

# NORTH OF CAPRICORN

## An Anthology of Verse



Edited by

*Elizabeth Perkins & Robert Handicott*

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Foundation for Australian Literary Studies

Foundation for Australian Literary Studies  
English Department  
James Cook University of North Queensland

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# FOREWORD

This collection includes poetry and verse written in and about North Queensland, or by men and women born in, living in or visiting the region. As with many regions of Australia, the boundaries of North Queensland are a geographical concept, but its emotive power is a reality of the imagination.

The anthology may provide a little evidence towards answering questions about the contribution that a region makes to shaping the intellectual and emotional perceptions of those who live there. Do North Queenslanders, or people affected by North Queensland, see the world and its concerns differently from the way others see them? Is there a distinctive North Queensland outlook or habit of mind? The influence of place on its inhabitants and its visitors has always fascinated poets, philosophers and historians. This collection is a small contribution to their debate.

Another purpose of the collection is to celebrate the women and men who, as a regular thing, or only occasionally or rarely, have used some of their time to write in a vivid way about their perceptions and experience. Days and energies are spent in innumerable profitable and unprofitable pursuits, many of which have observable, tangible and recorded results. There is a time and place for assembling and preserving the best efforts of people who now and then choose to spend time in writing. This anthology can only hint at the dedication some contributors have given to the pursuit of a handful of poems that might meet their own demanding criteria. The contributors, both contemporary and of earlier generations, wrote for many different reasons and under varied conditions. The emphasis here is on the poetry, not the poet, but it is hoped that readers will want to follow up for themselves the writers whose work holds their attention.

There is some emphasis on “nature” poetry. This is partly because people who write occasional verse often do so when struck by experiences in the natural world outside the daily round of living, and because the natural world often supplies the best images of human inner life. Or the poets may wish to understand nature as scientists do, using the investigative tools and techniques of poetry rather than those of the laboratory. Whatever the reason, the emphasis on nature poetry makes this collection a celebration also of the natural life of the region.

We have referred to both “verse” and “poetry”: we do not wish, however, to offer to define either or to place the writing in this anthology in one or other category. We do not assume that a difference necessarily exists, or, if it does, that it is a matter of aesthetic value. We introduce the terms to allow readers to use them or to reject them as they wish and to apply them or not apply them to

the writing before them. If they do so, perhaps they may like to consider the possibility that these categories are sometimes sociological rather than aesthetic.

Once the selection was made, the editorial principle was to interfere as little as possible with readers' use of the anthology. To avoid bias towards chronological appraisal, the pieces were arranged alphabetically by author, the arrangement that makes the reading experience less predictable, and offers the greatest freedom in reading and the greatest ease in tracking down a required poet. The earliest poem in the collection is undoubtedly Philip Lorimer's "Queensland", written in 1867, and the latest probably the Van Gogh sequence by Subhash Jaireth who writes in Hindi and makes his own English translation.

Thematic classification was rejected as being too directive of the reader, and classifications of race, resident or non-resident status, native born or migrant, were considered irrelevant. It is hoped that this will allow the poetry and the region to hold the foreground, and the reader to be the active imposer of order and, after the poets themselves, the active creator of experience.

We realize that even after wide reading on our part, many interesting poems and poets have been omitted. Constraints of space, of course, severely limited the number of pieces we could include by the poets known to us. While these things are regretted, we feel considerable pleasure in bringing before the reader so much worthwhile poetry that has been undeservedly little known and much, as well, that has been virtually inaccessible. Robert Graves once wrote that the true anthology is "a rescue anthology" whose object is to include as much material, irrespective of poetic quality, as will fully represent the field it wants to cover. Without quite neglecting poetic quality, we have tried to present the kind of anthology Graves commended.

# Helen Allan

## OLLERA CREEK

At the mouth of the Ollera, hot  
sand and sandflies. Not even you  
can dunk in the ocean, it's  
sea-wasp season. But walk,  
you will and you must, and wherever  
you walk I must follow.

Crossing the stony shallows  
I nervously cite statistics re  
stonefish — their habitat's here.  
Barefooted you laughingly cloud  
the issue by kicking the water. I,  
even with shoes on, teeter  
like the little mermaid. Still,  
though painful each step, I follow.

So all through our lives it's the same,  
you optimist lead,  
I pessimist follow.

# Helen Allan

## BEING BLUE AT JOURAMA

Afternoon at Jourama. Picnic tea  
on the council table.  
Beside us the innocent creek  
drowning in a painted pool, apparently  
painlessly — with sinister collusion  
from that rock escarpment, angled  
to bar escape.  
Fallen leaves  
seem to sail on the glassy  
surface. Look aside, and  
they've shifted. Stare, and  
they're suddenly still.

A turning of trees' heads, fracture  
of reflected rock. The afternoon  
breeze is up. On cue,  
two butterflies, bluer than seems  
essential, or even wise  
for their safety, soundlessly  
follow an intricate flight path  
along the gorge, foolishly tracing  
the longest distance between two points.

You've brought me here, for  
consolation, but my gaze  
is inward. I do  
register blue butterflies above the mirror,  
pool — not two now, four. But only  
in retrospect have I really seen  
Jourama.

# Lela Ara

## THE HOME I PRAPA MISS

I sit down ya lo verandah,  
I look towards the younda point  
I see ole big ore curriers kum insite,  
I sit an lessen por them birds sing out,  
I sit ya an smell da freshness blo flowers from mama's gardin.  
Oh my home I prapa miss.

Teck e me across da dusty plain,  
Teck e me por dat burramundi doman,  
Teck e me por dat place ware belly damper remain,  
Teck e me ware albatross roam.  
Oh my home I prapa miss.

# Thea Astley

## AFTER TASMAN

Chartered your coast without once  
touching land,  
Spinning on shore tides. Land would  
have me drowned,  
Earth-drenched, tree-weed tangled,  
hills in waves  
Mounting until the seventh seized me.  
Found

Sea to be safer, sea between the islands  
Running white with gulls, gull-lonely,  
green —  
Sea-scaped along your earth-whims.  
And I saw —  
Guessed at, rather, dune-hidden, still  
unseen —  
The inland gentleness beyond the peaks  
Scaled at a first assault, the tender  
miles  
Grass-warm with summer, and my thin  
white feet  
Exploratory and tentative as smiles.

## Thea Astley

CULTURE, 1945

It's symbolic, dear, that's what it is!  
You'd never guess at first, I know. But see,  
It's merely self-expression. What? My dear!  
Of course there's no repression these days. Art  
Is what the artist cares to give us. Look —  
That eye behind the swan's wing on the right  
Is meant to represent a breadth of vision  
Such as all these great Bohemians have . . . .  
You wonder that the artist called it "Life"?  
Then note the hand that clasps a little dust  
(Of bone, no doubt.) It's clear that you must read;  
We've Freud and Nietzsche at our finger-tips,  
And all that sort of thing. O darling, stop  
Gaping at that Holbein! Here's the finest —  
And that ghastly "Sunset on a Hill" —  
Picasso right behind you, *and* Matisse.  
*Must* you, dear? — da Vinci makes me ill!



## Thea Astley

### DROVING MAN

She might have chosen cities, but the man  
Compelled to see the pastures of his soul  
Stocked with dream cattle,  
Moved north and west and sunwards to his  
goal  
Under the freckled lightning of the wattle.

Over the years the piccaninny thoughts  
And timid lubra words became so shy  
Of their own thunder,  
They never spoke together but his eye  
Would find in hers a startled twin of wonder.

# Peter Bell

MOUNT MULLIGAN, NINETEENTH SEPTEMBER, 1921

The mountain is red,  
The coal is black,  
The bones are white,  
Except for one who has no bones.

He was blown to bits.

And they don't even know who he was.

What countless ages crushed the carbon  
And laid the sediments in stately tiers  
Of red blank rock that has gazed on aeons  
With a mighty face too proud to scowl?

Lovely morning, the nineteenth.

The northern mines are safe to work.  
Where no cruel fire damp haunts the shafts  
You can be a little careless when you set the shots.

Still have to watch coal dust, though.

How was the morning shift?  
Good. I think this strike talk's  
Dying. Pretty placid lot really  
Aren't they? None of those militants  
Dead set on their rights.

CHRIST!

Oh my god oh my god bob's down there  
bob's down there oh my god bob's down there  
oh my god oh my god holy mother  
bob's down there oh my bob my bob.

There wasn't any need to run.

When your loved one's lost on a tossing sea  
Or overdue on a shooting trip  
You can pace and fret in an agony  
That you know the verandah's creak will end.  
A cave-in's bad for you never know  
Whether men were crushed or safely trapped.  
But the wall of rock will yield in time.

But there wasn't any need to run  
For they heard the blast at Kingsborough  
And Kingsborough is twenty miles.

There was no hurry.  
For the white flame burst from the tunnel mouth  
And killed the trees at a hundred yards.

There was no cause for anxiety.  
For the blast that came from the breathing shaft  
Blew a half-ton fan to a thousand bits.

If your husband worked on the morning shift  
There wasn't any need to run.

Just got a wire from Mulligan, chief.  
There's been an explosion down the mine.  
They want some doctors on a special train.  
No, they didn't say, but they think there are dead.  
No, they don't know yet.

Very good, sir, I'll wire back.

(They heard the blast at Kingsborough,  
And Kingsborough is twenty miles.)

There's no earthly use in waiting, ma'am,  
I suggest you all go straight back home.  
No one could live in such a furnace.  
We have to wait for respirators.  
We'll let you know the list of names.

I heard down the street there's been a fire  
Or something in the mine at Mulligan.

A little bush town can change abruptly,  
Become a hostile, hateful place.  
In the aftermath of the great explosion  
The evil bush seemed to stir and breathe.  
No one talked in the town that morning  
There wasn't a word that was left to say.  
It had all been said in a voice of thunder.  
One vast syllable that stopped the world.

A shock wave at a thousand degrees centigrade  
travels through air at eleven hundred feet per  
second.

Eighty? Did you say they wanted eighty?  
No, tell them we can send six.  
It's quite impossible, we just haven't got  
Eighty coffins.

Two survivors, but only briefly,  
For both had been where a man must die.  
And the rescue teams in their respirators  
Searched for more where the coal was born.

Rescue operations are proceeding quite rapidly, although  
a mines department spokesman said yesterday great  
difficulty was being encountered with high temperatures  
and gas at lower levels. Last night thirty-four bodies had  
been recovered, of which nineteen have been positively  
identified.

The lucky ones got marble tombstones.  
They were the ones with observant wives.  
For though a husband's a piece of carbon  
He still bears marks on his wedding ring.

It was only furnace coal, you know,  
Not high grade stuff.

The enormous rock stood unaffected  
By flurry and wailing round its feet.

It had known more drama through the ages  
Than the men who scratched for the soft black stone.  
There were greater things to recall that morning  
Than the seventy-five it had turned to coal.

(They heard the blast at Kingsborough,  
And Kingsborough is twenty miles.)

A miner's wife knows every morning  
The goodbye kiss is not in fun.  
The miner rising to the sunshine  
Enjoys a privilege, not a right.  
The mountain asks a price for plunder.  
Boilers run on miners' bones.

The mountain is red,  
The coal is black,  
The graves are white,  
Except for one who has no grave.

But a great red mountain.

# Stefanie Bennett

## MY GRANDFATHER'S VIOLIN

I can still hear my Grandfather's violin.  
He played as if he'd brought the whole  
Of Italy with him . . .

He'd been a barrow-boy. He'd sold fruit  
And flowers outside the great Concert Halls  
Of Naples. He'd seen and known Caruso's last  
Performance from the back row.

That concert cost him forty barrow loads,  
And nine days of hard selling.  
"I'd do it again," he'd say. "There are  
Many apples but too few phenomena".

I can still hear my Grandfather's violin,  
Hauntingly beautiful, drifting upwards  
Like a prayer; like water trickling  
About the flagstones in the back garden.

I see the old photographs hung near the stairwell.  
The pin-stripe suit, the classic spats and hat  
That lent a "touch of class". But more than that:  
His kind of tenacity shone on through.

He went as he'd lived: Glib and humorous.  
His policy; things are what you make them.  
He died comfortably off. It started with  
A barrow full of fruit and flowers.

The violin? It held it all together.

# Stefanie Bennett

## TESTAMENT

The horizontal's always one up on us.  
It has the view of ceiling and sky.  
Moreover, it can stay put, needs  
no luggage.

Ah; and if moved — skates, wheels: Human power  
prams it gently about. A beloved  
grandmother, a crowned jewel.

Ridicule does not belong to the horizontal.  
Seldom has any fool cursed the ground.

Monuments are built mostly of it, Achilles' print  
can be found.

The horizontal. The horizontal. We envy  
your cause; can't evolve without you.  
Stately as every prayer written or sung  
: Horizontal I name you God of Exaction.

# Stefanie Bennett

## SEA CLASSIC

Harbour; can you not hear  
Beethoven in your fathoms —  
Embracing your piers,  
Caressing the barnacled bottom  
Of an ocean liner,  
Billowing sails of schooners  
— Old,  
Disarranging hair on the heads  
Of school-boys  
With the taste of salt-spray  
Tender to young lips  
And eyes reflecting  
Compass-calculations?

To disrobe the winds  
We'd find the master —

To make naked the master  
We'd reveal the currents.

Both are faithful disciples  
Melodiously prominent  
To each other.



## Colin Bingham (1898-1986)

### DWELLING PLACE

I remember an old, old house  
Spread in a large disunity,  
Magically shredded on summer days  
By the shadow-shafts of a tree;  
With its gables lost in a viney maze,  
One hundred feet of verandah shade  
And bushes unkempt for palisade.

I remember the many windows,  
North, south, west and east,  
Each with its wide-flung shutters  
Opening on soft plains creased  
With hills and storm-made gutters —  
Windows that called to the air and light,  
And the loveliest stars of night.

But nothing of wood, nothing of stone,  
Wrought for the comfort of man and mate,  
Has held so long 'gainst the rub of time  
As eight brown children riding a gate,  
Singing defiance of meaning, rhyme;  
Weaving from gayest inconsequence  
A pattern of living, of family sense.

Windows there were, and more, for all,  
And space for the trick of making;  
A kitchen table, a rolling pin,  
And a hand and a heart for baking;  
A dancing freedom too merry for sin  
And rooms too high and too wide for hate —  
In the rambly house of the singing eight!

## Colin Bingham

### MRS SMITH ENJOYS A SWOON

Mrs Smith enjoys a swoon  
with friends about her in the dusk —  
not in the sweaty glare of noon  
when donning again the husk  
of consciousness is like, in harsh inelegance,  
recovery from a circus trance.

To die and yet awake  
amid soft music from an inner room;  
here is a recipe to take  
the terror from the final tomb  
and bring to one convincing focus  
Man's first and most enduring hocus.

But Mrs Smith's is not this gain;  
a simple faint she cannot place  
upon a philosophic plane —  
hers is suspension in a space  
that has no base, nor top, nor wall,  
and yet allows a neighbour's call.

Oblivion — and then a fog  
unravelling by the hurried lamp;  
the eyes of Mrs Brown agog  
at those bright beads of damp  
blinking upon the patient's brow;  
soft voices: "Are you better now?"

"Here in the quiet hills;"  
don't stop the music; over the edge  
of night and her verandah spills  
the perfume of a summer's hedge,  
and pepperinas in the breeze  
sigh softly like romantic seas.

\* \* \* \*

Mrs Smith enjoys a swoon,  
the hardest day's emollient;  
motion to others is the boon  
that in His wisdom God has sent,  
but motionless she craves to lie  
and once a week appear to die.

# John Blight

## FOR FRANCESCA

Francesca! now in the early hours  
when death is the natural animal,  
and my skin seems black as yours, I light  
my lamp, the pale leprosy of whose glow  
disturbs my after-midnight sleep;  
stretching a ghostly white arm  
reaching for my pen to write of you.

Only my hand like an albino spider  
sidling over the parchment traces this story  
which, somewhere, midnight dictates of you.

Francesca, my totally black Mistress! I  
know now, in waking there is no more  
knowledge than in sleep. There is  
this feeling, only, of my love for you  
heightens the hour, the ceiling of my  
consciousness; but beyond the lamp's glow,  
up, up, all is black as the night still.

## John Blight

### RAIN FORESTS

Where the forests crowd the air and blue skies  
are only a window here and there, the elk —  
and staghorns grow in profusion; each massive bulk,  
a trophy mounted, unseen huntsman's prize.  
And there the hare's-foot ferns, and crow's nest — size  
of a roc's nest rather, if the roc did build.

Would you believe those forests are so filled  
with such eccentric flora? I have found  
potato-orchids — spud-like buds — and wild  
saliva where, not on defiled bare ground  
but on a twig, the rare spit insects riled  
me to suspect some lout unclean. All these:

and earth-stars, snake's-bread sprouting like red ears,  
and bells and ferns, root buttresses and tiers  
of white beech orchids in the flowerless trees,  
have filled me with confusions — doubts that please.

## John Blight

### DRIFTWOOD

When I was a young man surfing, I  
used to look out for sharks in the  
surf; now I am in my sixties  
we don't even look out for each  
other and, upon reflection,  
I believe if I bumped into  
a shark in the surf I would shout  
intuitively, "Excuse  
me, I am late for dinner."  
I feel sure that the shark would  
accept my apology  
dip beneath the waves earnestly  
in search of a serve of mullet;  
not hungry for driftwood like me.

## Emily Bulcock (1877-1969)

### LAKE BARRINE, N.Q.

A sapphire jewel, on a rich jade setting!  
How shall words paint this lovely Lake Barrine?  
Close your tired eyes, all joyless things forgetting,  
And list the lapping waves, the lake shore fretting:  
Then lo! the wonder of this world of green.

Red cedars their cool canopy are spreading,  
A flame tree stabs with vivid glow the shade.  
Tall Kauri pines their lances swift are shedding,  
And every path the shy bush things are treading,  
With moss and lacy ferns is overlaid.

Here parrots flash, their rainbow colours burning  
And strange birds, mad with music, 'midst the green,  
Sing this new loveliness our hearts are learning;  
O soft mysterious beauty Heavenward yearning!  
O shining wonder that is Lake Barrine!

# Colin Campbell

The aspiration of the soul . . .

a ramshackle ibis  
covered in filth  
struts its sacred way  
down eighth avenue

no stranger to  
the mysteries, he  
pokes his beak  
in other people's humus

the aspiration  
of the soul  
sizes up  
a beetle's hole

Thoth the proud scribe  
now a gutter snipe  
with sewage feathers  
he hoots

his disdain at  
passing utes  
fruitbat hangs  
a sullen flag

from electric wires  
dances the winds  
tiger rag  
above the bird

tanned mask  
gree gree  
full of fly  
ibis hears its



giblets gyre  
makes leisurely  
lift-off towards  
the great

sewage pipe  
by the sea

where brothers and  
sisters shank the mire.

# Colin Campbell

## CASINO

The pink clouds play knuckles  
over the casino's skeleton,  
show the ease of a divine croupier.

Wheeling seagulls ply for scraps.

Points — island, mainland — reject  
the intrusion. The cape's  
lines across the smooth bay  
don't accord with cement.

The seagulls soar above and screech and dart.

Soon muscles will knot around felt tables  
tanned legs turn jelly-wise, the  
croupier will scoop them, one and all.

And high above the seagulls spat and screech.

Now the scaffold presses  
towards mandarin clouds  
scheming completion.

The fish in the sea, the seagulls' darting beaks.

And carelessly, a town reacts  
with the flop of a palm frond  
the bite of a gummy shark  
as the big wheels move in.

And the wider wheels of seagulls  
loop and loop again, above,  
mock, and bless the carrion.

## C.B. Christesen

### THE BANKSIA'S BURNING BUSH

(For Dorothy Auchterlonie)

"It takes a thousand years  
to create a flower."

William Blake

I hold within my open hand  
A banksia's crimson bloom.  
What alchemy of sun and sand  
Creates this fragile form?

Mere thousand years to shape *this* bush!  
(What would he say of waratah?)  
The fire within a banksia's brush  
Burns brighter than a *Baraka*.

Had it been Blake's astounding fate  
To grace this ancient land  
He would have changed his estimate,  
Praised alchemy of sun and sand.

## C.B. Christesen

### PARADISO

The sign read: "To Paradise".  
I reasoned I had little to lose  
By following the leaf-mould track  
Through tunnels of emerald light,  
Cool and mushroom-scented.  
The buttressed trees, ferns,  
Had an exotic appeal.  
A cassowary took fright,  
A ring-tailed possum planed  
Through interlacing vines.  
There were nettles for the unwary:  
They lurk in even the best places.

What I didn't expect to find  
Along the Paradiso track —  
Not a crown of thorns  
But around my feet  
A garland of bloody leeches.

## C.B. Christesen

### GALAHS IN SLOW FLIGHT

Let me be precise  
The moment fixed in time  
The poem concise:

Against the evening light  
High above the woollybutt  
Galahs in slow flight.

## C.B. Christesen

### REGENT-BIRD AND GIRL

The gold and black regent-bird  
Flashes into the lantana  
Among a swarm of flowers:  
Bright bird, gay thicket of flowers.  
A girl sits on a log across a waterfall,  
Sings to the bower-bird among the flowers.  
She swings her feet over the log,  
Splashes the water-brink with her toes.  
She makes a singing sound, as the stream.  
She looks up to the blue and green mosaic  
Of sky between the piccabeen palms.  
A whip-bird swishes the cool silence.  
A red leaf falls, zigzags from a vine  
Interlacing the rain-forest giants.  
The girl watches the falling leaf,  
Tries to imitate the whip-bird.  
Water-beetles skim an eddying pool,  
A crayfish edges round a pebble.  
The red leaf drops to the water, is swept  
Over the cascade, a spinning disk.  
The air is cool in the gully,  
The sun warm on the breasts of the girl.  
  
And the regent-bird looks at the golden girl  
And thinks of nothing but berries.

## Arthur Collins

### PAY 'PHONE

Young love's  
fist is filled  
with silver.

Old love  
reverses  
the charges.

## Arthur Collins

### THE RECLUSE

Now I grow old  
I fear to love,  
for Death has stolen,  
one by one,  
Each I have loved.

My heart is shut  
tight against pain.  
So, I entomb myself,  
stone by stone,  
Each day I live.



## Joan Davis

### SALATIGA, CENTRAL JAVA

#### Selamat Sore

Cemara trees —  
the long horse tail branches,  
muted green in misty rain,  
shine with water stilled  
in myriad drops  
— released —  
to swell again, to sway  
the slender stems with a rhythm  
which defies the absence of breeze

above the opened window  
thunder crumbles clouds  
but no violence is apparent  
in any of this.

In the street  
from beyond a luminous hedge  
of yellow, green and dark red leaves,  
what better advertisement  
than a tinkle of the pedlar's spoon  
upon his china plate, that silence  
as he serves someone, then chats  
and waits near cemara trees

your dokar clips past —  
with dull wheels, warm vapour  
rises from the horse's coat —  
with a subtly different rhythm.

Selamat Sore: late afternoon greeting  
cemara (pron. chemara): the casuarina tree  
dokar: small horse-drawn cart, personal transport.

## Joan Davis

### BEE HIVE AT NIGHT

In the night this grey-glow hive is still,  
bees are quiet and I can smell the honey.  
The lemon tree is a sense of green  
because my daylight mind can tell me so,  
can know the smell of blossoms sought by starlight,  
the dank of weeds, a crowded breath below;  
a sleeper's breath — offered up  
as supple swathes of greenness to the sun,  
a tax of seed and strength to the wind:  
tomorrow's straw will shield, a little while,  
the young.

Shadows are skin soft  
and hint that their shapes should be  
moulded as images, rolled and rolled ahead  
into mountains till you can't tell where they begin  
while the known naked honesty of their jagged old horizon  
is a pre-dawn shadowy thing,  
perhaps,

but in the night the hive is still,  
the pulse is quiet, and I can savour honey . . .

## Joan Davis

### FLINDERS STREET EAST

All through the busy shopping mall  
dull people flowed like broken sea;  
the stranger sat on a plastic stool,  
a chainstore packet at his feet,

his roughened face and coarse grey hair  
bent over a jacket on his knee,  
his nimble fingers stitched the tear,  
those practised hands worked easily.

While pale youths sucked on paler malts,  
the sailor's tattooed forearm reached  
for another thread of cotton from  
the chainstore packet at his feet.

## Edward Dean

triads: a testimony

while i was walking through  
a tree  
last night  
i became a tiger  
sulphur body  
smoky eyed  
poised on a branch  
above eye level  
when i walked by below  
i leapt  
fastened at the neck  
no sound  
then bit the head  
cleanly  
off about the shoulder  
there was only  
one  
other witness  
a shadow — unidentified—  
he won't talk though  
he was frightened black  
besides he doesn't  
have  
a voice  
a mouth  
or a head  
any  
longer

# Edward Dean

on a scroll by hokusai

1

nature never was like this  
in our eyes:  
whispered poems breathed through  
the holes on mist & sky  
a waterfall of forms  
splashing/carefully/over rock

2

your subtle eye  
was a burning lens  
& a photographic fixative.  
drive off idioms  
into the pale sun  
eat your vision/  
slowly/  
wrapped in rice paper  
then watch the burnt ashes  
flow from your fingers  
& fix their form & shape

though you sit behind paper walls  
& eat only rice  
i know you to be a hunter:  
there your captive mountains  
there your silent waterfalls  
there your many mistresses  
flattered & held  
for always  
by your hand

3

a zen puzzle for you  
hokusai  
imagine death to be a flower

in which the soul is trapped  
how can the soul be freed.

answer:

clap your hands together  
it was only a concept anyway

you know

how silence

always

sometimes

has a meaning

## James Devaney (1890-1976)

### TO THE NURSE ON NIGHT DUTY

Fall, gently, gently, vast mysterious Night!  
Wrap thy sweet silence round the House of Pain  
Where lurking Death all day peers into eyes too bright  
With one relentless thought that eats the brain;  
Where doomed men hold to hope protestingly;  
Where life is vain, cruel, and meaningless.  
Fold us, compassionate Night! Come not with Memory,  
But bring with thee  
The meagre solace of Forgetfulness.

Here on the wide verandah where I lie  
The cool bush-wind is blowing; sweet and strange  
The lonely vague night-voices round me float and cry;  
A dingo's wail comes from the distant range;  
And hark! that is the curlew's eerie call.  
But now a kindly presence at my side  
Stirs in the silent ward — oh, sweetest sound of all  
That soft footfall,  
A welcome comfort to the sleep-denied.

Oh, gentle nurse, all night attending nigh,  
A new thought thrills this brooding heart of mine:  
What if a kindly God's all-understanding eye  
Watch over us with loving care like thine?  
Oh, teach me this, that life is not in vain,  
That our great Father plans both joy and sorrow;  
Then were the riddle read, if Love could but explain  
The mystery of Pain;  
Then all were well, and I could die to-morrow.

# Edith M. England (1899-1979)

## AT THE SALE YARDS

Within the rails  
Uneasy cattle, milling constantly,  
Prod here a vicious horn on bony side,  
And there recoil against a hostile flank,  
Only to wheel again.

The more sedate  
Stand in a corner, swishing endlessly the silken tassels of their tails  
While, in the niggard shade,  
Drowsy stock horses tethered to the trees  
Rest their hind feet, and close fly-pestered eyes  
To dream of long lagoons on flats that lie  
Where gleaming foothills meet the distant range.

Weather-beaten buyers, sunken-eyed,  
Wire-supple, tough as leather, quick of wit,  
Lean elbows on the rails, or stand with hand on hip,  
All so intent  
On prices  
That the very world divides into three sections: Springers —  
tinnern — fats —  
All else shut out!  
The wide-hipped, bovine woman who pours the tea  
Under a drab white awning between poles  
Is just an automaton.  
Automatons they, and the big, bawling auctioneer.  
Only the cattle, never-ending prey  
To Man, find time  
In the khaki-coloured haze of dust and heat  
To meditate (if their slow, heavy brains are ever stirred by thought),  
In this small space of time before they take the dazzling road again,  
Where life is plodding misery, or sharp rebuff,  
They find the respite  
Calm  
and sweet  
enough!



## Edith M. England

### MOTHS

The time is Queensland summer, and the moths —  
the moths — are everywhere;  
midget convairs with green and silver wings,  
and pied jets, scarlet flecked. All turn their fierce  
ruby head-lamps on my book, and smudge  
its page with glittering bloom

until late moonlight fills my long stone-coloured room  
lighting my blue rug like a tropic sea.  
By then a hundred wrecks heel over drunkenly  
where these frail squadrons nightly meet their doom.

## **Lala Fisher (1872-1929)**

### **SINCERITY**

Sincerity?

The cross, the rack, the bloody thong,

The cruel right, the stubborn wrong,

These to sincerity belong.

## Lala Fisher

### SECRET

How light she is —  
    A fountain playing,  
Shot through with sun  
    In sunlight spraying.  
As light as this,  
    So light she is!

Elusive she  
    As fragrance flowing  
On eddying airs  
    At midnight blowing.  
As fresh, as free,  
    As sweet is she!

In her heart's deep  
    A grave is hidden,  
Where she alone  
    May go unbidden —  
Where she doth weep,  
    And vigil keep!

To guard her nest,  
    The bird, outwinging,  
Leaves it unsought;  
    And singing, singing,  
Guides the stray guest  
    On a false quest.

So laughs she lest  
    Someone, not caring,  
Should chance on grief  
    Almost past bearing.  
Safe is the nest —  
    The heart may rest.

# David L. Foott

## GHOSTS

oh it doesnt matter if i do tell you  
you wouldnt believe me even when you saw  
you wouldnt recognise him  
he looks just like so many other old men  
oldfashioned dirty clothes grey hair  
bad breath from bad teeth  
a musty smell from the innards rotting  
and as for getting any sense from him  
its a waste of time  
you see he doesnt remember any more  
he doesnt even know his name to look it up  
in history books or old newspaper files  
i found it in a book he said was his  
but of course the handwriting can no longer be identified  
with the old mans shaking scrawl  
even i forget his name sometimes  
but everyone knows what he did  
he was the cause of all those riots and deaths  
and he had all his opponents liquidated  
i can never forget all that  
but its so difficult to reconcile  
the monster and the pensioner  
but anyway youd better come and look  
because you wont disbelieve until youve seen

## Bruce Forbes-Simpson

### VALE RUSTY REAGAN

Old Rusty Reagan's cashed his chips,  
No more he'll go on droving trips,  
And no more grog will pass the lips  
    Of drunken Rusty Reagan.  
He died of drink, or so they say,  
Or pure neglect, but anyway  
The sands of time have slipped away  
    For luckless Rusty Reagan.

Although he camped upon the flat,  
The bar was his true habitat,  
And home was underneath the hat  
    Of drifter Rusty Reagan.  
There's none to say from whence he came,  
Not sure in fact if that's his name,  
To Rusty, though, it's all the same,  
    Dead finish Rusty Reagan.

No relatives with reddened eyes  
Will weep at Rusty's sad demise,  
No lowered flag at half-mast flies  
    To honour Rusty Reagan.  
We'll miss perhaps his ugly dial,  
His raucous voice and toothy smile,  
We'll miss him for a little while,  
    Forget then Rusty Reagan.

Perhaps somewhere someone will wait,  
A mother, sister, brother, mate,  
Who'll wonder as they vainly wait  
    For absent Rusty Reagan.  
I'd like to think some tears might fall  
For Rusty's ilk, no hopers all,  
Who answer that last trumpet call  
    Unmourned like Rusty Reagan.

## Nancy Francis

### SUNRISE AT CAIRNS

This morning early, ere the town awoke,  
I watched the clouds bank on the dusky heights  
Across the slatey bay. Like wreathed smoke  
They rolled and puffed and battled —  
Changing lights  
From the veiled East in beaten silver shone  
Against their gloom, and dropped pale beams among

The drowsy waves just waking out of sleep,  
Edging their sombre grey; then stronger grown  
Ran up the hills, leaving the gullies deep  
In sepia shadow, mournful and alone.  
While on the peaks a steady radiance grew,  
Silvery sword-thrusts piercing through and through.

So all the curtain of the clouds was rolled  
With the menacing mantle of the night  
And put away. Out of the sea of gold  
Up rose the sun; shadows were turned to light,  
And doubt and gloom to laughter; grey to blue  
Colour and beauty painting earth anew.

A turquoise sky, an open crinkling sea,  
Emerald shores, and hilltops flaring bright;  
Ruby and amber splashed on rock and tree  
Tinting the sea-birds winging flight on flight —  
In all the world there is no fairer place  
Than this dear North with sunshine on her face.

## Nancy Francis

KATHLEEN

The hill sloped up, bound on its clear-cut rim  
By the blue Queensland sky, seen softly through  
Soft-swaying she-oak boughs, ragged and slim.

She stood in beauty where the grass-tree spears  
Dropped honey from their creamy blossoming heads  
Adown the grey-green shafts, like amber tears.

Her muslin frock held high, puckered to hold  
Some treasure. None so dear as those grey eyes  
And dusky lashes with their glints of gold.

The rosy childish fingers shook with all  
Of joy and wonder. With a rapturous air  
She let the gathered muslin slowly fall.

And — butterflies! A cloud of moving white  
winged round her upraised head. She stood entranced,  
A blessed vision for my heart's delight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Love, till they close for evermore, my eyes,  
Blind to the passing show, will watch you there  
Among the grass trees — and the butterflies.

## Maria Fresta

### TO THE GIRLS WHO SIT IN BAMAGA HOSPITAL

When he touched her flesh  
it sent shock waves into dark leaves  
his dark hands soft satin touches  
cool as breezes  
moved on her  
when he gently rose above  
she wanted the dark shadows  
to fold them together

She remembers his body and limbs  
his mouth's tenderness  
now she lies there  
the steel probes hurt her  
the doctor and sister stare  
where his flesh moved  
such sweetness in hers.



## Maria Fresta

### FOR MY FATHER

Early morning.  
Four I think — still dark.  
Alone thinking that the kitchen is cold.  
Black coffee seals the stomach  
robs the habit of sleep from the eyes.  
Brown hands grasp the mug  
with “Buy Australian Made” on the bottom.

Mio padre, il tuo spirito mi chiama. Dove vai?  
Quali sono le ombre nei tuoi occhi?  
I've seen Etna in your eyes and  
watched your face move as you weave  
a tongue that's only half-mine.  
Do you know you have grown old in  
a strangers' land and your children are  
now half deaf to you?  
How have you lived so long, not seeing  
the black olives blistering in the sun,  
with the wind drinking the warm oil,  
the yellow lemons stinging the air,  
making it lazy, lying in heavy pools  
slowly swirling under the dozing trees;  
purple grapes bruising the ground?

Yellow afternoons and  
sometimes in mirrors of morning,  
I have surprised Etna in my own eyes.  
My spirit has called to the centuries  
behind you but felt strange there.  
To-day when the centuries and you are  
buried parts of me,  
non mi lasciare le ombre delle tue lacrime.

*“Mio padre, il tuo spirito mi chiama. Dove vai?”*

*My father, your spirit calls to me. Where do you go?*

*“Quali sono le ombre nei tuoi occhi?”*

*What are the shadows in your eyes?*

*“non mi lasciare le ombre delle tue lacrime.”*

*Do not leave me the shadows of your tears.*

## John J. Grove

### THE EMPTY CUP

Fly on the lipstick print  
as the sun creeps up to peep  
into the bottom of the cup.

There is no story here  
except the hum of the refrigerator  
and the table bare, bar the cup.

One can see the whole laminate landscape  
up here with the fly;  
and it's empty.

# Robert Handicott

## FOR LENI RIEFENSTAHL

*(classic documentary maker of the Third Reich)*

You say you only wanted to make films.  
But films consist, as memory consists,  
Of images selected and recycled.  
Your images are nightmares we forget  
That we remember. A Platonic ray  
Projects them on our eyelids when we dream.

Frame after frame hides more than it reveals  
And falsifies by what it brings to focus.  
You say you only wanted to make films.  
But film, like memory, like history,  
Is fashioned by philosophy, not fact.  
Your photographs of Nuba men reveal  
The old perspectives, poses statuesque  
As any blue-eyed blonds of Nuremberg.

The labyrinthine archives of the mind  
Hold many shadows, symbols, soundtracks, myths.  
Our thoughts exist in their manipulation.  
Are yours comprised of Riefenstahl alone?  
Or are there scenes from others, filed in sleep  
Against the conscious will, but cruelly strong?  
Flickers of Dachau, Auschwitz, Buchenwald?  
You, who helped shape these nightmare horrors, too,  
Must sometimes cease from work, and see, and weep.

# Robert Handicott

## AN EARTHEN FLOOR

The roof has gone; the walls and door  
Were long since carried off: the floor  
Alone remains, a dwindling square,  
To echo lives that swept it bare;  
A floor of earth — deserted stage  
Of pathos, laughter, love, and rage —  
Sane dramas of a simpler age.

The bush crowds round; the black goats mill  
As if some scene were playing still  
Invisible to human eye,  
Ungessed by modern passers-by:  
As if some curtain needs must part  
For creatures of uncluttered heart  
On ground where unsung stories start.

The crow, the mocking critic, caws  
To dissipate the mute applause;  
Arch-realist, he cannot bear  
A taste for humpies in the air —  
Derides as weakness men's demands  
For evidence that something stands  
Of all the fabric raised by hands.

Yet granted Life's a play, the Earth  
A theatre entered at our birth,  
And half our act to sleep and feed —  
The candle lit is lit indeed.  
Good work, our lives' consuming fire,  
Though locked in clay, cannot expire  
Until the last leading man retire.

The earthen floor, and bottles, too,  
Once placed as markers, smashed and few,  
Survive and speak: unlikely cast,  
They resurrect the sunken past —

Dispelling “news” and “motor cars”  
Like campfire smoke, where nothing mars  
The pageant of the unaging stars.

## Maree Hawken

### A TIME TO LOSE

something like truth  
taunts me from a distance  
like an evasive beacon  
as I scour the horizon for answers.  
the sweet coldness  
may have revived me once  
but now conjures only stony indifference  
relentless as waves in wind;  
cicadas like falling leaves  
beckon the hazing dusk  
and the urge to leave this place,  
though there is nowhere  
to go  
and no time to lose.

## R.G. Hay

### 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 cloy. 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.



## R.G. Hay

### DISCOVERY

I'm not sure how I got the notion, but I thought  
a low-tide coral reef was going to be a kind  
of wander through a polychrome museum. The tide  
was in when we arrived, so I found a few hours  
restless distraction, then, donning prudent gym-shoes,  
waded out and waited for the carnival of colour  
to emerge: after a while I'd learned it  
wasn't quite like that. There were tints vibrant  
on edge and crevice, but most an expanse of  
tired grey or washed-out brown. Later, in scuba gear,  
we explored reefs glowing scarlet lilac and  
gold as I'd imagined. An air-breathing pedestrian  
can expect only an ordinary world with hints  
of something else.

## R.G. Hay

### NATURE ABHORS

I don't suppose I thought vacuum cleaners actually vaporized all that stuff they take in, or kept a nest of termites in their innards to chew it up, fuel their metabolism: but one day I had to take the thing apart, remove the semi-permeable bag of gunk, dispose it in the garbage bin. Next to the guts of a butchered beast, or those squashed things on the road that used to be an animal, it was the most revolting sight I've met: not ordinary dust, fluff, cobwebs, stray bits of paper, spread in thin film, random clump, but a whole structureless construction of congealed wastes.

Suppose, as some have speculated, one social function of poetry is to take bruising, fearsome bits of chaos that inhabit or intrude upon a normal life and safely encapsulate them in art: does the mind of the poet, or his heart, guts, whatever he experiences with, get to be like a vacuum cleaner bag?

## Barbara Henson

### TELEPHONE

The switchboard answering,  
she asked for him.

I'm sorry, he's not here.  
He's gone to New Zealand.

As clear as day,  
the huge plane banking  
steeply over the crowded city,  
flattening across the Harbour.  
Complexity of roads, concrete, blocks, horns,  
cars and hurrying feet, unaware  
of the jet vanishing  
into the light.

The voice waiting . . .  
No, don't worry, I'll write.  
Thank you.

The receiver down,  
the silver connection  
broken.

She sat for a moment  
motionless. Walking out then  
into the blank stillness and glare  
of almost noon.

Looking across to where  
the windmill, graceful against the rocky slope,  
rose out of a sea of grey-green scrub.

Two thousand miles away.

# Helen Horton

## INNISFAIL PIER

Four ladies fishing on the pier steps  
where yesterday a mangrove heron  
had briefly stood to preen.  
Cotton-clad, plump bulk of form,  
silent as the water that runs  
wrinkling around the piles  
tide-urged.

Between the mooring ropes of boat  
a nylon line darts out  
straight as the thrust of a heron's bill,  
that one quick flick of wrist enough  
to link the mass of inert patience  
and the light-fingered deftness  
of dark gentle hands.

"Catchem bait" — a little giggle,  
the others not even looking until in a short  
voluble burst of their own tongue  
they left, bucket quarter full.

Later, the heron returned  
and stealthily tiptoeing the low-tide bank  
stabbed the minnow-hinting water  
with his yellow-beaked eye.

## Subhash Jaireth

### VAN GOGH AND THE POTATO-EATERS

So what, if the face  
is blackened by coal dust,  
All colours are colourless after some time  
as all human things turn inhuman.

This is, you would say,  
a banal truth.  
But whatever it is  
                    it is still the truth.  
I arrived at this truth,  
like a hungry dog, chewing on  
a dry, rotten shoe.

I was told,  
to put on that white gown,  
and bring daily,  
into the begging bowls of their hearts  
a handful of patience.  
But they had no need of that patience,  
I coaxed from nowhere.  
They needed only, once a day,  
a handful of boiled potatoes,  
and a drop of butter melting over them.

I remember,  
the fragrance of those boiled potatoes,  
and a pinch of light dripping through the narrow windows,  
the small, hidden in the corner, scared candle,  
and the silent, tired, dug-in people.  
That day,  
I saw Jesus not on the cross,  
but as a white, fragrant, peeled potato.

That day,  
for the first time  
I felt:

I have more clothes than I need,  
I am fuller than I need,  
my house is bigger than I need,  
and the doors too small,  
and my house is no house, but a prison.  
And I picked up a bowl,  
and went begging from house to house.

What a cruel compulsion it is,  
to realise that I, standing outside the gate of that coal mine,  
can only copy, on canvas, their faces with pieces of charcoal,  
though each face is the same face,  
layer by layer buried below the rough sand,  
and burnt alive.  
Though my pulse echoes loud in my veins,  
but I doubt:  
I too am buried alive in rocks, a stony fossil.

Yes, nothing would change,  
if I stand up and come out in that square,  
and give up my white gown, the silken rope,  
the woollen shirt,  
the bread, the butter, and all the potatoes.  
yes, nothing would ever change,  
the mountains are not moved easily,  
nor the rivers come flooding on invitation,  
and the wind listens only to those who have wings.

## Subhash Jaireth

### THE HALF-CUT EAR

Sometimes, it does happen  
that colours no longer remain colours,  
but change into sounds  
and the lines into strained strings  
and my ears into gigantic drums.  
then I no longer am I  
but deformed, entangled foetus.

To take birth itself is the deformation  
or a whole life searching for the right colours,  
to forget those colours.  
Ask those pieces of that broken pitcher,  
the joy and the sorrow of being a full pitcher.

I do remember  
the midnight and the violent  
vibrating-with-stars sky,  
the river was also sky and the sky also river,  
the stars were stars and also water.  
Tell me, Margot, did you pick up that poison,  
when the sky had started slipping from within your fingers,  
flowing like a river.

Now, what if I have painted  
these dozens of sunflowers on the canvas,  
the canvas is only a canvas, a mere piece of cloth,  
and that sun is not just a sunflower,  
and even those sunflowers  
really the sunflowers dancing outside my yellow house.  
I too had tall suns, growing within me,  
my ears too had heard the continuous sound of ripening seeds,  
I too had once, found this life, entrapped, scared within my fists,  
But that was then, long ago.

Now, this life, like the strongman of that brothel,  
has thrown me out onto the street.

That Rachel no longer could ignite  
the extinguished heart,  
her own world has since been measured by  
many a pair of thighs.  
It is true that pain, when it becomes a habit,  
is no longer pain?

But then why,  
all of a sudden, thousands of wings  
flutter into my ears,  
why do my own hands start creeping to my own neck,  
and why does this whole world, within me,  
keep lashing at me?

Do you see that slimy piece of half-cut ear,  
wrapped in that bloodied scarf?  
Is it just a piece of my own ear?  
If my hands might have done it,  
I would have chopped off all the noses of this world  
and auctioned them, for nothing.

When they pushed me into that dark cell  
and closed the doors,  
through that palm-size hole near the roof,  
was it possible for me to reach the world outside?

I have felt the cruel eyes creeping over my back,  
my ears have heard the shameless laughter,  
and my feet have stumbled, shaken and run,  
harassed by the stones, aimed at me by children.  
And then, I have felt,  
to paint this bloody world as a black spot on my canvas,  
and to tear that canvas into bits and more bits,  
and to urinate on them, rivers and more rivers.

No, it's not true  
that life had never, no love for me.



It's not true  
that life had given me only the bitter taste of that sweet wine.  
I too have felt the intoxication, the sweet loss of memory,  
I too have stretched out my hand, to shake other hands,  
I too have walked step in step with other steps,  
I too have felt the solid strength of the earth below my feet.

But I don't know why  
all these pairs of eyes  
have a sickening habit of  
putting all other faces in their own narrow frames  
to make them cry.

## Bruce James

25/5/89 FROM THE ASYLUM — LETTER 592

The madmen here, as do the men of Arles,  
in little drawers their coloured keepsakes keep;  
chick-peas and beans after checkers and bowls  
content the lot, tobacco and some sleep.  
Theo, with such, we more-than-mad are pleased,  
wing-chair, wall-paper, curtains and a cot,  
relics of some rich and ruined deceased;  
white, cream, pink, brown, black, red, forget-me-not,  
viridian. Yesterday I hung above  
a death's head moth I had to pin to paint  
— insect of startling distinctions; olive,  
black, grey, cloud shade, but with carmine taint!  
A handshake in thought, your Vincent. Send green,  
zinc, cobalt, lead-orange, ultramarine.

## Irene Johnson (1907-84)

### CRY FROM SUBURBIA

The friendly ibis have been here for months.  
The hungry hawks, since drought is in the west,  
Have decimated little birds of song,  
The tits, the singing groundlarks and the rest.

This morning as I rose to proud pink dawn,  
Desperate to ignore suburban noise  
Within ten feet of me a proud white crane  
Stood motionless in tall breath-taking poise.

A miracle! Your stillness, bird, and mine  
Drowned out the living noises from the doors.  
For pity came, a comradeship in arms.  
I serve my sentence just as you serve yours.

We would not be unsocial, you and I.  
Many there are to whom this place is home.  
Since they would serve like sentence in the land  
The wide brown land where you and I would roam.

O, lovely bird, when rain shall set you free,  
For pity's sake, white bird, take me, take me!

## Irene Johnson

### THE BORE

One day I'll do it, so help me I will  
When your monologue gets past a joke.  
I'll stand up and say in a clear ringing voice  
"Look, you're mentally bankrupt and broke!"

I sit while you natter of cabbages, kings  
And wriggle my tail on the chair —  
Your audience captive, you're full in your stride,  
Till I find myself gasping for air.

It would not be so bad if you had an idea,  
Just one teeny one of your own  
But you mouth what you've read to the letter, old chap  
with a confidence bloated and blown.

You moralise, criticise, judge and condemn  
Not knowing you haven't a clue,  
While I speculate, wickedly, all of the good  
That a big hot potato could do!

One day I'll do it, so help me I will!  
No finesse, just blatant and blunt.  
If you once again query "Do you follow me?"  
I'll leap up and shout with a fiendish glee  
"No — I'm flaming well right out in front!"

# Nancy Keesing

## TO TOWNSVILLE, 1980

### 1. Getting There

At 30,000 feet of brilliant air  
Give or take a couple of thous. for those  
Who listen too late, or always fail to hear  
The captain's or first officer's crackling voice,

From these most mercifully non-metric skies  
The flanks of the Great Divide seem slashed; their veins  
Emptying in rivers that snake beyond two windows  
And bleed through webs to soaks on squared-off plains,

While starboard sight glares over filmy skin  
Of terrible blue that's acne-ed into islands  
Ringed by pale pus.

Ears will explode and deafen;  
Eyes, this high, must listen to heightened silence.

### 2. Arriving

The noises of disaster and despair  
In every city magnify through air.  
The higher the storey of your hotel room  
The worse your windows shriek of death and doom.

### 3. Walking

On the door of the shut-window cottage a sign reads:  
"MORGUE.  
NO UNAUTHORISED ENTRY." Never. Oh Never!  
The opposite hospital towers from lawns; a rose  
Is pruned by a gardener. This grass nobody mows.

4. "Your comments please" (Will enable the Management  
of this hotel to maintain a high standard of service etc. etc. etc.)

i) Three pelicans have, three times, flown past my window.  
I am unaccustomed to being at the level of flying pelicans.  
They have power and grace; they jut their beaks  
optimistically and with far sight.  
They make me feel old, fat, earthbound, ungainly, myopic.  
This is not luxury. This is far from right.

ii) Late afternoon I'm enchanted by the music of a band  
And lean from your balcony, thoughtfully provided.  
Cheated! No marching girls. Colonel Bogey is canned.

iii) Your outdoor pavement restaurant is heaven.  
All very well.  
But the five malnourished alchos. (three men, two women)  
Who have just staggered past from a pavement bar  
Are in hell.  
This contrast causes inner  
Guilt and spoils my dinner.

iv) Your Souvenir Shop

What ever has coral done to deserve this fate?  
Can these millions of polyp-builders be re-incarnations  
Of wicked souls eternally doomed to create  
Sulphurous roses and vile sky-blue carnations?

If so, this nautilus carafe was surely at least  
Some dungeon-keeper or hangman. Consider whose hell  
Must lurk on many a family mantelpiece  
Damned by innocent taste and misguided good will.

## 5. In the Mall

The young black girls of Darwin frisk  
And scuff on legs like whippy sticks.  
But Townsville women tread on trees  
Of bronze and polished ebony.

An old one creeps on twisted bone  
Thinned to black snags. The shady brim  
Of her hat's wound with a bright flower wreath  
"Death" would serve, but I'll write: "Breath."

TAMBOURINE MAN

Past the white Mercedes and the diamond windows  
In Africa, at dawn,  
Come the black men, cycling barefoot  
Under the signs that say "Net Blankes."

Here comes a barefoot black man walking  
In a tattery shirt with his trousers torn,  
And all of his pockets must be empty  
But he's got a tambourine in his big black hand  
And to it his body and his voice are singing  
As his eyes go past you blankly  
Under the music's moon.

Orpheus' membership never had to  
Be millionaires  
Music critics  
Even have ears.  
Trees, kings, Cerberus, Pluto,  
All in the music's plane he equalled —  
Playing, if you're up or down, who cares?  
Dance, said the Saddhu, let the cosmic  
Dance go on.  
And on and on goes the black man dancing,  
Goes the black tambourine man dancing  
Into the Durban dawn.

## Sylvia Kelso

### TOAD

Sings in the swamp like a marble-cluttered kettle  
Churring praise of rain.

Toad

Couples in cattle-troughs, dies erotically  
Spreadeagled to the stab of frost.

Toad

Poisons carpet-snakes and taipans; old dreamtime dragon perentie

Toad exterminates.

Toad

Silent on the edge of lamplight, fat from duffing moths, resembles

All queenly virgins' nuptial Frankenstein.

Toad

With letter-box lips, yellow eyes unblinking,  
Old warty back, wet humanoid hands

Toad,

Squatted, chops vibrating, in thigh and forearm mimics  
Just enough man to bring on atavistic spasms.

Toad's

Unblemished catalogue of vices (and not even pretty)

Merits race extinction —

But consider

The Inquisition, Waterloo, pogroms,  
Ypres Salient, Conquistadors, Dachau,  
And whatever lovely liberations  
Lie ahead down moon-walk road.  
All consciences made equal  
I'd sooner be the toad.



## Francis Kenna (1865-1932)

### TO NORTHWARD

To Northward far where the sunrays shiver  
On brown sand beaches and vine-clad tree,  
In deep, lone valleys there runs a river,  
Through sun and shadow, towards the sea.

And there the palms with their regal crowning, —  
Their wealth of trailing blossoms hung,  
With the spent bloom dropping above and drowning  
Stand, as they stood when the world was young.

(With never the smoke of a grimy steamer,  
And never the churn of a driving screw;  
The white crane out on the sand, a dreamer,  
The brown hawk poised in the boundless blue.)

The vine-clad heights, with the pine trees lifting  
Their stately heads to the winds always,  
Or the barque of a native fisher drifting  
Around a bend in the waning days.

And there the days bring forth no dangers  
To the wild shy life in the flowering trees;  
And there the gulls and the deep sea rangers  
Come for rest from the stormy seas.

(A water hen from the rushes peeping.  
A wild duck sporting, that takes no heed  
Of the sudden sound of a mullet leaping.  
The splash of a falling mangrove seed.)

The morn is a dainty bridesmaid, dressing  
Her golden hair for the hallowed day;  
The sunset falls like a mother's blessing,  
And sheds its gold on the broad tideway.

And then the night, when the stars are scattered —  
A wealth of pearls in the water flung  
With dim suggestions of things that mattered  
In the long ago, when the heart was young.

(Only the cry of a bittern calling  
Somewhere off in the tideswept ways,  
The scent of a broken blossom falling —  
The still sweet nights, and the dreamy days.)

The lazy tide in the river reaches,  
The trailing vine and the towering tree;  
And far away on the ocean beaches  
The drowsy boom of the dreamy sea.

## Victor Kennedy (1895-1952)

### NORTHERN JUNE

There's fancy on the running hills  
That guard the bay,  
The charm of many a perfume fills  
This winter day.

A million melting colours fall  
From clouds that cling  
About those carven crags that call  
This winter — spring.

# Victor Kennedy

## FARTHEST NORTH

Away before the stretching eyes  
The little valley lies,  
And who would not be out with me along the tropic way?  
We sipped the wine of old romance when we were fresh  
and strong,  
But that was many years ago and many miles along!  
Ah, me, to breathe the golden air of Farthest North to-day!

Who knows the deep entrancing blue  
In Murray-Prior's view?  
Or climbs again the coastal ridge to clamber Bartle Frere?  
Whose eyes recall the sombre spread of bending fields  
of cane  
When coloured evens richly glowed to trash fires on the  
wane?  
Ah me, to be in Queensland when the night star shimmers  
there!

Below the gorge's purple gloom  
The valley gardens bloom,  
And winding past the mountain road the Mulgrave beckons  
here;  
To the emerald South Pacific and the ancient Coral Seas,  
The Barron hurtles forward with her rhyme of centuries.  
Ah me, to be in Queensland when the north sun glitters  
there!

The storm — the cyclone season's best —  
Tears frantic to the west  
As outposts on the waterfront are stamped and driven  
through;  
The time-built, time-worn Barrier sinks back in old-time  
pain  
To meet the flashing fury of the foam fiend once again —  
Ah me, a million victims grin a welcome for the new!

Still I have seen the broad pale moon  
Change tropic nights to noon;  
And I have seen the summer smile at Cairns and Innisfail;  
Lantanas blazed their impudence down edgeways from  
the heat,  
But crotons and hibiscus hearts flush hot-blood welcomes  
sweet —  
Ah me, when tropic calls ring clear *can* southern pleas  
prevail?

## John Knight (1835-1901)

### ON THE GREAT BARRIER REEF, OFF THE QUEENSLAND COAST

From submerged tracks upbuilt — it fronts the sun,  
Athwart whose disc is seen oft spreading wide,  
A foam-wrought shroud high flung above the tide.  
This work, by humble instruments begun  
Long since! confronts Pacific's onslaughts — hurled  
With thund'rous might — solid! immovable!  
Here woe oft meets the sailor headlong whirled  
'Gainst its bleached sides, rooted! impregnable!  
When tempests mock, or nights all lustrous burn  
With light from Luna's overflowing urn.  
Here insects wrought spontaneous, out of sight,  
Ere thy bold crest, O Capricorn!\* those spheres  
Beheld, whose beams, far reaching down the years,  
Fall on thy rugged shoulders through the night.

\*Cape Capricorn

# Maureen Kozicka

## ANT HILLS

Petrifying  
Sand castles  
Peppering  
A countryside  
Deserted by  
A million children  
Long since  
Piped  
Away.

## Darcy La Mont

### OLD JACK

Battered and old and tarnished with sin,  
A floppy old hat, a whiskered old chin,  
Legs slightly bowed from years on a horse.  
Who is this fellow? The duffer, of course,  
Winks at the barmaid as he sips at his beer,  
She knows all the stories and thinks him a dear.  
For once he was famous for the way he could ride,  
And few of the locals could stay at his side.

Way in the ranges, the back of the Towers,  
The birthplace of rivers, where birds build their bowers,  
In a lonely old station, the back of beyond,  
Watered in good years by a bit of a pond,  
Old Jack did his duffing, he was king of 'em all.  
He stole from the big bloke, never touching the small.  
And many a digger at the end of his beat,  
Gave thanks to the duffer for a bag full of meat.

His old eyes are reddened by days in the sun,  
His shoulders are sagging through working the run,  
The old cattle-dog asleep at his feet,  
Dreams of the good days and plenty of meat,  
For Jack's on the pension, he camps in the town,  
Too old now for duffing and knocking around.



# Anne Lloyd

## INSOMNIA

So Rip Van Winkle snored too. And did his wife then lie awake for thirty years? I practise deep-breathing exercises, try to make my mind divorce itself from worn-out limbs. Wriggle the big toe first, relax, let all the tension dissipate. Loosen the tightness of the next, force each body part to rest, go limp. I am the rag floppy doll, stretched out. I am a traveller on the longest escalator in the world. I can levitate across space. Still he snores. Irregularly. Regularly. Not loud, but deafening in relentlessness. I toss and turn, frightened my brain will snap open, a scream escape to cut the night. "Oh shut your mouth," I sigh, exasperated, knowing his sleep impenetrable and the snore incapable of hearing. In the spare room, lying with wide eyes on the single bed, his snore knows how to walk around corners and follow me, sure as death. I can see the snore standing haughtily in the doorway.

Returned to the double, I remember the magazine story of a man who, conscience-pricked by talk of snoring, suffered his wife to sew buttons in a row down the back of his pyjamas. If he rolled over to snore, the buttons would wake him, so the theory went. He rolled over, but continued snoring. Snore snore. More snore. Light is stalking into the room.

I observe my own dear snorer more prone to bouts when spread-eagled on his back and try a different tack: "Roll over, darling," I say, softly touching a shoulder. The body rolls sideways. It breathes normally. The shoulders rise and fall in quiet empathy. Ah peace! Ah stuff of dreams!

The body rolls back rhythmically, shudders into its usual fit of snores.

# Anne Lloyd

## THE MARRIAGE OF PETER

Pete, do you remember  
the mad sand crouched in cold messages  
that night on Bilgola,  
bending the heart white  
and the sea blownabout in the blue of the salt?  
The others singing their fireside choruses  
to the five-stringed fellowship guitar,  
and me crying?

The rock out there in the middle,  
beaten down by the rush of the ocean,  
was the allegory I wrote myself,  
and I screamed to the winds  
that it didn't really matter  
if Jesus loved me,  
so long as you damn well did.

You, Peter, were the rock that night,  
and you and your church wifey  
will make good rocks  
upon which the Lord can build  
a host of churches  
to be filled by screaming infants,  
and later perhaps,  
their five-stringed guitars.

## Anne Lloyd

### CHANTING FOR J.B.

From the shower your voice  
rising over water, dovelike,  
mysteriously vicarious:  
“Any gory bits yet?”

I was just in the middle of that section  
with them axing the Newbys and  
ugly old Graf (oh surely, Grafín),  
a honey-smooth pontificate of education,

and *quite* unmoved. Her rib cage  
splintered, the hams divided —  
all nicely sliced. They were nasty pieces,  
the whole pig lot of them . . .

but even the old clockwork couldn't raise  
a flutter of indignation, no sweet revulsion.  
My violences were always silent, my mind  
a honeycomb, sugared with attitudes, quieter vices.

## Philip Lorimer (1843-97)

### QUEENSLAND

Queensland! thou art a land of pest:  
From flies and fleas we ne'er can rest,  
E'en now mosquitoes round me revel;  
In fact they are the very devil.  
Sand flies and hornets just as bad,  
They nearly drive a fellow mad.  
The scorpion and the centipede,  
And stinging ants of every breed,  
Iguanas, lizards, and poisonous snakes,  
Deadly fever with the shakes,  
Bandicoots and thieving rats,  
Bears, opossums, and native cats,  
Wallabies and kangaroos,  
Native dogs and cockatoos,  
Barcoo spew, rot, and sandy blight,  
Dingoes howling all the night,  
As well as hosts of croaking frogs,  
Curlews, quails and yelling dogs.  
Carpentaria alligators and crocodile  
Cause one to fear, dispel a smile:  
Kanakas, Chinese, and murderous Blacks,  
Frightful roads and outlandish tracks,  
Spinifex and desert sandy,  
Horrid rum and wretched brandy,  
Bad tobacco and *ad valorem*,  
These troubles — who could e'er get o'er 'em?

# Noel Macainsh

## THE MANGO TREE

a highly praiseworthy fruit-producing society of leaves  
erected in favour of  
North Queensland  
where the usually available lovable fruit  
(not great mounds of green rats hanging by their tails)  
are annually conceived by successive governments  
to educate and stimulate, glorify and decorate  
the meaning, life and purpose of our subjective state —  
awarded as prizes, pressed in books, recorded in the office of births  
and deaths, of titles, of biography, of Who's Who in Mangoes,  
the Biggest Mango, Tales of Mangoes, Great Mangoes of the World  
the Inner Life of the Mango, the Loves of Mangoes, the Dreams and Lusts  
and Insane Cavortings of Mangoes, Mango-Heroism, Mango-Idealism,  
Mango-Militarism, Mango-Jingoism — drooled upon, slept upon  
hoarded, fingered, felt, deposited in banks, posted in letters  
(our truest and best emissary), held aloft in churches, prayed to,  
lectured on, studied in schools and stools, peeled, stripped,  
poked, licked and gobbled, looked up to, looked down on  
as they fall and carpet the golden sward  
of sun-drenched clay-pan,  
paddock and yard,  
turning mellow  
as skins yellow  
in prize  
demise  
for God  
for Queen  
for Joh  
(19% of  
the votes)  
for Country  
for all the World  
(Mangoes ueber alles)  
for holy holy Queensland (the North) all rights reserved

## Noel Macainsh

### MISSION BAY

“Connais le poids d’une palme” —  
and to myself say, the fruits,  
the fruits, the tan fruits  
of being calm —  
let your fronds be heavy  
heavy in the light  
but rise, rise to go with the breeze  
then stay, stay attached to your trunk  
be a mimic of the seas  
that move that stay  
though their froth-fronds  
rank on rank  
wander  
but always landwards  
coming to the shore  
hiss rustle  
and finally float over land  
in the gentlest way —  
rest, rest a moment  
till the current calls  
then follow, follow all the way  
and sway borne upon the currents  
as an ocean on its stem  
as a palm  
a susurrus, a colloquy of angels  
a host of hands  
showing what they say.

## Noel Macainsh

### KANGAROO BY NIGHTFALL

The kangaroo by the roadside,  
standing like a milestone  
in a place of national pride  
is changing into shadows,  
in fact, it's almost overgrown.

Soon, we'll be able to say —  
I think it's still there,  
or perhaps nearer your way —  
I think so, but it might have moved;  
I can't be sure, it must be somewhere.

And then, of course, everywhere  
will have something of kangaroo —  
shrubs will have ears, a mild stare  
be felt from an empty bush,  
and last, wary of what you do,  
of dim trees that could be a hide,  
your heart will thump away from you.

## Richard Magoffin

EH!

“Y’reckon eh? Well, so do I —  
It’s like their flamin’ hide —  
T’say we all talk different eh —  
Fair churns me up inside!  
They reckon eh, in Queensland eh,  
Y’know eh like they say —  
They reckon we talk slower  
An’ we use a lot of ‘eh’.

Eh, bullshit eh? Y’reckon eh?  
Yair, course it is, eh Joe?  
There’s no doubt in my mind y’know—  
At least we ‘av a go!  
Eh? No mistake! Eh — watch me beer!  
Eh — ‘oo the ‘ell are you?  
Aw — all the way from Melbourne eh?  
Well Sport, how do you do?

We mightin’ ‘av an ‘Arbour Bridge —  
Eh! Watch me bloody beer!  
But eh, we got — eh, ridgey didge —  
The Min Min Light up ‘ere.  
Anwot about the bloody Reef —  
Eh Joe? Y’reckon eh?  
Well like, y’know — beyond belief —  
Yair eh — that’s what I say!

Well like, y’know, in Queensland eh —  
There goes me bloody beer!  
Eh yair — another Fourex, mate —  
‘Oo is that bloody queer?  
At least we’re not the Garden State —  
Eh? Not all pansies gay?  
Yair, sure y’come from Melbourne, mate —  
Eh, lay orf mate — EH! EH!”



## Richard Magoffin

### IS THIS THE BUSH?

A tourist, plump and well attired,  
One of the city push,  
Came in today and he enquired:  
“I say, is this The Bush?”

“No, this is not The Bush, my friend;  
The Bush is nowhere near,  
The Black Stump was just 'round the Bend,  
But it's no longer here.

“Its border line was not defined  
But it was here no doubt,  
Before the modes of men inclined  
To move it further out.

“No, this is not The Outback yet,  
For we're too up-to-date;  
You've come a way, but don't you fret —  
Keep on, you'll find it, Mate.”

You would have thought, to see him frown,  
That I'd been telling lies —  
He looked me up and looked me down  
With pity in his eyes:

“Good Grief! It's not The Bush today?  
It's further up the track?  
It's Bush enough for me I say —  
From here I'm turning back!”

# E.W. Merlehan

## THE BOOK

He was going to write a book  
about men,  
men he knew and had known  
big men good men tough an' strong  
smart men men's men humble an' loud  
men of silence and men proven fools  
of the kind of men he'd learned to know.

He was going to write a book  
about life,  
life he knew and had known  
rallies an' riots an' dangerous peace  
of beatings and burnings an' metal meals  
and a type of classical show case Justice.

I, really, was going to write a book  
but there wouldn't be enough pages  
enough words or enough people to read  
to read and understand as I have  
to realise that they're my kind of men  
and this is my kind of life.

## Claude Morris

### A GRAVE SITUATION

When I staggered away from my favourite pub,  
The night was dark and still,  
And I thought I'd take a short-cut home  
That led over Cemetery Hill.  
Now I'm not a hero, as everyone knows,  
And I have no reckless trends,  
But ghosts and the like leave me cold, as it were,  
And spirits and I are old friends.

I wobbled along through the cemetery gates,  
Begging my legs to behave,  
And everything went pretty well, so I thought,  
Till I fell down a newly-dug grave.  
For a moment I thought I had landed in hell,  
And ended my earthly career.  
I sniffed like a hound for the sulphurous fumes,  
Expecting Old Nick to appear.

But reason returned and I staggered erect,  
My prison so dark, to survey,  
And tested my bones for a fracture or two,  
But everything functioned O.K.  
I made a feeble attempt to get out,  
But it needed no more than a glance  
To convince me, in my condition,  
I hadn't the ghost of a chance.

I reckoned I'd have a lay-off for a while,  
And when I woke sober and fit  
I'd surely come up with a good idea  
That would get me out of the pit.  
Just then I could hear fast oncoming steps  
That seemed too good to be true,  
But ere I could "Coo-ee" or offer advice,  
In the grave there were suddenly two!

By chance, he fell in the grave's other end,  
With no-one to cushion his fall;  
But he rose like a shot with a strangled yelp,  
And attempted to scale up the wall.  
This chap was at pains to be up and away,  
As the capers he cut plainly told.  
He jumped and scrambled and jumped again,  
But his fingers and toes wouldn't hold.

I hadn't yet spoken — I'd hardly a chance,  
The way he cavorted about,  
And I had to admire the way that he fought  
To sever all ties and get out.  
Of course, he believed there was nobody near;  
He thought he was there all alone.  
And I got the idea it had entered his head  
That the grave was becoming his own.

I felt rather sad for the poor little guy  
Now acting a little distraught,  
And I thought he'd relax if I gave him the drum  
That he wasn't alone, as he thought.  
So I walked up behind him and tapped on his back  
As he poised for another wild bid:  
"You CAN'T make it, Mate", I breathed in his ear —  
But by the Lord Harry, he DID!

# Wayne Murphy

## GLIMPSES

Charters Towers

1979

old gold and  
ruins  
and summer's bruising clouds  
and gatling-gun rattle  
on a thin tin roof  
rusty as the  
water-tanks  
peering from nervous stilts  
leering into wooden-stove kitchens  
and drowsy beer-swilling sessions  
under sedate back-yard  
mango trees

deep northern heat and  
flies buzzing like  
gossip against the clouds  
niggling like  
bindi-eyes and  
broken marriages

women powdered under  
firm matronly arms  
swishing a fly from the  
plate of scones  
the hems of their  
pleated skirts grating  
modestly  
against crimped stockings  
six inches below  
the knee.

## Mark O'Connor

### TO KILL AN OLIVE

Nobody knows how long it takes to kill an olive.  
Drought, axe, fire, are admitted failures. Hack one down,  
grub out a ton of mainroot for fuel, and next spring  
every side-root sends up shoots. A great frost  
can leave the trees leafless for years; they revive.  
Invading armies will fell them. They return  
through the burnt-out ribs of siege machines.

Only the patient goat, nibbling his way down the ages,  
has malice to master the olive. Sometimes, they say,  
a man finds a dead orchard, fired and goat-  
cropped centuries back. He settles and fences;  
the stumps revive. His grandchildren's family prosper  
by the arduous oil-pressing trade. Then wars  
and disease wash over. Goats return. The olives  
go under, waiting another age.

Their shade still lies where Socrates disputed.  
Gethsemane's withered groves are bearing yet.

## Mark O'Connor

### UMBRIAN FARM

*Ditissima terra* — “richest of lands.”

Europe we'd thought fished out, choked, cleared,  
an older phase of the Australian madness; yet here  
— so many mountains baulk the farmers' greed —  
the Umbrian hills still hold more trees  
than almost any part of our cleared land.

But the groves, re-logged each twenty years  
have kept no mystery. No Faunus,  
lover of panting nymphs,  
comes chasing well-sprites through these fields.  
The nymphs are under potsherds, hay,  
twelve feet of valley silt,  
or hang like mountain gnats in air, where stone  
shows boldly through the dwarfing thyme  
like a starved donkey's ribs. My every step  
falls through ten centuries of absent soil.  
Italy, ravaged land, with what a wealth it loads  
those five surrounding seas!

But the wheat thickens, and the vine's bunched udders  
in these smooth hills hang fruitfullest.  
Better to sing of the seminous seeds of things,  
the pollenous chromosomed wills greening  
the curve of the planet, thrusting out  
of their spirals gorse-yellow spineless  
broom's perfume, the acorn, ever-logged  
chestnut, melons, sharp oat, roots  
and shoots of the slow-increasing olive  
— harvests of Italy, farmed and loved  
at such a cost in blood, where slow  
viburnums bloom in cypress shade.

# Mark O'Connor

## SHEARWATERS

In October, the pasture-month of ocean,  
when Saturn and Venus in glimmers escort  
the clouded quartered moon, striving home  
on the meadow of boxfish and sponge-crab,  
targeting on a conspiracy of casuarinas  
in the ram of the wind on a darkening sea,  
they come to ghost-glimmering islets  
smudged under a map of evening stars.

Wing-crash on trunk or tent,  
clunk of feathered weight;  
silence — and then  
the indignant wail, and sharp  
home-scamper, heads lowered, furtive as rats;  
and the settling, two by two,  
in ecstatic down,  
by the rowdy burrows.

First year finds a mate to canoodle;  
second, a patch and a shallow scrape;  
third and after, the lone precious egg  
is replacement — no hawk  
of the air is their master.

This sunrise the season is over. They go  
in the dawn-gloved morning bewailing the other pole;  
wings stiff as a moonflag; beaks fixed  
for precision snatching of krill  
in the sprat-doom tip-hooked scissor.

Old salts to whom climates and seasons  
are one, aloft on the island eddies  
thickening the wind, they pour;



endless as round jellyfish I saw once  
on a night-dive, galaxied beyond galaxy  
in an infinite regress of size; aloof  
and enviable

since words are all we have of wings.

## Mark O'Connor

### WORDSWORTH'S HOUSE AT RYDAL

Poetry is the mating of adders:  
rarely seen, though it's thought  
it still goes on. Only here and there  
are places, commonplace hollows  
in bracken or homes by a bridle-path  
where it's known to have happened.  
And here on the wall  
is the jut-nosed red-cheeked fellow's  
image; Mary beside, Dorothea,  
Dora; and the furniture  
of a hale much-loved old age.

Windows frame a park  
so blanded as to half rebuke  
the hissing language of the stoat,  
the gloating argot of the crow.  
Only the pastelled rhododendron  
hints the hue of blood.

Swallows dive at the eaves,  
skimming up on folded wings to hit  
the hidden nest. Literati gaze  
under harrying clouds on those  
tartan fells. No landscape tempts  
so pat a formula for beauty;  
though the icy fells still snare  
those who moralise them wrong.

\* \* \* \*

Inside, his cultured walls reveal  
three slight Italian *Vergines*. "This  
is the Master's library", maids would say;  
"his study is outdoors." Yet here we know

that something failed; cogs blurred and  
stumbled here for thirty years, while one  
of Europe's engines rusted in its prime.  
The years of un-novelty, fame, and  
*Prelude* revisited, led to this  
bright-eyed hook-nosed eighty-year-old  
starving for information.

His walls show thirty years of gardening,  
dining, afternoons of fire and quill  
for one who felt the green force in the leaf  
but had neither Ramirez's scope, nor  
Darwin's lorgnettes for the dance of worms.

Nature is vast, has many shrines; though  
the New World was largely the Old  
re-found, with Europa's swan,  
oak, elk, and bison. Only his daring  
brother might have sailed where banyan, lungfish,  
tapir, lyre- and weaver-birds  
displaced the easy robin. No *Beagle* came  
to Rydalmere's smooth water.

Diaries propped open (since accounts  
are closed) tell how the Palace  
came to tea, but not why Coleridge  
stayed away, self-wrecked, through years  
when Shelley would have soared or perished  
scooping the honey.

On the refurbished floor I walk softly,  
and leave slowly, a cold breath on my neck.

# Mark O'Connor

## THE RAINBOW SERPENT

(A sequence of poems on Hinchinbrook Island,  
designed to accompany a photographic exhibition).

### I. *Tch'mala: the Rainbow Serpent*

*His mass is mountains. Roar  
is elder brother of the sea's blood-purr.  
His rumble from Mission Beach down past Murdering Point  
is a palm's back-sway, taipan's long hiss.*

*His trails are the endless oncomings of mist  
low into the water-choked valleys — his scales  
the mountain slopes shiny with rain; his accompanist  
the wilful drub of rain that greets  
the giant toad's rasping heat-cry.*

*Though he breaks the good trees with the flail of his tail,  
through him are all hatchlings and fruit. Grass-renewer,  
his sperm are the eels that fall from Heaven. He restocks  
the swamp, fills the rock-hole above falls. Through him,  
what survives is reborn in water.  
His cave of retreat makes the dry season.*

*His aftersign is the bridge of beauty  
glimpsed through shifting cloud.*

*His faithful are buried in hills and reserves.*

### II. *Mt. Bowen*

*Rainmaster, evercapped.  
My top butts the sky, bruises  
wind into clouds. Longer  
than stone can remember,  
torments in womb of my mother  
squeezed me out high. I was twice*

what you see. Now my head  
muds the Hinchinbrook Channel.

III. *Rock*

I am all-parent.  
Gray nets eat my skin.  
The colorless fluid rots my nerves.  
All that live rasp on my flesh.

IV. *Mountain Fig*

Rockgrinder. Dry or wet  
my roots clutch the crevice,  
jemmy fissures apart. In deep hollows  
below hang my harvests of soil  
where I store from the Wet  
a pool for the blazing season.  
Once I struck in a half-inch of moss;  
now I bind hillsides together.  
In my branches the nutmeg-eater builds.

V. *Mangrove*

Net-master. Mine the curtain,  
the endless green. My prey the  
smallest fish that swims, round  
grain the mountain lost.  
What passes me rolls  
on the salt sea floor.

Million-propped and pegged  
I snag the keen tides  
into pack-weary eddies,  
winning space  
and soil from the very  
liquid ocean.

And my completion  
is to be displaced.

VI. *Sandcrabs*

Each sandball the work of six limbs.  
The tireless architects of *now*. Our  
history is billions of tides; our  
canvas the sandy world.

Twice a day all is destroyed.  
We rebuild in the eye of the moon.  
Forgotten: when the masterwork began.  
When it ends, no tide will come.

VII. *Monsoon*

Gray mists sliding overhead.  
The globe is tensed like a brimming tear.  
The Wet begins. Here's reward  
for blazing hopeless months. Today  
the pre-Cambrian world returns;  
and life, like fern spores, swims in water.

Now the wilted leaf turns up.  
Enough is had; with promise of much more.

VIII. *Fungus*

Mine to destroy. Without my unmaking  
last millennium's forests choke your hills.  
I make clogless the wheel of return. Through me  
seedlings rise where the strangler fell.  
I alone, eating wood, am the gate  
of the springtime cavalcade.

IX. *Coconut Palm*

On the moist fresh lens that bobs with tide,  
my pods have no season.  
Each takes its plunge:  
thrown by the last wave of a peaking sea  
to hit soil and roll beyond salt; or,

three days weltering in brine, to lose  
the spark, an inner-stinking curio.

Ungraftable, I spring from the germ.  
My friend is the animal  
who plants me for his use.  
He has spread me so far he forgets  
in what continent's sun  
my brown brood of nuts first swelled  
under winnowing arms.

X. *Fire*

The oldest human fossil;  
my castles those the stone age saw.  
I am man's comforter, tiger-fence,  
and my own master. Burning the past  
I give cold sand, clean ash.  
I am wisdom's father, technology's  
mother, the first safe nest on ground;  
Heraclitean flux made visible; round me  
familiar grunts first made a family's meaning.

I burn with hot indifference, follow  
who feeds me best. And my best servants  
died before speech was baked in clay.

XI. *Hinchinbrook Aborigines*

Generations beyond guess of naked children  
grew with the suns and storms of this lost beach,  
left its sands for the inheritors  
freshly to scrawl their days in blood or ash.  
Tracks were a teacher's ornate map  
erased by tide. Nature was a stone rubbed smooth  
where groans or song would scarcely cling  
and every tale in time recurred.

The land was deep with magic.  
You blended with its power, held its rules;  
were full when it would feed you, lost  
your children when it pruned you back.

Its hardness never staled until  
the ghost-men brought an easier way.

XII. *Earth*

Mine the face on which you trample.  
Mine the bones by which you live.



## Derry Parker

### THE MAN WHO FED THE BIRDS

Your meaning's bare, they said.  
You'll have to cover up.  
The poet, who didn't know  
he was naked, made no move  
but kept on writing  
the green and the white and the blue  
and singing his blind man's songs.

Away from the sharp-eyed men  
who look for nakedness  
even in the decently clothed,  
he'd learnt no subterfuge,  
knowing only the company  
of simple men like himself  
who worked with their hands.

You've left it all hanging out  
— your heart and that.  
Said those who knew the uses of armour.  
But he saw no harm  
for his heart was pure  
and he went on playing his faltering flute  
to girls with cinnamon hair.

Come off it mate,  
you can't get away  
with rosebuds and lilies these days.  
But the poet who didn't know that,  
had already turned away  
and was feeding the birds.

## Derry Parker

### DISENGAGEMENT

I prepare for your going  
with hardened heart,  
telling your faults  
like beads in the night.  
Sins long forgiven  
are raked for a spark.  
I need a fire  
to warm myself by  
when you're gone.  
Add no more grains  
to the years' hoard of love;  
it will make bitter bread  
when you're gone.  
You will not know,  
but please forgive  
this final cowardice.

## Fiona Perry

### THE OLD POET

An ear cocked for birdsong  
An eye out for red fox dens  
Noted at nightfall in his journal  
retold in letters written at dawn.

His land is gardened by the wind  
leaves of applebox and manna fall  
spindles of bark fall  
gums batter down from time to time.

Fallow in the evening  
he comforts himself in the arms  
of the pot-belly stove, faithful  
till he's drunk, sleeps without memory.  
"Old feuds and wives pass on!"

Hunting simple truths  
he sets out on a journey.  
West into spray, finned  
green with dolphin.

Then inland into the wind's red blowpipe  
to face the great red rock, a loneliness like caves.  
He'd found no woman on the road  
thought cold thoughts.

He comes at last to the deep green forest that closes  
To feel on his hand, delicate, black, the shade of giant ferns.  
Under leeches falling, cassowary watching  
finds his truth, he has no muse left.

In the north I cook for him on a fire  
hear him quote Dostoyevsky, Icelandic sagas  
the yarns of long doused campfires  
Watch him shelling garlic, pouring soy,

setting out green mussel shells  
for the red ants to clean.

Here in the heat  
his old bristling smell of earth, booze and brimstone sours.  
In his beard snow turns to sweat  
drunkenness to bitterness.  
the old poet should smell of home, humus and snow  
cold open country, old roots.

## Fiona Perry

## THE BRIDE'S HYMN

When these seed pearls cloudy could be my eyes,  
When I pass away, when I hang by a thread,  
Dress me in my bridal gown, laundered  
and saved for death. Better disguise  
where the hook and eyes do not meet. The silk  
has yellowed to match my teeth, my waist has spread.

Do not truss me up in bed.  
Do not let them all tramp by, crossing themselves  
With “Amen” and “goodbye”, while the children  
                        impervious  
Spy and pronounce me “cold and dead.”  
Take me deep into the scrub  
Array me softly on a mound of leaves  
Let me see an old bride sleeping.

Dig for me by owl light  
Cross my breast with my own cold hands  
Promise to cross yourself. Lay me cheek  
Down on the deepest earth. Wed me to earth,  
Blithely, as if my soul were of featherdown.  
Shovel me over.  
Let the only bell be the knell of batwing.

Where I lie the dark is roily  
My dress is a host where worms  
Keep vigil, where insects toil, where  
I am cherished. Clay stains  
My dress to umber.  
Rain rots me. It is my hymn.

Forfeit all our former glory. We are lyres of bone.  
Under spider lilies we are lying,  
Under leaves' skeletons, orchids of bone.  
Our veil is moss, the brides who were, are lost.

## Fiona Perry

### LETTER TO MY MOTHER, EMPRESS OF AUSTRIA, MARIA THERESA WHO IS ALSO DEAD

(written on my last handkerchief)

White rose petals  
Mother, my armpits are still as soft  
I cannot powder them so they smell  
like bread, white  
as bread. My hair  
Monsieur Leonard combed three feet high, adorned  
with mother-of-pearl windmills, is gone quite white, a nest.

Dull letters  
you wrote me from Vienna, how you deplored  
the air of my court, eavesdropping  
enmity, meddling. Mother I gilded it  
with my own extravagance  
my own white bosoms.

I was Queen of France and Navarre.  
I am the Widow Capet.

I hear my tiny son beaten  
in his truckle-bed. His head  
is their cobblestone. When he's drunk  
he calls me whore.

Mother I discarded men  
like mouthfuls of marzipan,  
I was never innocent.  
Unicorn horns whorled in their breeches.  
Pah! How they crumpled. I have not been rescued.

A tumbril. A tumbril.  
Tomorrow they sever my neck. I am despised.  
In this foul cell they spy  
even when I am indisposed.  
O my Versailles . . . Mother  
I soil myself.

## Des Petersen

### HIS DAUGHTER AT NIGHT

I quietly enter the room,  
tip-toe to your bed,  
listen, as I pause,  
to your breathing alive  
and sharp in the air.

Asleep, you almost smile  
at me, and moonlight reflects  
from your delicate face  
across the blankets, as over  
a dark field of grass.

The icons of your childhood  
surround me where I stand:  
Peter the bear, glassy eyed  
and unkempt on the tiny chair;  
the picture stories on the wall.

And I recall how this morning  
you squatted on the floor,  
hands clasped beneath your legs,  
and said, Look Daddy, I can  
lift myself up off the ground.

As you jumped in that fated leap  
it touched the thought in me  
of a girl who smiles as she turns  
and walks towards her womanhood;  
the years thickening between us.

And as I stood and stared  
at the scene I remember now  
in the quiet of a darkened room  
my child was falling to earth,  
down, down to her human self . . .

I pause to look again  
at you, then turn to leave,  
picking my way past Peter  
the bear looking up at me  
with uncomprehending eyes.



## Des Petersen

### HOUSES

The photographs upon the walls  
of this empty, once scrubbed house  
stare back at me without a story  
except, simply, we who were here before  
no longer wake to hear the ocean pass.

I wish they were here with me,  
apart from memories whose solitude  
tumbles with these hills toward the reefs,  
but a request to an empty house offers  
nil. No, I would not have them here,

for people gone to other houses become  
themselves more by changing,  
and I must myself set out like the sun  
along my road across those great gulfs  
towards your house, before the ocean turns.

## Joan Priest

### THE SOLITARY

The chair that was empty  
and the bird that sang —  
a black butcher in the casuarina  
above the glutinous cane —  
saw her die. Who can live  
on a view and birdsong when they  
disappear in the closeness  
of night?

The world on holiday  
was so near it might have  
cared had it known — ruddered cats  
slicing the sea, striped canvas  
spluttering, boys in trapeze, curved  
naveled girls, dizzy gulls hurtling  
over rock and wreck, tide thrusting  
through rust.

On the hilltop, below the chair,  
caught, implacable, between  
generations' urgings, she lay,  
an imprint on carpet, hands stretched,  
and the curved naveled girls did not  
dream of it, not yet in their bones,  
their sun-warmed bones, did they  
dream of it.

## Mary Rattenbury (1878-1937)

### BEAUTIFUL GIRLS OF YEPPON

All aboard the "five-five" for Yeppoon,  
Take your seats and just hum this old tune,  
    For sure at "ten-seven"  
    You'll be next to heaven,  
On the bluff with the girls at Yeppoon.

#### *Chorus.*

You talk of your seats in the park,  
    You sing of the days long gone by,  
But give me Yeppoon after dark,  
    When music and laughter are nigh.  
Oh, give me this jolly old life,  
    And blindfold the silly old moon.  
Let me live in the light of the smiles  
    Of the beautiful girls of Yeppoon.

On the bluff with the girls at Yeppoon,  
You will find that time passes too soon.  
    It's the home of romance,  
    Of music and dance,  
And the beautiful girls of Yeppoon.

## Alan Riddell

### SUNLIGHT (For Charles Salisbury)

The happiness of sunlight is a thing in itself.  
Reading a book, my eyes averted from the glare, I  
accept, but limit, such unrestrained euphoria.  
Whereas stones, now in shade, now struck by its rays,  
neither affirm nor deny this benison of joyfulness.  
My friend's cat, however, has made *his* position plain:  
under a table, in the deep pool of shadow there, he lies asleep.  
All of which could lead one to believe — and quite plausibly too —  
that a trough of high dudgeon might be forming in the sky.  
Save that the sunlight itself, falling on petals, roofs, trees,  
the leaves of my book, sea, these marginal hills, cares  
only for its own joy, the sheer exuberance of being  
the thing in itself.

# George Herbert Rogers (1872-1926)

## A LETTER

*Written in reply to one received from a young lady complaining that she had arrived home from a voyage to find a servantless house.*

Dear Beatrice, how are you feeling  
These sweltering midsummer days?  
I imagine you busily peeling  
Potatoes and facing the blaze,  
Where the frying-pans sizzle and splutter  
While you long for cool drinks in the shade.  
I'm afraid it's too utterly utter,  
The lack of a maid.

Is it horrid, this washing of dishes,  
And wielding of dusters and brooms,  
The scaling and gutting of fishes,  
And cleaning verandahs and rooms?  
There's no place like home, and we know it  
Yet you murmur at times I'm afraid,  
"What is home without hand-maidens? Blow it!  
We haven't a maid".

Do you think of the blue of the ocean?  
Do you dream of the swing of the sea?  
Does it haunt you, that placid emotion  
Created by afternoon tea?  
When good people asked what the row meant  
Their somnolent ears to invade?  
And nobody thought for a moment  
Of missing a maid?

Where white-falling waters are splashing,  
And the butcher bird flutes on the bough  
And parrots are screaming and flashing  
They cannot enliven me now.  
Though breezes with perfume are laden  
And locusts and grasshoppers hiss,

The world, when one's missing a maiden  
Seems *made* all *amiss*.

Go, search every country and nation,  
Each suburb and city and creek,  
Don't grumble in chill isolation  
Your experience is not unique.  
In England and Euston and Ealing,  
In Bendigo, Bath and Belgrade,  
You're sure to find somebody feeling  
The lack of a maid.

*5 December 1922*

## Bea Schuchard (1910-1981)

### BARBARA HEPWORTH SCULPTURE FILM

A sea-smooth pebble in the hand,  
the restless flowing sea,  
and wings that carve in air  
the living curves of love  
that twine and mingle,  
ever-flowing,  
weaving in my heart  
a pattern of longing,  
a springing to meet  
the joy and the pain and the beauty of life.

My finger tips caress  
the gravid roundness,  
weighted with  
the mystery of birth . . .  
silken-smooth and velvet-soft,  
or rough like ocean rocks,  
or sandy ripples on the shore  
of endless space and time;  
while swirled cavities conceal  
a liquid play of light.

Frail strength of soaring seabird's flight,  
blown spray from seawave's crest,  
white-blossom'd bough that bends to me . . .  
spirit's delight, sea-music wild  
fills Heaven and Earth and praises God.

# W.N. Scott

## THE INNISFAIL SONG

Hey, rain;  
rain comin' down  
on the cane,  
on the roofs of the town.  
Rain on my hands, rain in my face,  
muddy old Innisfail's a muddy wet place,  
hey, rain, hey rain.

Bloke from the west nearly died of fright  
'cause the river rose thirty-five feet last night.

Rain in me beer, rain in me grub,  
and they just fitted anchors to the Garradunga pub.

Johnstone River crocodile living in me frig,  
and a bloody great tree on the Jubilee Bridge.

Monsoon sky has sprung a leak  
from Flying Fish Point to the Millstream Creek.

Clouds in the sky so black and big  
and an old flying fox in a Moreton Bay fig.

Worst wet season we've ever had,  
I'd swim down to Tully but it's just as bloody bad.



## W.N. Scott

### DEAD KANGAROO

Blood in the dust, dust in the ash grey fur,  
ash in the unclosed eyes. Only careless flies  
and the waver of wind lift and stir  
where breath moved once. All sinews slack, old roo  
leaps no more at dusk or dawn, stretches no more  
under the creekbed gums in the hush of noon.

Mortality's an uneasy cloak to wear  
for man alone, on these enormous plains.  
Speargrass and spinifex and gibbers tear  
vanity from the mind, and here's my tale  
ended while I look, and underlined with fear.

Here where the silence dents the eardrums,  
here where the shimmer blinds the eyeballs,  
here naked before myself, I know how the times  
blind and dazzle the eyes, shutter the ears.  
The grim age rushes upon us, shrill, headlong.  
Witless, we stumble to meet our slayer, meet  
what crushes us unheeding, and is gone.

This country strips illusion from the bone,  
and in this death is mirrored part of mine.

## W.N. Scott

### GHOST TOWN

Here the iron lies too dry to rust  
and the wood dries as hard as iron  
and the roofs clang in the dry wind  
and the stones split in the night frost.  
No birds sing, but the plover wails  
in the night hush, and the wild dog's cry  
monotonous from the dry hills  
weaves through the empty streets in the bitter air.  
Thin as wind by wires come the voices  
from ghosts of bearded or painted lips —  
thin on the inward ear, piano tinkle  
from the empty bar room with the wind swung door,  
shattered glass strewn floor; and on the ridges  
silent poppet heads like skeletons  
over the vacant shafts; the quiet graves  
where hope and life, where songs and riches  
died and dried and were deserted then,  
like a convict's bones, with no one to lie beside  
or warm them, playthings of the wind  
in the crow picked sand burnished solitude.

Out here we get like that  
and live on memories of what we were.

## Dan Sheahan (1882-1977)

### A PUB WITHOUT BEER

It is lonely away from your kindred and all  
In the bushland at night when the warrigals call —  
It is sad by the sea where the wild breakers boom  
Or to look on a grave and contemplate doom.  
But there's nothing on earth half as lonely and drear  
As to stand in the bar of a pub without beer.

Madam with her needles sits still by the door —  
The boss smokes in silence — he is joking no more  
There's a faraway look on the face of the bum  
While the barmaid glares down at the point of her thumb.  
The cook has gone cranky and the yardman is queer —  
Oh, a terrible place is a pub without beer.

Once it stood by the wayside all stately and proud —  
'Twas a home to the loafers — a joy to the crowd —  
Now all silent the roof-tree that oftentimes rang  
When the navvies were paid and the cane-cutters sang.  
Some are sleeping their last in the land far from here  
And I feel all alone in a pub without beer.

They can hang to their coupons for sugar and tea  
And the shortage of sandshoes does not worry me —  
And though benzine and razors be both frozen stiff  
What is wrong with the horse and the old-fashioned ziff.  
'Mid the worries of war there's but one thing I fear  
'Tis to stand in the bar of a pub without beer.

Oh, you brew of brown barley, what charm is thine?  
'Neath thy spell men grow happy and cease to repine.  
The cowards become brave and the weak become strong,  
The dour and the grumpy burst forth into song.  
If there's aught to resemble high heaven down here  
'Tis the palace of joy where they ladle out beer.

# Paul Sherman

## IN CHILLAGOE CAVES

It is like entering an Eastern temple.  
Barefoot, blessing the frailty of the flowstone,  
we walk the underground aisles, electric-candled.  
But the statuary is named in Christian terms.

This is the grotto of the Gold Madonna  
this sanctuary of medieval marble  
where stalactite has married stalagmite  
in virgin bonds, crowned with frozen flowers.

The guide's gregorian chant moves down the aisle  
and I am left alone, a nervous barefoot friar.  
A gargoyle comes to life, stutters on leather wings  
and squeals with radar speed into the dark.

Through these cold catacombs of weeping stone  
I grope like Orpheus up towards the sun.  
Whose is the shadow closely marking mine?  
Who the Eurydice I dare not turn to claim?

The part of me I always leave behind  
still underground, regards the gothic rock  
and sees the braids that break the roof of the cave  
the braids of the roots under the growing tree.

## Salvatore Sorbello

### PICASSO'S OLD MAN

Wretched, decayed prematurely.  
Squeezed into a corner  
Burdened with misery  
With only a guitar for a friend  
And no voice with which to sing.  
A poem in black and white  
A caricature of what remains  
When most is gone.

What luckless story have you  
Which has so eaten away at your spirit  
Distorted your frame  
Emaciated your mind  
Made bitter from sweet  
Remorseful from rejoiceful  
Left you wasted, abandoned  
And in pain  
Devoid of hope  
Waiting to greet death  
Bow down and kiss it  
As a saviour.

## Janice Starck

### SEA WIFE

She offers her land bound heart  
to the man whose love only knows  
the curl of the ocean's shapes  
and the shadows of night, teasing  
gestures and images like her.

He returns. Some Nereus she imagines  
but gaunt as the trawler takings.  
A season of angry spume and spent muscle.

Gifts he showers upon her  
like memories in spring.  
The dance of vagrant ripples  
bursting like fledgling waves  
mothered by dolphins  
and tempered by the wind.

She is always there waiting like the  
brown path through the green field  
to the gate with its rash-red on blue  
and the eczema'd paint on the house  
where the sun curls its lonely fingers  
around her heart until he returns.

## Janice Starck

### COMMUNION

A black man stood at my doorway  
and cast an eye toward the hills  
of lush rainforest, dripping  
and steaming from the morning rain.

With all the load of grief,  
his hat clutched raggedly to his heart  
he offered up the niceties of the day.  
His idiosyncratic car and kids  
the mosquitoes and their sharp  
reminders of another reality,  
until the real force of his visit  
spilled into the fresh jungle air  
soothing the knotting of his heart  
and wringing hand that fell open,  
vulnerable as a flower  
to touch my arm and convey  
unspoken words, his brother's death.

## Vanessa Stevens

### THE CALL FOR THE YOUNG

I hear the call of my ancestors  
Oh! A pitiful cry;  
They chanted the songs which belonged to our tribe  
Oh! A sorrowful song.  
I hear the slow shuffle of their dancing feet  
To the droning sounds of the forgotten tunes.

I hear the call of my ancestors  
Oh! An angry cry;  
I have missed out on my traditional learnings  
And know of only the white child's mind.



## Jeremy Tager

### THE MATHEMATICIAN

No one will speak to you now —  
not after the dead were found  
in your sitting room  
drinking daquiries  
and playing party games  
with mirrors.

No one will be seen with you  
after you described murder  
as love on a slippery floor.

You have exhausted the equations,  
examined the parameters  
and found there were no limits  
only sunken boats  
in the bath, glasses  
filled with tokens.

You incline towards stasis  
but that is simply because  
you awakened drunk  
and wedged between two walls.

No one will recognize you now;  
your face is a perpetual  
and enraged metaphor  
and your hands are too  
abstract to open doors.

You sit in the dark  
exhume parabolas and lines  
of rhetoric  
and wait for a delivery of ducks  
or guns  
or children with their feet on fire.

No one will tell you where you are;  
you search for words  
and find only telephones  
whole vocabularies articulate  
themselves in silence.  
You watch from beneath the bed  
bewildered and almost tame.  
Soon you will scratch your name  
into the wood and hope  
there will be someone to welcome you  
long after the last words have gone home.

## Jeremy Tager

### THE JOURNEYER

Ultimately, all our battles are fought  
with gravity, our tenure only as a  
falling body, an equation  
of inevitable collisions.

Ultimately, we feel the weight of our shoes  
and the conspiracy of planets.  
Even our names begin to drag  
and sometimes even the soldiers  
move with the patience and tedium of chairs.

Despite this, I know that pieces of sky  
occasionally float to the surface,  
whole topographies rise like moons.

And so, journeys are planned  
maps examined.  
Seductions move through us  
weightless, smelling of fog.

I know of only one route  
and all my clothes are badly made.  
There are numerous stops  
and numerous signs of decay.  
This landscape persists —  
even in the early hours  
you can hear trains.

You dismantle the scene without pain,  
pull it apart  
the mechanism scattered across the floor  
until there is no word left  
to describe your death  
and the moment  
when you will finally  
sink into the sea.

## Arthur Howarde Tilse (1911-74)

### OPIUM

Enmeshed in silken threads of opium's snare,  
I pass my time among the perilous ways  
Of glorious nights, and suffering vagrant days,  
Alternately in rapture and despair —  
Prince of my fate, then pawn in every game . . .  
My clothes are shabby and my restless feet  
Go drifting down a never-ending street,  
Seeking the solace which I cannot name.  
Sometimes, I seek the harbour and the ships,  
Searching the docks and taverns for some well-known face  
Waiting in agony upon some vendor's grace —  
An urgent question ever on my lips.  
Then suddenly my head rings like a bell,  
My quest is over, and at last — at last  
My urgent wanderings are over, past —  
Anticipation wings me upward out of Hell!

My thoughts are glass — inconsequential, light,  
I am afloat in an unfathomed sea —  
The stars of Heaven are shining bright on me,  
And brittle dreams drift round me all the night.

## Arthur Howarde Tilse

### THE VETERANS

They sit apart, reliving old campaigns,  
    The Modder River, Spion Kop, Mafeking . . .  
    Each adding to the telling of the tale  
Some half-remembered half-forgotten thing,  
    Some deed of Empire when Victoria was Queen,  
And soldiering was soldiering! Ah yes!  
    And to be British were itself enough  
To get a man through almost any mess!  
Now faded ribbons from forgotten wars  
    Are gently brushed and pressed back into place,  
And drooping shoulders squared, as once again  
    Dulled eyes re-sparkle in each wrinkled face.  
Forgotten men . . . the world has passed them by,  
    And greater wars have made their day a jest.  
Yet, gently dreaming in the leafy shade,  
    They march again to win fresh victories,  
Before that last "Lights Out" calls them to rest.

## Gerry Turcotte

### GREAT BARRIER REEF

An hour off Michaelmas Cay  
We talked of coral and rusted anchors —  
And most spoke of fear,  
Poor visibility,  
Of what could slither like a long dark arm,  
Out of shadows,  
And touch you before you knew.

Some of us were pale,  
Others proffered to the sun's white strokes  
Noses like peeled onions.

Once there,  
Our flotsam fears about us  
And the threat beneath,  
We vied for position on aquamarine ladders.

Submerged, we opened our minds  
To the cool salt touch  
And trembled at the ocean's games  
Thinking all the while of sharks.

But when, Zeppelin-like,  
One suddenly sailed past,  
Not a coward among us  
Failed to follow it down.

# Frederic Charles Urquhart (1858-1935)

## THE NIGHT WATCH

The "Boss" has turned in and is fast asleep,  
Two horses around are tramping;  
Their riders, two men in cabbage-tree hats,  
Are silently watching the travelling "fats"  
As the mob is quietly camping.

Poker Jem has allowed his thoughts  
Backward to go a-roving,  
To the routine flush that took him down,  
And forced him forthwith to clear from town,  
And go once more a-droving.

Gentleman Jack is thinking of home  
And the girl he ought to have married,  
And the kind of a man he might have been  
If the mess he got into had been foreseen,  
And his life had not all miscarried.

Jem reckons that he's had darned hard luck,  
And consigns to several places  
The fellow who cleaned him out with a smile,  
When he stood to win such a tidy pile  
On his hand, which held four aces.

Jack thinks that the ways of the world are queer,  
And its ups and downs are curious;  
There's a kind of happiness everywhere;  
The majority don't much know or care  
If it's true or if it's spurious.

Crack! goes a branch from that old dead tree,  
And with instantaneous rattle,  
Two thousand feet strike the gravelly ground,  
And with one thundering rush of sound  
Away go the frightened cattle.

Gone are the thoughts of the gambling game,  
    And the sentimental musing,  
As they ride for their lives, to save the loss  
Of the mob behind, they can hear the "Boss"  
    All created things abusing.

A rattling gallop they have in the dark,  
    No thought of their danger taking,  
They wheel them at last on the homeward track,  
And with patient driving they bring them back  
    As daylight is slowly breaking.



# Val Vallis

## NAVAL EXERCISE 1963

### 1. Hayman to Hook Island

Already it is forgotten, as the sand is forgotten  
Tumbled into the pitfall of a holiday beach  
And only a childhood memory avoids  
The lair of driftwood, paper and the hole,  
The glass, the accident and the blood destroying  
The white sea and the sky that summer day.  
It is that time again. The season's appetite  
Digesting pre-digested tourists. The minted sun  
Bleaches the unwilting paper tropic flowers —  
The beer cans and the broken bottles shy  
Beneath the shore-line cottonwoods.

Then the south-easter  
Spoiling everything, though one can sun-tan overcast;  
Lucky, too, the indoor sport's arranged;  
And from the "rec-hut" seeing the grey line  
On the horizon, that spore of turbulent,  
Bruised flesh of cloud, infecting sky and sea.

Taipan of south easter, vicious, unpredictable.  
Already the fishermen of Bowen have moved their boats  
Into the creek. The finger of the damp  
Requires no cautious forecast to direct it —  
"Unsafe for small craft." In that bruise of grey  
There's blood to be let, one vein in the proud flesh.  
Prouder than wind, the navy exercises.  
Did the cartographers  
Of cupids, demons sell their souls to be in league  
With divining powers? The charts that Flinders drew  
Showed "rippings" here. The naval maps delete  
Archaic references and demons both.

Well I remember as a child the horseboats anchoring  
In Gladstone harbour without pilotage —  
Two hawsers and the wharf-road dark with coolies

In twenty minutes. And the Anzac berthing  
 On a clear light-northerly day, for an hour manoeuvring  
 Against the commonsense of flooding tides —  
 Crashed piles, raised decking, dented bows,  
 But all according to the regulations.  
 There is no regulation that provides  
 Respect for the simple wisdom of the sea  
 That only working it accrues to men afraid  
 As often as fearless. Contour of island,  
 Funnelled flood and meeting backwater refute  
 The oracle of plotted isobars —  
 Amend the naval exercise!  
 “Exact for Sailing” says the Admiralty . . .

As Eliot might say “Between the Words  
 And the Event”, “Death by Water” —  
 Just words — there are no symbols for stupidity;  
 Only monuments.

## 2. The Enquiry

Put out the chairs from Wilder’s “Town”  
 In neat and tidy rows. They’ll stand for people  
 At this most public hearing  
 Of unheeded warnings, tackle left to rot —  
 And not squeak comment.

Not death, “off Hayman Island”!

My “Fishing Season” back in ’61,  
 Reviewed by Evan Jones, recalled an earlier death  
 By drowning off the Gladstone coast. “Such things” he said  
 “Are for the Aran Islands, not for here.”  
 Would God the man’s omniscience were true  
 And we, like Dassin’s harlot, could applaud  
 The total company, including the five boys  
 For their performance in this comedy of errors.

No, no, their deaths are funnelled in the winds  
 That seep in through the cracks of our closed hearts.

Fold up the chairs of Wilder's Town.  
No-one's to blame; the weather was exact  
For Death.

3. Mrs Mulvany's Lament

O my boy, my son — patches of love in the dark  
The words are fretted away in the night.  
I can imagine (often did your death by  
Drowning), but not this death,  
Half submerged, in a sunken, broken boat;

Cannot frame

The loneliness of your four night tears at sea,  
And your friends slipping into the black waves.  
My love went out to you always across the waters,  
But what can it do against the funnelling sea  
Or hold last light to the edge of a breaking wave?

There is no image for the dark, for the cold that the mind  
Clamps to the heart's warmth; only numb speech  
As you bear down through those straits of stone.

## Brian Vrepon (1882-1995)

### THE CRABS

The crabs are lunching;  
An hour I've watched, and still they eat,  
Pincering microcosms from the scaly rocks,  
Timed to split-second mouth shutterings  
Like Chinamen with chop-sticks;  
No disrespect, but Asian they look,  
And I on an overleaning rock am humbled.

Such industry is not mine,  
Such battering I could not suffer.  
The waves hiss and bury the feeders three feet deep,  
Avalanches fall on their apparent frailty,  
The rock bares, the sea sucks back,  
And I laugh to see the crabs uninterruptedly feeding;  
The littlest baby crab holds miraculously rock fast,  
Centuried to sea-wash,  
Insolently safe, insolently chop-stick lunching  
Against the might of the sea.

I laugh, knowing crabs wiser than man;  
When man, suicided from his home, the earth,  
Shall see no lord sun spray gold on wave,  
Nor moons come like vespers, go in full song,  
Crabs still will ply their chop-sticks,  
Knowing nor caring that man is dust.

## Brian Vrepon

### THE FISHERS

Two men stood thigh-deep in the sea,  
Their bodies braced against the pounding surf,  
Hauling a net of fishes;  
Heel-deep in shifting sand, inch by inch the fishers neared the shore,  
For heavy was the brown net with sea and fishes,  
And the pushing of a great sea-wind against them,  
But already gleamed the silver sequins of creatures of the sea,  
Their round eyes goggling, and mouths agape for breath.

The two men leant against the wall of wind,  
Calm in the sureness of their plunder,  
And one, the taller by a head, cried: "John,  
The net is heavy with big fishes",  
And laughed and hummed a chanty.

But the man John did not hear, for the wind had him,  
Whispering the lisp of his dead love of the spring,  
The wind whipped him, but the fires of his heart were drowned,  
And the fisher John fished not for fishes,  
Nor braced his thighs against the piling sea,  
But loosed his tug and let the net go slack,  
And the other cried: "John, the net is loose",  
And urged him stiffen 'gainst the fish escape.

The man John heard the voice as one hears shells  
Murmuring of things long gone —  
Irredeemable springs, and love's laughter dead,  
And John the fisher let his net-hold go,  
And a great surf took his feet, and tangled them,  
Wrapping him to his thighs in twisted flax,  
And drew him down,  
And sucked him to the deeps.  
The net unbent its brown salt length,  
And heavy of its trove of man and fishes,  
Came shorewards inch by inch to ankle shallows.

While John the fisher lay so still upon the sands,  
The fishes quivered, then blindly stared;  
So stared the man John — at some far nothingness,  
Where the fishes' breath slept, and his one spring song.

# Lyndon Walker

## APATHY

The other day  
i was a student visiting Kent State  
when i was shot  
by a man i was surrounding  
100 yards away  
across an open football field.

The tears  
of the girl i met on the bus  
cooled down my blood,  
because she knew  
i hadn't done  
or meant to do  
any harm to any one . . .  
but that's all right.

The other day  
i was a child in Vietnam  
that a man had mown down  
because he didn't feel fine  
about what the war  
had done to his friends . . .  
but that's O.K.

What really hurts  
is when  
i'm a poet in Townsville  
reading my poems  
to blank minds and faces.

# Lyndon Walker

## THE FISHERMAN

As he opened them  
each was like a silver-purse  
lined with red privacy  
of internal affairs.

The child stood silent in the bows  
white-faced, watching,  
clutched tightly to his chest  
a bunch of blue fingers.

Like unloved toys  
the guts were flung  
and landed  
on the lumpy darkness of the water  
in random decoration.

In the early hours  
that birth and death  
choose  
he cleans another fish  
and wipes the blood from his knife  
on the soft underbelly  
of the moon.



# Lyndon Walker

## THREE SEPARATE PIECES

### 1. THE FIRST PIECE

In Hong Kong the cliffs are made of people, and washing flies from the clefts and crags. Whole families, eagle-like, nest in its eyries. Bat tribes and mouse clans are lost in its caverns. Asian rabbit people serious, Lewis Carroll-convinced, of the importance of each small mission scurry back and forth inside the complex vastness of concrete warrens. These huge hives that crowd the coast are bewilderingly similar and yet each drone can find his own, his honey home, at the sauna end of an east-west hybrid, pedal-cycle day. He weaves his way among the twin teeming towers till he scents the moray that is imperceptibly uniquely his and laying down his guard rests on the fortress balcony gazing protectively down to the ant children playing on the valley roads far below.

### 2. TOWNSVILLE SUMMER

We'd been sucked into that summertime like logs upon a floodstream. It was one of those listless youthful summers in which the weekends seemed to drag, squint-eyed, on forever. We, the shiftless kids, would stand on the corner in hot stillness watching the heat shimmering from the tar of the road and shuffle, from one foot to the other, in the orange talcum powder dust of the north. All this inactivity was presided over by the biggest, hottest, most painted sun you've ever seen.

### 3. ROLLING STONES

I imagined the incident of the midnight rockfall. Those huge, smooth and onionated boulders bouncing endlessly down the cliff in the sparkling moonlight. I saw it all slowly. Their solid, organic, pre-historic suicide as the boulders rolled themselves slowly to the edge of the cliff in the blue night and with personal feeling but military precision catapulted themselves into space to drift downward through the offshore breeze as it cooled their hair and they fell for hours, gathering speed and momentum until finally in supplication, they smashed themselves on that lonely beach or gave themselves to the deep, green, rolling ocean.

## Lesley Whitteker

### THE WRECK

These were eyes and smiles of happy tourists  
But rubbing my stinging eyes,  
Dampened with salty spray,  
They pass through some sea-change,  
And in the gauzy mirror mist  
The crew of some forgotten barque  
Cries mercy from the sea's cold rage.

Tossed up in childish giant's hand,  
Thrown back and forth like marbles  
Rolling on slanted board,  
Pitched and tipped at game:  
"Hold hard, lads!" — all sick as dogs,  
Striving to end in pain and fear.

And all to reach a land hostile  
As that infernal creature  
Which foully suckles its spinied young:  
Faces rise and fall in terror,  
Captain, silent, strains at wheel,  
Cabin boy cries in the corner  
Between his retchings.

Beneath, the ageless deep awaits,  
A Paradise of coral thorns  
And angel-fish . . . .

## Lesley Whitteker

### THE THREE TREE FROGS

I watched  
Three fat green tree frogs; comfortably  
“At home” to flying-ants & glow-worms,  
Black bugs & smaller speckled moths:  
All welcome to the Tree Frog Inn.

By night, fleshy pallid paws  
Spreadeagled on the windowpane,  
Tongues pinkly flicking smallfry in.  
They’d sit atop each other’s face for a feed.

By day, and burning heat  
Bodies olive pale & dried, they squeezed,  
Pasted themselves into cracks, mouths half ajar,  
Still as death till dark & the free lunch.

All through the breathless humid time I watched;  
Eating, sleeping: sleeping, eating;  
That’s life to tree frogs (slightly tame).

And, in the dry, they died.

## Jena Woodhouse

### THE RAINBIRD

Calling up the rain at dead of night  
you take me back to rainless summer mornings  
by the tank-stand      watching as the light  
blinked eyes and stretched to shake itself awake  
and flung a drowsy arm across the stubble,  
rolling back the eiderdown of shadows,  
signalling the birds to a crescendo.

I heard those birds, your ancestors or cousins,  
calling from the mulberry tree      mid-morning      smoko-time;  
no motors throbbed; the distant breakers pulsed against the dunes  
and then your cry, each note evoking water,  
made invocation to an empty sky.

The mountain lounging on its elbow seemed to hear  
but ventured no reply to your monotonous appeal;  
now, some generations later in the rainbird family tree,  
you punctuate the night's unnerving quiet with that same cry:  
is your pleasure in the formula for asking,  
or is it in awaiting a reply?

## Jena Woodhouse

### FARMER'S DAUGHTER

She looked proud and graceful  
at the school centenary,  
her head and coils of hair  
expressing beautiful disdain.

Small towns have long memories  
and nourish them with secrets.  
Everybody knew about  
her married man, their meetings.

The green banana fronds cast  
shadows shaped like war canoes,  
and in the quiet farmhouse, doors  
breathed in to readmit her.

When she, without her seven  
children, passed me in the crowd,  
I thought I saw a coronet  
of flowers in her hair.

## Barrie B. Woolston

### ANOTHER CELL

Four walls the obvious place to start but this one has five: the fifth chopping off a corner, a facade for the plumbing. That still leaves three corners to stand in — which as a rule are stationary but occasionally they shrink slightly inward, string a little more pressure about the head like a hat or headband too tight. The floor is normal enough if you're used to seeing years and years and years of shuffling etched aimlessly into patched peeled paintwork. No doubt countless words have been ground under foot on this floor — consonants in sweat, vowels in tears, but I wonder if poetry has seeped from the walls, leapt from the floor into anyone's blood like this before?

## Barrie B. Woolston

### MUSICAL NOTES

Click, the tape is rolling, shredding  
the air in personal spaces quickly to

quivering ribbons. You warm up, pluck  
from your head shards of friction and

bother. The forceful rage of Clapton's  
blues — an ideal backdrop for ruthless

morning. A song until his voice submits,  
diminishes, is enveloped by guitar.

Lyrics as springboard for the soul and  
warm-up for the fingers, picking loosely

yet tight the screaming sometimes weeping  
guitar. It's as if the air that you breathe,

the thoughts you almost have, are sliced,  
rationed, and allotted chunk by chunk

as carved, until fade, click, the song  
has ended, the walls still stand.