Stephen Roberts is a Melbourne poet who has been published in many literary journals. From the Outer draws its themes from the contemporary landscape of Australian society. Roberts’ poem “A Kid in the Outer Suburbs — Melbourne — 1940s”, nostalgically celebrates the innocence and freedom of childhood in the forties: “When I was a child / the Suburbs hadn’t rolled out like miles of lino / Streets still straitjacketed paddocks / Market Gardens a stone’s throw away.” Surprisingly, perhaps, Roberts describes the forties as an idyllic age, made even more rosy by the passage of time: “In Spring we picked buttercups & yellow daisies / & searched hopefully for four-leaf clovers / We made endless daisy chains to wrap around / each other.” However, these picturesque childhoods are no longer possible in the Australia of the nineties.

From this “outer” of remembrance, Roberts examines the “everyday” existence of contemporary society. His themes are drawn from the many “lived” experiences and concerns of his subjects. “Steady” and the “Temptress,” begin the collection and deal with different aspects of woman. The “she” of “Steady” exhibits a controlled deliberateness in her stance: “She’s cool / holding onto the handrail / puffs even-paced.” This deliberateness is repeated in the last lines of the poem as it is suggested that she holds onto her boyfriend as coldly as she does the handrail: “She’s timing her smokes / so her hand’s free / to hold him tightly / She won’t flick him off / lightly.” The poem describes the woman as coolly calculating, and renders the un-named boyfriend as a shadowy passive figure.

The “Temptress” is yet another poem of Eve and the Fall. Roberts’ approach is to personify the apple to represent the “robust harlot,” Eve. Roberts’ poem transports the biblical to the contemporary, as the apple is placed “on the sideboard.” The poem is simplistic in its treatment of its theme, and concentrates on woman, not surprisingly, as the sensuous
instigator of the Fall, “skin flecked / blood-fleshed / ... a robust harlot / the carnal stem / ... craggy moon-shaped / succulent,” who is “waiting for Adam.”

The collection moves from this perception of woman to the family. “On the Alert”, one of the better poems in the collection, portrays parenting as the occupation of embattled territory. The parents are fortressed within their bedroom, until urban warfare breaks out in the family home:

The wife unconsciously shuts the bedroom door
Everlastingly
I gird my loins with each turning of the handle ...
Avalanche starts in the lounge ...
We’re strategically positioned to start shooting
when the young Turks start to storm the Palace

The parents vanquish the rebels, and an uneasy peace is struck:

Bayonets drawn we patrol the quarters and in pairs
closely inspecting the restive inmates & their belongings
Subversive literature & caches of arms are confiscated
& hostages bundled off
Rumblings protests abuse accusations murmurings
are a recurrent thrum sounding through the Ghetto
Battles for leadership amongst the rebels continually
break out in the beleaguered garrison

In this poem Roberts successfully engages, with a light touch, the humorous aspects of family life. He then advances to a more sombre mood as he examines time and its passage.

“Days Arrested” and “Casting Off” deal with the same subject: mutability. Both poems illustrate the futility of resistance to time and change. Roberts uses “Days” as a metaphor for the inevitable passage of time in both poems, which does not quite work the second time around in “Casting Off.” “Days Arrested” begins with the question, “Where do Days go.” The poem goes on to describe how people attempt to hold back the passage of days:

Where do Days go
Like shadows
latch on to people
Time, however, cannot be contained: “Days can’t be stalled.” The final stanza of the poem offers a quasi-religious solution to the question posed by the poem, in a mixture of pantheism and religious beliefs:

There is a region       God willing
Days can’t invade
Like the spring
Like the call of the nightingale
Like the crest of the wave
Like the caress of lovers

The poem ends with the ideal of the soul, “A chamber of the heart / that never departs.” The series of very different similes and metaphors in the first two stanzas, however, does not hang together, especially in relation to the tone of the final stanza.

The poems “Spectator” and “Meandering” juxtapose the active and literary pursuits of man. In “Spectator” the voice of the poem states, “I’m an indoors man. / You’re an outdoors man. / I’m best in rooms, walls of books, keeping the day / at bay until my protector / — night — covers all, conquers all.” The voice of “Meandering” has the same message: “I don’t cultivate gardens / I stay indoors / Fertilising my mind / with scraps, peelings, / newspapers, paperbacks.” Both poems celebrate the cerebral life over an outdoor existence.

“Chosen” begins a set of four poems about animals. It reflects upon the significance of man’s existence compared with the dog’s: “Preacher says the dog won’t make it up there. / It’s a bit hard / anyway / for anyone. / How are We higher really?”. The other three poems in the sequence, “Queens” (about cats), “Bird Beware” and “The Taster”, in praise of the mosquito, continue in the same vein, as Roberts examines the relationship between animals and humans.

“On Time” and “Red Wings” are both grounded in the present and then regress to the forties and wartime. “On Time” begins in the rush hour of busy Melbourne:
Melbourne is mad on trains.
Train eclipses the Sun in prickling the skin.

Perspiring Executives wouldn't be seen dead on them.
Typists peer anxiously at their wrist watches & then rejoin Elvis.
Newspaper commuters stiffen & bury deeper.
Travellers breathe at destination point.

The next stanza jumps from the benign surroundings of Melbourne to the trains of Nazi Germany:

The Hamburg Express runs on time.
A revelation to Ex-Melbourne "detainees".

(Reich train of "44 was on target.
Drivers' and guards' lives depended on it.
Steam jets didn't stop.
The passengers, young & old, were secured.
Reception Committee — a band — played in unison.
Always on time.)

"Red Wings" follows the same pattern of regression from present to past. Instead of a mechanical spark for remembrance, "Red Wings" begins with the tip-toeing of a bird: "I hung — a blackbird tip-toed across the main street. / She was desperate; she needed every crumb. / Stepped like Ulanova adagioing over trip wires." Roberts continues the theme of flight as he regresses to "Forty Years Ago" and the Muscovite girls who "donned pilot suits and took off / in planes like Tiger Moths." The girls seem as desperate as the blackbird as "Few of the angels" survive their mission.

More than once in the collection, Roberts gathers together a set of poems with the same theme. "In Memory of Dean Dixon" commemorates the achievements of the "big black man" who

didn't harmonise, didn't sing the blues,
didn't blow horn, didn't tap dance in shiny shoes,
didn't drop gags, didn't play honky-tonk,
didn't sing spirituals ...
He could though interpret expertly a Beethoven score.
The poem goes on to suggest that blacks have been excluded from the "serious" music world because of their colour: "Privately-based Orchestras need a white ‘Ace.’ / A black ‘King’ won’t do." "Roccsbbootty" is written to reflect the speech of uneducated whites in society. The poem attempts a satirical send up of the whites who are in favour of mining sacred sites, but the poem does not work and falls flat. There is no bite to it, and it only succeeds in patronising whites and blacks alike. "Newcomer," the final poem in the sequence, continues in the same patronising vein as it examines "Sammy" the black. Although Roberts attempts a sympathetic portrayal of the plight of blacks, his heavy-handed approach fails:

Sammy hasn’t learnt the Compartment Code.
Sammy wasn’t a regular.
Sammy was a Black, drunk, smelt to boot ...
It was obvious Sammy had just left the Reserve.
He mumbled slurred English, mixed with pidgin.

The final lines of the poem supposedly redeem “Sammy” in the eyes of his “superiors” and the readers of the poem: “with broken lingo & long handshakes / wouldn’t let go. / “Assault & Battery,” one Boss muttered, / as they in turn wrenched free & quickly left. / Sammy stuck to one like a leech. / “I luv mee wiif nn atte kds”. / “I believe you.”

In “Down to the Lighthouse” Roberts pays homage to Virginia Woolf. He complements the image of the Lighthouse in his title by the use of sea images in the stanzas of the poem:

words were finely spun pearls
caught in oysters on the seabed
a midwife to set them free
from their shells
she must enter the sea
release them separately
untie her tight cells

a sea-mother she starts
gathering her sea-children
as the ocean opens its manifold doors

Although the last three words of the poem are harsh and break the flow of the sea images, the poem remains the best in the collection.
It could be said that Roberts’ variety of themes in *From the Outer* leans towards tokenism; he certainly seems to have covered all the bases. Perhaps it would have been better to have developed only one or two of these themes to ensure more than a mere surface engagement with his subjects. The grouping of poems with the same theme, at times, becomes predictable and a little tedious. For the most part, however, the poems do work in their own right. Roberts does honestly engage with the contemporary society from which his themes are drawn, and celebrates the everyday existence of his subjects.