

or tendentious:

consumed by the body's light
we glow, we fade, not all
of us even in seven
years can be renewed.

But the flame at least is something
to read by. Till we learn
to do without it - growing
accustomed to the dark.

from *Decade's End*

This small book of poems is beautifully designed, and
readers will wish only that it was twice as long.