

LES MURRAY



SELECTED POEMS

1964 - 2010



## Tableau In January

January, noon. The idle length of a street ...  
 There is more light than world, and what few outlines  
 Persist forget their meaning in the heat.

The metal sea's too bright to walk upon.  
 Thoughts pass, and figment shops, and random glimmers  
 From crystals in the concrete, and oiled swimmers.  
 The sky does not exist when it's outshone.

On the dazed white sand, umbrellas stiffly lean  
 To pose and impose their shade upon the shifting  
 Languor of bodies and glare, and all the sifting  
 Motes of dim music mingled with the scene  
 Fade into summer, January, drifting ...

Things drift apart, significances fade.  
 The returning street, once blue, is taut with azure  
 Tension between persistence and erasure.  
 In the cool of doorways, shirts drink lemonade.

January, noon. The unreal, idle street.  
 There is more light than world. The poet, smiling,  
 Takes his soft lines and bends them till they meet.

from *The Ilex Tree* (1965)

## Cave Divers near Mount Gambier

Chenille-skinned people are counting under the countryside  
on resurrections by truck light off among the pines.

Here in the first paddocks, where winter comes ashore,  
mild duckweed ponds are skylights of a filled kingdom

and what their gaze absorbs may float up districts away.  
White men with scorches of hair approach that water,

zip into black, upturn large flap feet and free-fall  
away, their mouths crammed full. Crystalline polyps

of their breathing blossom for a while, as they disturb  
algal screens, extinct kangaroos, eels of liquorice colour

then, with the portable greening stars they carry under,  
these vanish, as the divers undergo tight anti-births

into the vaults and profound domes of the limestone.  
Here, approaching the heart of the poem they embody

and thereby make the gliding cavern-world embody,  
they have to keep time with themselves, and be dull often

with its daylight logic—since to dream it fully  
might leave them sprawl on the void clang of their tanks,

their faceplates glazing an unfocused dreadful portrait  
at the apex of a steeple that does not reach the day.

from *Dog Fox Field* (1990)

## The Burning Truck

It began at dawn with fighter planes:  
 they came in off the sea and didn't rise,  
 they leaped the sandbar one and one and one  
 coming so fast the crockery they shook down  
 off my kitchen shelves was spinning in the air  
 when they were gone.

They came in off the sea and drew a wave  
 of lagging cannon-shells across our roofs.  
 Windows spat glass, a truck took sudden fire,  
 out leaped the driver, but the truck ran on,  
 growing enormous, shambling by our street-doors,  
 coming and coming ...

By every right in town, by every average  
 we knew of in the world, it had to stop,  
 fetch up against a building, fall to rubble  
 from pure force of burning, for its whole  
 body and substance were consumed with heat  
 but it would not stop.

And all of us who knew our place and prayers  
 clutched our verandah-rails and window-sills,  
 begging that truck between our teeth to halt,  
 keep going, vanish, strike ... but set us free.  
 And then we saw the wild boys of the street  
 go running after it.

And as they followed, cheering, on it crept,  
 windshield melting now, canopy-frame a cage  
 torn by gorillas of flame, and it kept on  
 over the tramlines, past the church, on past  
 the last lit windows, and then out of the world  
 with its disciples.

from *The Ilex Tree* (1965)

## Spring Hail

This is for spring and hail, that you may remember:  
for a boy long ago, and a pony that could fly.

We had huddled together a long time in the shed  
in the scent of vanished corn and wild bush birds,  
and then the hammering faltered, and the torn  
cobwebs ceased their quivering and hung still  
from the nested rafters. We became uneasy  
at the silence that grew about us, and came out.

The beaded violence had ceased. Fresh-minted hills  
smoked, and the heavens swirled and blew away.  
The paddocks were endless again, and all around  
leaves lay beneath their trees, and cakes of moss.  
Sheep trotted and propped, and shook out ice from their wool.  
The hard blue highway that had carried us there  
fumed as we crossed it, and the hail I scooped  
from underfoot still bore the taste of sky  
and hurt my teeth, and crackled as we walked.

This is for spring and hail, that you may remember  
a boy long ago, and a pony that could fly.

With the creak and stop of a gate, we started to trespass:  
my pony bent his head and drank up grass  
while I ate ice, and wandered, and ate ice.  
There was a peach tree growing wild by a bank  
and under it and round, sweet dented fruit  
weeping pale juice amongst hail-shotten leaves,  
and this I picked up and ate till I was filled.

I sat on a log then, listening with my skin  
to the secret feast of the sun, to the long wet worms  
at work in the earth, and, deeper down, the stones  
beneath the earth, uneasy that their sleep  
should be troubled by dreams of water soaking down,  
and I heard with my ears the creek on its bed of mould  
moving and passing with a mothering sound.

This is for spring and hail, that you may remember  
a boy long ago on a pony that could fly.

My pony came up then and stood by me,  
waiting to be gone. The sky was now  
spotless from dome to earth, and balanced there  
on the cutting-edge of mountains. It was time  
to leap to the saddle and go, a thunderbolt whirling  
sheep and saplings behind, and the rearing fence  
that we took at a bound, and the old, abandoned shed  
forgotten behind, and the paddock forgotten behind.  
Time to shatter peace and lean into spring  
as into a battering wind, and be rapidly gone.

It was time, high time, the highest and only time  
to stand in the stirrups and shout out, blind with wind  
for the height and clatter of ridges to be topped  
and the racing downward after through the lands  
of floating green and bridges and flickering trees.  
It was time, as never again it was time  
to pull the bridle up, so the racketing hooves  
fell silent as we ascended from the hill  
above the farms, far up to where the hail  
formed and hung weightless in the upper air,  
charting the birdless winds with silver roads  
for us to follow and be utterly gone.

This is for spring and hail, that you may remember  
a boy and a pony long ago who could fly.

from *The Ilex Tree* (1965)

## The Sleepout

Childhood sleeps in a verandah room  
in an iron bed close to the wall  
where the winter over the railing  
swelled the blind on its timber boom

and splinters picked lint off warm linen  
and the stars were out over the hill;  
then one wall of the room was forest  
and all things in there were to come.

Breathings climbed up on the verandah  
when dark cattle rubbed at the corner  
and sometimes dim towering rain stood  
for forest, and the dry cave hunched woollen.

Inside the forest was lamplit  
along tracks to a starry creek bed  
and beyond lay the never-fenced country,  
its full billabongs all surrounded

by animals and birds, in loud crustings,  
and sometimes kept leaping up amongst them.  
And out there, to kindle whenever  
dark found it, hung the daylight moon.

from *The Daylight Moon*, 1987



A house in New South Wales with a verandah

## Midnight Lake<sup>1</sup>

Little boy blue, four hours till dawn.  
Your bed's a cement bag, your plastic is torn.

Your breakfast was tap water, dinner was sleep;  
you are the faith your olds couldn't keep.

In your bunny rug room there were toys on the floor  
but nothing is obvious when people get poor

and newspaper crackles next to your skin.  
You're a newspaper fairytale now, Tommy Thin,

a postnatal abortion, slick outer space thing,  
you run like a pinball BING! smack crack BING!

then, strung out and spotty, you wriggle and sigh  
and kiss all the fellows and make them all die.

from *Dog Fox Field* (1990)

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<sup>1</sup> An allusion to "Homeless", a song by the South African group Ladysmith Black Mambazo: "Homeless, homeless / Moonlight sleeping on a midnight lake."

## The Tin Wash Dish

Lank poverty, dank poverty,  
 its pants wear through at fork and knee.  
 It warms its hands over burning shames,  
 refers to its fate as Them and He  
 and delights in things by their hard names:  
 rag and toejam, feed and paw—  
 don't guts that down, there ain't no more!  
 Dank poverty, rank poverty,  
 it hums with a grim fidelity  
 like wood-rot with a hint of orifice,  
 wet newspaper jammed in the gaps of artifice,  
 and disgusts us into fierce loyalty.  
 It's never the fault of those you love:  
 Poverty comes down from above.  
 Let it dance chairs and smash the door,  
 It arises from all that went before  
 And every outsider's the enemy—  
 Jesus Christ turned this over with his stick  
 And knights and philosophers turned it back.  
 Rank poverty, lank poverty,  
 chafe in its crotch and sores in its hair,  
 still a window's clean if it's made of air,  
 not webby silver like a sleeve.  
 Watch out if this does well at school  
 and has to leave and longs to leave:  
 someone, sometime, will have to pay.  
 Shave with toilet soap, run to flesh,  
 astound the nation, rule the army,  
 still you wait for the day you'll be sent back  
 where books or toys on the floor are rubbish  
 and no one's allowed to come and play  
 because home calls itself a shack  
 and hot water crinkles in the tin wash dish.

from *Dog Fox Field* (1990)

## Noonday Axeman

Axe-fall, echo and silence. Noonday silence.  
Two miles from here, it is the twentieth century:  
cars on the bitumen, powerlines vaulting the farms.  
Here, with my axe, I am chopping into the stillness.

Axe-fall, echo and silence. I pause, roll tobacco,  
twist a cigarette, lick it. All is still.  
I lean on my axe. A cloud of fragrant leaves  
hangs over me moveless, pierced everywhere by sky.

Here, I remember all of a hundred years:  
candleflame, still night, frost and cattle bells,  
the draywheels' silence in our ears,<sup>2</sup>  
and the first red cattle spreading through the hills

and my great-great-grandfather here with his first sons,  
who would grow old, still speaking with his Scots accent,  
having never seen those highlands that they sang of.  
a hundred years. I stand and smoke in the silence.

A hundred years of clearing, splitting, sawing,  
a hundred years of timbermen, ringbarkers,<sup>3</sup> fencers  
and women in kitchens, stoking loud iron stoves  
year in, year out, and singing old songs to their children

have made this silence human and familiar  
no farther than where the farms rise into foothills,  
and, in that time, how many sought their graves  
or fled to the cities, maddened by this stillness?

Things are so wordless. These two opposing scarves  
I have cut in my red-gum squeeze out jewels of sap  
and stare. And soon, with a few more axe-strokes,  
the tree will grow troubled, tremble, shift its crown

and, leaning slowly, gather speed and colossally  
crash down and lie between the standing trunks.  
And then, I know, of the knowledge that led my forebears  
to drink and black rage and wordlessness, there will be silence.

After the tree falls, there will reign the same silence  
as stuns and spurs us, enraptures and defeats us,  
as seems to some a challenge, and seems to others  
to be waiting here for something beyond imagining.

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<sup>2</sup> Draywheel: (Australian) a dray is a two-wheeled cart, used for delivering heavy loads.

<sup>3</sup> Ringbark: v. to remove rings of bark from a tree in order to kill it. Ringbarking is used to clear large areas of woodland.

Axe-fall, echo and silence. Unhuman silence.  
 A stone cracks in the heat. Through the still twigs, radiance  
 stings at my eyes. I rub a damp brow with a handkerchief  
 and chop on into the stillness. Axe-fall and echo.

The great mast murmurs now. The scarves in its trunk  
 crackle and squeak now, crack and increase as the hushing  
 weight of high branches heels outward, and commences  
 tearing and falling, and the collapse is tremendous.

Twigs fly, leaves pass puff and subside. The severed trunk  
 slips off its stump and drops upon its shadow.  
 And then there is no more. The stillness is there  
 as ever. And I fall to lopping branches.



Axe-fall, echo and silence. It will be centuries  
 before many men are truly at home in this country,  
 and yet, there have always been some, in each generation,  
 there have always been some who could live in the presence of silence.

And some, I have known them, men with gentle broad hands,  
 who would die if removed from these unpeopled places,  
 some again I have seen, bemused and shy in the cities,  
 you have built against silence, dumbly trudging through noise

past the railway stations, looking up through the traffic  
at the smoky halls, dreaming of journeys, of stepping  
down from the train at some upland stop to recover  
the crush of dry grass underfoot, the silence of trees.

Axe-fall, echo and silence. Dreaming silence.  
Though I myself run to the cities, I will forever  
be coming back here to walk, knee-deep in ferns,  
up and away from this metropolitan century,

to remember my ancestors, axemen, dairymen, horse-breakers,<sup>4</sup>  
now confined in silence, down with their beards and dreams,  
who, unwilling or rapt, despairing or very patient,  
made what amounts to a human breach in the silence,

made of their lives the rough foundations of legends—  
men must have legends, else they will die of strangeness—  
then died in their turn, each after his own fashion,  
resigned or agonized, from silence into great silence.

Axe-fall, echo and axe-fall. Noonday silence.  
Though I go to the cities, turning my back on these hills,  
for the talk and dazzle of the cities, for the sake of belonging  
for months and years at a time to the twentieth century,

the city will never quite hold me. I will be always  
coming back here on the up-train, peering, leaning  
out of the window to see, on far-off ridges  
the sky between the trees, and over the racket  
of the rails to hear the echo and the silence.

I shoulder my axe and set off home through the stillness.

from *The Ilex Tree* (1965)

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<sup>4</sup> Horsebreaker: A type of horse trainer. To "break" a horse is to teach it to draw or carry.

## As Country Was Slow

Our new motorway  
 is a cross-country fort  
 and we reinforcements  
 speed between earthworks  
 water-sumps and counterscarps,  
 breaking out on wide glimpses,  
 flying the overpasses—

Little paper lanterns  
 march up and down dirt,  
 wrapped round three chopsticks  
 plastic shrub-guards grow bushes  
 to screen the real bush,  
 to hide old towns  
 behind sound-walls and green—

Wildlife crossings underneath  
 the superglued pavement  
 are jeep size; beasts must see  
 nature restart beyond.  
 The roads are our nature  
 shining beyond delay,  
 fretting to race on—

Any check in high speed  
 can bleed into gravel  
 and hang pastel wreaths  
 over roadside crosses.  
 Have you had your scare yet?—  
 It made you a driver  
 not an ever-young name.

We're one Ireland, plus  
 at least six Great Britains  
 welded around Mars  
 and cross-linked by cars—  
 Benzene, diesel, autobahn:  
 they're a German creation,  
 these private world-splicers.

The uncle who farmed our place  
was an Arab of his day  
growing fuel for the horses  
who hauled the roads then.  
1914 ended that. Will I  
see fuel crops come again?  
I'll ride a slow vehicle

before cars are slow  
as country was slow.

from *Taller When Prone* (2010)



"The Rabbiter and his Family" (1938) is by Australian artist Russell Drysdale.

This painting was chosen by Les Murray to accompany "The Tin Wash Dish" in an exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia.

## Lament for the Country Soldiers

The king of honour, louder than of England,  
cried on the young men to a gallant day  
and ate the hearts of those who would not go

for the gathering ranks were the Chosen Company  
that each man in his lifetime seeks, and finds,  
some for an hour, some beyond recall.

When to prove their life, they set their lives at risk  
and in the ruins of horizons died  
one out of four, in the spreading rose of their honour

they didn't see the badge upon their hat  
was the ancient sword that points in all directions.  
The symbol hacked the homesteads even so.

The static farms withstood it to the end,  
the galloping telegrams ceasing, the exchanges  
ringing no more in the night of the stunned violin,

and in the morning of insult, the equal remember  
ribaldry, madness, the wire jerking with friends,  
ironic salutes for the claimants of the fox-hunt

as, camped under tin like rabbiters in death's gully,  
they stemmed the endless weather of grey men and steel  
and, first of all armies, stormed into great fields.

But it was a weight beyond speech, the proven nation,  
on beasts and boys. Newborn experiment withered.  
Dull horror rotting miles wide in the memory of green.

Touching money, the white feather crumpled to ash,  
cold lies grew quickly in the rank decades  
as, far away, the ascendant conquered courage,

and we debauched the faith we were to keep  
with the childless singing on the morning track,  
the Sportsmen's Thousand leaping on the mountains,

now growing remote, beneath their crumbling farms,  
in the district light, their fading companies  
with the king of honour, deeper than of England

though the stones of increase glitter with their names.

from *Poems Against Economics* (1972)

## Flowering Eucalypt in Autumn

That slim creek out of the sky  
 the dried-blood western gum tree  
 is all stir in its high reaches:

its strung haze-blue foliage is dancing  
 points down in breezy mobs, swapping  
 pace and place in an all-over sway

retarded en masse by crimson blossom.  
 Bees still at work up there tack  
 around their exploded furry likeness

and the lawn underneath's a napped rug  
 of eyelash drift, of blooms flared  
 like a sneeze in a redhaired nostril,

minute urns, pinch-sized rockets  
 knocked down by winds, by night-creaking  
 fig-squirting bats, or the daily

parrot gang with green pocketknife wings.  
 Bristling food tough delicate  
 raucous life, each flower comes

as a spray in its own turned vase,  
 a taut starbust, honeyed model  
 of the tree's fragrance crisping in your head.

When the japanese plum tree  
 was shedding in spring, we speculated  
 there among the drizzling petals

what kind of exquisitely precious  
 artistic bloom might be gendered  
 in a pure ethereal compost

of petals potted as they fell.  
 From unpetalled gun-debris  
 we know what is grown continually,

a tower of fabulous swish tatters,  
 a map hoisted upright, a crusted  
 riverbed with up-country show towns.

from *The People's Otherworld* (1983)

## The Forest Hit by Modern Use

The forest, hit by modern use,  
stands graced with damage.

Angled plaques  
tilt everywhere, with graphic needle crowns  
and trinket saps fixed round their year;  
vines spiderweb, flowering, over smashed  
intricacies; long rides appear.

Dense growths that were always underbrush  
expand in the light, beside bulldozers'  
imprinted machine-gun belts of spoor.

Now the sun's in, through breaks and jags,  
culled slopes are jammed with replacement; green  
and whipstick saplings, every one out  
to shade the rest to death.

Scabbed chain  
feeds leaf-mould its taut rain-cold solution;  
bared creeks wash gold; kingfishers hover.

There is still great height: all through the hills  
spared hierarchs toughen to the wind  
around the punk hearts that got them spared  
and scatter seed down the logging roads.

Grease-fungi, scrolls, clenched pipes of bark:  
the forest will now be kept like this  
for a long time. There are rooms in it  
and, paradox for mystery, birds  
too tiny, now that we see them, for  
their amplitude and carrying flash of song.

On a stump, a sea eagle eats by lengths  
their enemy, a coil-whipping dry land fish,  
and voids white size to make room for it.

from *The People's Otherworld* (1983)

## The Mitchells

I am seeing this: two men are sitting on a pole  
they have dug a hole for and will, after dinner, raise  
I think for wires. Water boils in a prune tin.  
Bees hum their shift in unthinning mists of white

bursaria<sup>5</sup> blossom, under the noon of wattles.<sup>6</sup>  
The men eat big meat sandwiches out of a styrofoam  
box with a handle. One is overheard saying:  
*drought that year. Yes. Like trying to farm the road.*

The first man, if asked, would say *I'm one of the Mitchells*.  
The other would gaze for a while, dried leaves in his palm,  
and looking up, with pain and subtle amusement,  
say *I'm one of the Mitchells*. Of the pair, one has been rich  
but never stopped wearing his oil-stained felt hat. Nearly everything  
they say is ritual. Sometimes the scene is an avenue.

from *Ethnic Radio* (1977)



"Morning" by S.T. Gill (1870)

<sup>5</sup> Bursaria: blackthorn, a thorny shrub bearing white flowers.

<sup>6</sup> Wattle: an Australian acacia with long pliant branches and cream, yellow, or golden flowers.

## Performance

I starred that night, I shone:  
 I was footwork and firework in one,  
  
 a rocket that wriggled up and shot  
 darkness with a parasol of brilliants  
 and a peewee<sup>7</sup> descant on a flung bit;  
 I was busters<sup>8</sup> of glitter-bombs expanding  
 to mantle and aurora from a crown,  
 I was fouettés,<sup>9</sup> falls of blazing paint,  
 para-flares spot-welding cloudy heaven,  
 loose gold off fierce toeholds of white,  
 a finale red-tongued as a haka<sup>10</sup> leap:  
 that too was a butt of all right!

As usual after any triumph, I was  
 of course, inconsolable.

from *Subhuman Redneck Poems* (1996)

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<sup>7</sup> Peewee: lapwing, a bird noted for its load call. Hence "descant".

<sup>8</sup> Buster: cold regional wind of Southern and South East Australia.

<sup>9</sup> Fouetté: (in ballet) a pirouette performed with a circular whipping movement of the raised leg to the side.

<sup>10</sup> Haka: a ceremonial Maori dance accompanied by chanting.

## Comete

Uphill in Melbourne on a beautiful day  
a woman is walking ahead of her hair.  
Like teak oiled soft to fracture and sway  
it hung to her heels and seconded her  
as a pencilled retinue, an unscrolling title  
to ploughland, edged with ripe rows of dress,  
a sheathed wing that couldn't fly her at all,  
only itself, loosely, and her spirits.

A largesse  
of life and self, brushed all calm and out,  
its abstracted attempts on her mouth weren't seen,  
not its showering, its tenting. Just the detail  
that swam in its flow-lines, glossing about—  
as she paced on, comet-like, face to the sun.

from *Subhuman Redneck Poems* (1996)

## On Home Beaches

Back, in my fifties, fatter than I was then,  
I step on the sand, belch down slight horror to walk  
a wincing pit edge, waiting for the pistol shot  
laughter. Long greening waves cash themselves, foam change  
sliding into Ocean's pocket. She turns: ridicule looks down,  
strappy, with faces averted, or is glare and families.  
The great hawk of the beach is outstretched, point to point,  
quivering and hunting. Cars are the stuff at its back.  
You peer, at this age, but it's still there, ridicule,  
the pistol that kills women, that gets them killed, crippling men  
on the towel-spattered sand. Equality is dressed, neatly,  
with mouth still shut. Bared body is not equal ever.  
Some are smiled to each other. Many surf, swim, play ball:  
like that red boy, holding his wet T shirt off his breasts.

from *Subhuman Redneck Poems* (1996)

## Pigs

Us all on sore cement was we.  
Not warmed then with glares. Not glutting mush  
under that pole the lightning's tied to.  
No farrow-shit in milk to make us randy.  
Us back in cool god-shit. We ate crisp.  
We nosed up good rank in the tunnelled bush.  
Us all fuckers then. And Big, huh? Tusked  
the balls-biting dog and gutsed him wet.  
Us shoved down the soft cement of rivers.  
Us snored the earth hollow, filled farrow, grunted.  
Never stopped growing. We sloughed, we soughed  
and balked no weird till the high ridgebacks was us  
with weight-buried hooves. Or bristly, with milk.  
Us never knowed like slitting nor hose-biff then.  
Nor the terrible sheet-cutting screams up ahead.  
The burnt water kicking. This gone-already feeling  
here in no place with our heads on upside down.

from *Translations from the Natural World* (1992)

## Deer on the Wet Hills

As anywhere beyond the world  
it is always the first day.

Smell replaces colour  
for these ones, who are loved  
as they are red: from within.

Bed brightening into feed,  
the love stays hooves on steep.

History is unforgiveness.  
Terse, as their speech would be,  
food-rip gets widespread.

Tuned for stealth and sudden  
ones' senses all point, chewing  
uninterest as anguish flaps one wing.

Day-streak, star-cinders.  
Black sky. Pale udders forming there.

Ones' nap spooned in licks  
like mutual silent sentences,  
bulk to mirrored bulk.

One forgets being male  
right after the season.

from *Translations from the Natural World* (1992)

## Cattle Ancestor

Darrambawli and all his wives, they came feeding from the south-east back in that first time. Darrambawli is a big red fellow, terrible fierce. He scrapes up dust, singing, whirling his bullroarers in the air: he swings them and they sing out Crack! Crack! All the time he's mounting his women, all the time more *kulka*, more, more, smelling their *kulka* and looking down his nose. Kangaroo and emu mobs run from him, as he tears up their shelters, throwing the people in the air, stamping out their fires. Darrambawli gathers up his brothers, all making that sad cry *mar mar*: He initiates his brothers, the Bulluktruk. They walk head down in a line and make the big blue ranges. You hear their clinking noise in there. Darrambawli has wives everywhere, he has to gallop back and forth, mad for their *kulka*. You see him on the coast, and on the plains. They're eating up the country, so the animals come to spear them: You have to die now, you're starving us. But then Waark the crow tells Darrambawli Your wives, they're spearing them. He is screaming, frothing at the mouth, that's why his chest is all white nowadays. Jerking two knives, he screams *I make new waterholes! I bring the best song!* He makes war on all that mob, raging, dotting the whole country. He frightens the water-snakes; they run away, they can't sit down. The animals forget how to speak. There is only one song for a while. Darrambawli must sing it on his own.

from *Translations from the Natural World* (1992)



"Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point" (c.1832) by John Glover

## Dead Trees in the Dam

Castle scaffolding tall in moat,  
the dead trees in the dam  
flower each morning with birds.

It can be just the three resident  
cormorants with musket-hammer necks, plus  
the clinician spoonbill, its long pout;

twilight's herons who were almost too lightfoot  
to land; pearl galahs in pink-fronted  
confederacy, each starring in its frame,

or it may be a misty candelabrum  
of egrets lambent before saint Sleep---  
who gutter awake and balance stiffly off.

Odd mornings, it's been all bloodflag  
and rifle green: a stopped-motion shrapnel  
of kingparrots. Smithereens when they freaked.

Rarely, it's wed ducks, whose children  
will float among the pillars. In daytime  
magpies sidestep up wood to jag pinnacles

and the big blow-in cuckoo crying  
Alarm, Alarm on the wing is not let light.  
This hours after dynastic charts of high

profile ibis have rowed away to beat  
the paddocks. Which, however green, are  
always watercolour, and on brown paper.

from *Subhuman Redneck Poems* (1996)

## The Meaning of Existence

Everything except language  
knows the meaning of existence.  
Trees, planets, rivers, time  
know nothing else. They express it  
moment by moment as the universe.

Even this fool of a body  
lives it in part, and would  
have full dignity within it  
but for the ignorant freedom  
of my talking mind.

from *Poems the Size of Photographs* (2002)



A woodblock print by Australian artist Max Miller (1991)

## The Harleys

Blats booted to blatant  
 dubbing the avenue dire  
 with rubbings of Sveinn Forkbeard  
 leading a black squall of Harleys  
 with Moe Snow-Whitebeard and

Possum Brushbeard and their ladies  
 and, sphincter-lipped, gunning,  
 massed in leather muscle on a run,  
 on a roll, Santas from Hell  
 like a whole shoal leaning

wide wristed, their tautness stable  
 in fluency, fast streetscape dwindling,  
 all riding astride, on the outside  
 of sleek grunt vehicles, woman-clung,  
 forty years on from Marlon.

from *Conscious and Verbal* (1999)

## Inside Ayers Rock

Inside Ayers Rock is lit  
 with paired fluorescent lights  
 on steel pillars supporting the ceiling  
 of haze-blue marquee cloth  
 high above the non-slip pavers.  
 Curving around the cafeteria  
 throughout vast inner space  
 is a Milky way of plastic chairs  
 in foursomes around tables  
 all the way to the truck drivers' enclave.  
 Dusted coolabah trees grow to the ceiling,  
 TVs talk in gassy colours, and  
 round the walls are Outback shop fronts:  
 the Beehive Bookshop for brochures,  
 Casual Clobber, the bottled Country Kitchen  
 and the sheet-iron Dreamtime Experience  
 that is turned off at night.  
 A high bank of medal-ribbon  
 lolly jars preside over  
 island counters like opened crates,  
 one labelled White Mugs, and covered with them.  
 A two-dimensional policeman  
 discourages shoplifting of gifts  
 and near the entrance, where you pay  
 for fuel, there stands a tribal man  
 in rib-paint and pubic tassel.  
 It is all gentle and kind.  
 In beyond the children's playworld  
 there are fossils, like crumpled  
 old drawings of creatures in rock.

from *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, 1996

## An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow

The word goes round Repins,  
 the murmur goes round Lorenzini's,<sup>11</sup>  
 at Tattersalls,<sup>12</sup> men look up from sheets of numbers,  
 the Stock Exchange scribblers forget the chalk in their hands  
 and men with bread in their pockets leave the Greek Club:  
 There's a fellow crying in Martin Place. They can't stop him.

The traffic in George Street<sup>13</sup> is banked up for half a mile  
 and drained of motion. The crowds are edgy with talk  
 and more crowds come hurrying. Many run in the back streets  
 which minutes ago were busy main streets, pointing:  
 There's a fellow weeping down there. No one can stop him.

The man we surround, the man no one approaches  
 simply weeps, and does not cover it, weeps  
 not like a child, not like the wind, like a man  
 and does not declaim it, nor beat his breast, nor even  
 sob very loudly—yet the dignity of his weeping

holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes about him  
 in the midday light, in his pentagram of sorrow,  
 and uniforms back in the crowd who tried to seize him  
 stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their minds  
 longing for tears as children for a rainbow.

Some will say, in the years to come, a halo  
 or force stood around him. There is no such thing.  
 Some will say they were shocked and would have stopped him  
 but they will not have been there. The fiercest manhood,  
 the toughest reserve, the slickest wit amongst us

trembles with silence, and burns with unexpected  
 judgements of peace. Some in the concourse scream  
 who thought themselves happy. Only the smallest children  
 and such as look out of Paradise come near him  
 and sit at his feet, with dogs and dusty pigeons.

Ridiculous, says a man near me, and stops  
 his mouth with his hands, as if it uttered vomit—  
 and I see a woman, shining, stretch her hand  
 and shake as she receives the gift of weeping;  
 as many as follow her also receive it

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<sup>11</sup> Repin's Coffee Shop and Lorenzini's Wine Bar are located in downtown Sydney. In the 1960s they were used as meeting places for many leading figures in Australian literature, and are associated with the Sydney Push.

<sup>12</sup> Tattersalls: An exclusive club for Sydney businessmen

<sup>13</sup> George Street: the most important street in Sydney's financial district.

and many weep for sheer acceptance, and more  
refuse to weep for fear of all acceptance,  
but the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing,  
the man who weeps ignores us, and cries out  
of his writhen face and ordinary body

not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow,  
hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea—  
and when he stops, he simply walks between us  
mopping his face with the dignity of one  
man who has wept, and now has finished weeping.

Evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street.

from *The Weatherboard Cathedral* (1969)

## You Find You Can Leave It All

Like a charging man, hit  
and settling face down in the ringing,  
his cause and panic obsolete,

you find you can leave it all:  
your loved people, pain, achievement  
dwindling upstream of this raft-fall,

back with the dishes that translated  
beasts and croplands into the ongoing  
self portrait your genes had mandated.

Ribbed fluorescent panels flow  
over you down urgent corridors,  
dismissing midday outside. Slow,

they'd resemble wet spade-widths in a pit:  
you've left grief behind you, for others.  
Your funeral: who'll know you'd re-planned it?

God, at the end of prose,  
somehow be our poem—  
When forebrainy consciousness goes

wordless selves it'd barely met  
inertias of rhythm, the life habit  
continue the battle for you.

If enough of those hold  
you may wake up in this world,  
ache-boned, tear-sponged, dripped into:

*Do you know your name?* 'Yes' won't do.  
It's Before again, with shadow. No tunnels.  
You are a trunk of prickling cells.

It's the evening of some day. But it's also  
afterlife from here on, by that consent  
you found in you, to going where you went.

from *Conscious and Verbal*

## Joker as Told

Not a latch or lock could hold  
a little horse we had,  
not a gate or paddock.

He liked to get in the house.  
Walk in, and you were liable  
to find him in the kitchen  
dribbling over the table  
with a heap behind him

or you'd catch a hoof  
right where it hurt bad  
when you went in your bedroom.

He grew up with us kids,  
played with us till he got rough.  
Round then, they cut him,

but you couldn't ride him:  
he'd bite your bum getting on,  
kick your foot from the stirrup

and he could kick the spurs off  
your boots. Almost hopped on with you,  
and if he couldn't buck you  
he'd lie down plop! and roll  
in his temper, and he'd squeal.

He was from the Joker breed,  
we called him Joker;  
no joke much when he bit you  
or ate the Monday washing.

They reckon he wanted to be  
human, coming in the house.  
I don't think so. I think he  
wanted something people had.  
He didn't do it from love of us.

He couldn't grow up to be a  
full horse, and he wouldn't be a slave one.  
I think he was looking for his childhood,  
his foalhood and ours, when we played.

He was looking for the Kingdom of God.

from *The Daylight Moon* (1987)

## The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever

To go home and wear shorts forever  
in the enormous paddocks, in that warm climate,  
adding a sweater when winter soaks the grass,

to camp out along the river bends  
for good, wearing shorts, with a pocketknife,  
a fishing line and matches,

or there where the hills are all down, below the plain  
to sit around in shorts at evening  
on the plank verandah—

If the cardinal points of costume  
are Robes, Tat, Rig and Scunge,  
where are shorts in this compass?

They are never Robes  
as other bareleg outfits have been:  
the toga, the kilt, the lava-lava  
the Mahatma's cotton dhoti;

archbishops and field marshals  
at their ceremonies never wear shorts.  
The very word  
means underpants in North America.

Shorts can be Tat,  
Land-Rovering bush-environmental tat,  
socio-political ripped-and-metal-stapled tat,  
solidarity-with-the-Third-World tat tvam asi,

likewise track-and-field shorts worn to parties  
and the further humid, modelling negligée  
of the Kingdom of Flaunt,  
that unchallenged aristocracy.

More plainly climatic, shorts  
are farmers' rig leathery with salt and bonemeal,  
are sailors' and branch bankers' rig,  
the crisp golfing style  
of our youngest male National Costume.

Most loosely, they are Scunge,  
 ancient Bengal bloomers or moth-eaten hot pants  
 worn with a former shirt,  
 feet, beach sand, hair  
 and a paucity of signals.

Scunge, which is real negligée  
 housework in a swimsuit, pyjamas worn all day,  
 is holiday, is freedom from ambition.  
 Scunge makes you invisible  
 to the world and yourself.

The entropy of costume,  
 scunge can get you conquered by more vigorous cultures  
 and help you to notice it less.

Satisfied ambition, defeat, true unconcern,  
 the wish and the knack for self-forgetfulness  
 all fall within the scunge ambit  
 wearing board shorts or similar;  
 it is a kind of weightlessness.

Unlike public nakedness, which in Westerners  
 is deeply circumstantial, relaxed as exam time,  
 artless and equal as the corsetry of a hussar regiment,

shorts and their plain like  
 are an angelic nudity,  
 spirituality with pockets!  
 A double updraft as you drop from branch to pool!

Ideal for getting served last  
 in shops of the temperate zone  
 they are also ideal for going home, into space,  
 into time, to farm the mind's Sabine acres  
 for product or subsistence.

Now that everyone who yearned to wear long pants  
 has essentially achieved them,  
 long pants, which have themselves been underwear  
 repeatedly, and underground more than once,  
 it is time perhaps to cherish the culture of shorts,

to moderate grim vigour  
with the knobble of bare knees,  
to cool bareknuckle feet in inland water,  
slapping flies with a book on solar wind  
or a patient bare hand, beneath the cadjiput trees,

to be walking meditatively  
among green timber, through the grassy forest  
towards a calm sea  
and looking across to more of that great island  
and the further topics.

from *The Daylight Moon* (1987)



A house in New South Wales with a verandah

## A Study of the Nude

Someone naked with you  
will rarely be a nude.  
A nude is never with just one.

Nude looks back at everyone  
or no one. Aubergine or bluish rose,  
a nude is a generalization.

Someone has given their name  
and face to be face all over,  
to be the face of something

that isn't for caressing  
except with the mind's hand.  
Nude is the full dress of undressing.

from *Poems the Size of Photographs* (2002)

## The Drugs of War

On vinegar and sour fish sauce Rome's legions stemmed avalanches  
of whirling golden warriors whose lands furnished veterans' ranches;  
when the warriors broke through at last, they'd invented sour mash  
but they took to sugared wines and failed to hold the lands of hash.

By beat of drum in the wars of rum flogged peasant boys faced front  
and their warrior chiefs conversed coolly, attired for the hunt,  
and tobacco came in, in a pipe of peace, but joined the pipes of war  
as an after-smoke of battle, or over the maps before.

All alcohols, all spirits lost strength in the trenches, that belt-fed country  
then morphine summoned warrior dreams in ruined and would-be gentry;  
stewed tea and vodka and benzedrine helped quell that mechanized fury—  
the side that won by half a head then provided judge and jury.

In the acid war the word was Score; rising helicopters cried Smack! Smack!  
Boys laid a napalm trip on earth and tried to take it back  
but the pot boiled over in the rear; fighters tripped on their lines of force  
and victory went to the supple hard side, eaters of fish sauce.

The perennial war drugs are made in ourselves: sex and adrenalin,  
blood, and the endomorphias that transmute defeat and pain  
and others hardly less chemical: eagles, justice, loyalty, edge,  
the Judas face of every idea, and the fish that ferments in the brain.

from *The Daylight Moon* (1987)

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