

MICHAEL THWAITES



UNFINISHED JOURNEY

COLLECTED POEMS 1932-2004

Unfinished Journey

Michael Thummes



Also by Michael Thwaites

Poetry

Milton Blind (1938)

The Jervis Bay and other poems (1943)

Poems of War and Peace (1968)

The Honey Man and other poems (1989)

Current Affairs

Truth Will Out: ASIO and the Petrovs (1980)

Memoir

Atlantic Odyssey (1999)

Michael Thwaites

Unfinished Journey

Collected Poems

Unfinished Journey: Collected Poems

1 74027 249 8

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Cover design by Robert Thwaites

Back cover photo: *Canberra Times*

This selection first published 2004 by

GINNINDERRA PRESS

PO Box 53 Charnwood ACT 2615

www.ginninderrapress.com.au

Printed by Pirion Digital, Fyshwick, ACT

Canberra Autumn

Land of the singing light
Light that first I saw
Eighty years and more
Some pain but more delight
What did I come here for?
How soon will it be night?
So many that I know
Like autumn leaves they fly –
Wide over-arching sky
Accept the pledge I owe
To live until I die
To thank before I go.

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Foreword

The poems in this collection have been written between 1932, when I was seventeen, and 2004, when I fall just short of ninety.

In the Foreword to my previous volume of verse, *The Honey Man*, I expressed the belief that poetry can be the shared experience of many, rather than the exclusive preserve of the few. It remains my conviction that poetry offers a supreme gift of communication, needed as never before in our distracted and divided world.

I have been encouraged by Peter Pierce's response to what he called 'a varied, skilful and satisfying collection', by Alec Hope's sensitive appreciation and by Bob Brissenden's comment 'Fashions come and go, while the genuine article endures.'

To all who have helped and supported me – my wife, family and a host of generous friends – I owe more than words can ever express. This book tries, however inadequately, to convey my thanks.

Michael Thwaites

Early Poems
1932–1939

Australia to her Children

I am so old, oh very old, my children,
Ye that are so young,
And I have seen the weary centuries
Like endless camels strung.

The shy unpractised sun could scarcely make
A smooth arc in the sky
When first I knew and loved him. We were young
Together, he and I.

I am not of these great new continents,
All my folk are fled.
Atlantis was my sister, long ago,
And she, I know, is dead.

And while the sun has taken from the years
Manhood more glorious-bright,
I am grown grey, and all my youthful beauty
Dimmed to your questing sight.

Yea, of a truth, my face is now grown quiet,
Saddened and smoothed with age;
Brown plains and sombre trees and smoke-blue hills –
These are your heritage.

Spent are my rivers and my hills bowed low,
My pastures brown and burnt;
No soft green garments clothe my aged limbs,
This truly have ye learnt.

I cannot give you those. They are of youth,
And I am very old.

But have ye seen the glory of my skies
At eve, like wings, unfold?

And have ye loved my dreamy distances,
The breathless mysteries
Of my hushed forests? But ye, too, are young,
Your thoughts are not for these.

Go, fare you forth; I would not have you stay;
Go to your lover's arms;
To England; she is young and very fair,
Oh very sweet her charms.

Joyful her face, and tender vivid beauty
In all her gracious parts;
Green fields are hers and colours of the seasons;
Oh she will steal your hearts

I bid you seek her, for my heart can tell
Your weary heads will rest
At length all passion spent and travail ended
Here, on my aged breast.

Music and the Heart

Music and the Heart run hand in hand
Naked over the shining sand,
Laughing and leaping and scattering spray –
Two lovely children on holiday.

But Reason sits upon the beach
And reads or knits, beyond the reach
Of wind and spray, and eyes the sea,
And wonders, Should those children be
Allowed such shameless nudity?

And when they climb the inland hills,
With honest wrath her bosom fills.
'I cannot understand,' she flings,
'The antics of those two young things.'

But they reckon not at all, nor hear
Old Reason toiling in the rear,
But leaping and laughing upward still
Press on ecstatically, until
The clouds close round them, and the height
Receives them wholly from her sight.

Then Reason toils no more, but looks
About, and drops the bags and books,
And finds a seat that's nice and dry
And settles down resignedly
To spend a useful hour until

The children come down from the hill,
Breathless and eager, full of talk
Of what they saw upon their walk;
Reflecting, 'They'll come back to me,
Since I have all the things for tea.'

Bricks

Slow in the golden morning sun
He lays them tenderly, one by one,
Keenly the poised form surveys
With critical thought with kindly gaze,
Ere each he rests, with order fit,
Upon the place ordained for it,
The chosen bed where it must lie
Who knows? for all Eternity.
He has no part in loves or hates,
Stern master of the brickly fates:
Oblivious what they ask or feel,
Against whose word is no appeal.
For some whose form is somehow wrong
With one sharp stroke (Oh, he is strong!)
He shapes to rightness. Others yet
Whose fault he sees too deeply set
Are cast aside, to take their sleep
On the eternal rubbish heap.
And still he lays them, one by one,
Slowly, under the morning sun.
And as I watch his priest-like task
A thousand questions I would ask.
To what eternal changeless plan
Move you in tune, unhasting man?
What have you learnt in twenty-six
Years of close contact with bricks?
Has each to the discerning eye
A vivid personality?
An Ego that transcends the law
Of being $9 \times 3 \times 4$?

And have they in their silent fashion
Deep reserves of quiet passion?
Loves, doubts, swift wild antipathies,
And little brickish frailties?
Have bricks the touch of something higher
From being tested in the fire?
And do they strive to comprehend
Vainly, with minds that will not bend
Splendid in failure, what may be
Mysterious sphericity?
Have some their moments, sweet, apart
When piercing clear to bricky heart
Comes the conviction, bright as day –
'A brick is something more than clay'?
These I would ask, and thousands more
And yet, and yet – I may not. For
Behind the brow serene I see
Thoughts that command me silent be:
Beer; tobacco; Joe was wrong,
Carlton will not beat Geelong.

Alone

Alone to walk the dripping woods of spring
While daisies spy you?
Where's he should make the bells of heaven ring
Because he is by you?

Who would have been my lover lies afar,
No more he wanders.
Those feet and eyes and arms of comfort are
The ploughland of Flanders.

And, homeward turning, who shall hear your feet
That crunch the gravel?
I know no room by love made fresh and sweet
To ease me from travel.

Long dust the lips should answer mine, the eyes
Caress me only,
And I must earn my bread, and bravely rise,
And lay me down lonely.

And they, that bring such pain, and joy that sings?
Lie hid for ever.
My womb, a butterfly with folded wings,
Must open them never,

And there shall sleep the seeds that never grew
In cells unbroken,
Nations that might have made the world anew
To the world's end unwoke.

After

Out of this questioning, eventual truth;
Out of this doubt, faith rooted in the rock;
Out of these impotent loins men shall come forth;
Out of this troubled sleep the world awake.
After we querulous ghosts are laid, shall rise
Men drunk with life, full-bodied and full-souled.
Death shall be then the fugue's triumphant close,
And Love the trembling turbine of the world.
After; not for us. We have no life;
Only Lethean vague despairs that crush
Our strengthless spirits; our faith a confident brook
Dried into mud-holes; man a windblown chaff.
Death is the butt-end stubbed to perfunctory ash,
And Love a wretched scuffling in the dark.

The Old Convict Church, Port Arthur

A grey reminder of God's grace
By a blue winking sea,
The church stands in a green place,
Green as Calvary.

The convicts built it, stone by stone –
Wall, window, tower, arch.
'Build or we break you, flesh and bone,'
And so they built the church.

Irons clank, the lashes crash and skim;
They quarried, hewed, and hauled.
Straightly they built the church to Him
Who made their crooked world.

They built and spilt their hate, a flood
Their hearts might not disburse;
For every beam, a drop of blood,
For every stone, a curse.

They built a church, the living praise
Of mercy from on high:
Their blistered hands they dared not raise
To curse the cruel sky.

The sweat they poured, the blood they spilt
Earth drank long since, and gone
Long since the guards and they that built:
Only the church stands on.

Built by the convicts' hating hands,
Still by the quiet cove
In gracious dignity it stands,
Praising the God of Love.

Release

As homing bird the prisoning hand releases,
As tide, unyoked, brims up the beach anew,
As needle finds the norm when pressure ceases,
So, love, my resting soul returns to you.
Hours after hours instinctive thoughts are hidden,
Here, there, alert I bend my busy brain,
But when the book is closed, the mind unbidden
Relaxes, like a spring, to you again.
There finds it ease, and peace beyond believing,
A meeting as true mutual spirits make,
With never a gnawing joy nor secret grieving –
Such love perhaps not death itself shall break.
So should I love my Lord; and so, I pray,
Would rest in Him, though you were taken away.

Chemistry

Solutions over sweet
Soon precipitate;
Fire breathing oxygen
Burns brave, and ashes then;
Glass is to common metal
At once more bright and brittle.
So joy most safe, most full,
Aches, ignorant yet of ill;
So, rapt, at life's hushed peak,
We hear the watch's tick,
In the summit song of youth
A quiet quick catch of the breath.

The Well

Seraph my soul's content
More longed than desert well
Deep though I drink thee, still
Returns my exquisite want.

Nor will I dread my thirst
Drain all or pass away:
Before the spring is dry
The lip may well be dust.

Forestry

My love and I in all agree
As one, save this thing only:
While she likes trees in silver clumps,
I like them huge and lonely.

In this our hearts divided stand
As Egypt and the Pole
Though in all else we are not two
But one consenting soul.

And that is why we love to walk
When Night, the blackbird, perches,
Together, counting I the oaks,
And she the white young birches.

Acknowledgements...

Not vile, body, nor foe, flesh,
Your joys deluding, triumphs trash,
Fit to be foiled your every wish.

Never so will I malign
Helper and friend on whom I lean,
Vessel of life and breath not vain.

You now, my joyful carrier,
Bear me about, on earth, in air,
Or white wave greening in to shore.

How you exult to leap and run!
How gladly greet the wind and sun
And stretch at ease when work is done.

And are not all the senses yours
Which in the universe disclose
The frame of That which moves and is?

Eye, that speaks with liquid lens
To brain and soul of grasses bronze,
And moon's miraculous light, and sun's;

Ear, whose vibrant membrane tells
Of birds and words and waterfalls
And Music's heavenly syllables;

Smell, stabbing memory fierce and first;
Touch, cold to stone but warm to breast,
Love's surest proof he is no ghost.

Good body, happy home here,
God-given instrument I wear,
I'll cherish, use you without fear.

But limbs grow heavy, and breath lost,
And eyes weary, and words forced,
And I will chafe my house at last.

Then rest, body, and lie still
When I have otherwhere to dwell,
And other work, as God may will.

Colours

Before I loved or knew you were
 I spoke as I had eyes,
Gladly remarking grasses green
 And sapphire skies.

Pleased with the coloured world I had,
 I knew no further need:
And then you lifted up my lids –
 I see indeed.

Before I looked in love of you
 It seems I never knew
That grass could be so grassy-green
 And air so blue.

Detachment

Not necessary you all conscious hours;
All summer's ease and country known
I can be glad in deep flowers,
In welcoming woods, by brooks careless,
And paths friendly, and turns fearless,
Or with you or alone.

But suddenly, beloved, chill and strange,
A thought that stops my heart with fear –
Lest, unawares, the land change,
With birds flying, and the thunder growling,
And winds mounting, and the sky falling,
And night, and you not here.

Encounter Recalled

Wrapped in my gown of self-regard sublime
I heard your voice arrive from outer space.
I listened, doubtful if I had the time;
Later, became aware of form and face,
Then of a being far from nebulous,
Wide-eyed for the great world, flushed cheeks a-glow.
Soon it seemed natural to talk of 'us'.
A peaceful spring of joy began to flow,
Making an island – though in all delights
Somewhere in your agenda was a plan
To set the vexed intruding world to rights.
I half subscribed. And so it all began.

The moral which this story clearly shows
Is: 'Well, I... What I mean to say... Who knows?'

Mutability

'All things are flux: there's nothing fast,'
Said Heraclitus, ages past,
And lovers, more than all, must own
The changes they have undergone.
Then let's not fling at Nature's moves
Our brave but unregarded gloves,
Nor hope on piteous raft to climb
The Amazonian flood of Time,
But rather face, with honest thought,
The change the passing years have wrought,
Confessing, though the heart may burn,
That what is gone can ne'er return.
Oh when, beloved, shall we tear
The mask of habit, truth be bare?
When boldly strike, as brave and best,
And lay the unhappy ghost to rest?
Oh when put off this creed forlorn,
This institution long outworn,
Resigning with a grateful sigh
The posture of duality?

Milton Blind

That dreaming day it was, the bell-like air
Unclosed the naked admirable heaven,
Well made, and framing Oxford town; that day
The crocuses put out their waxen petals –
White, purple, gold – a comely darling band
To witness God's unrivalled handiwork;
That day the droning sky let fall on China
Its bloody rain, plastering street and wall
With quivering flesh; that day the miner's wife
Strangled her starving children in their bed;
Elysian day, that day of plague and death
And horror screaming out of impersonal headlines –
That day it was I put my Milton by,
And, still with that serene immortal air
Elated, and the organ-march of sound,
Looked down into the blackened furtive street,
Looked up into the blue that boomed of death,
And in my imagination issue was joined:

Come down, Milton, from Olympus,
Where centuries have seated you, above common criticism.
Cease now that stirring flight
Above the Aonian Mount, and effect a landing.

Touch earth, Milton, and answer us.
We are the Twentieth Century, the unseated men, sceptics,
Not cynics, but questioners:
Come, stand in our midst, then, stand to our question.

And first, we would like to insist,
As searchers we speak, without favour, hostility,
According our world and you
Unprejudiced appraisal, and science is our searchlight.

Stand in the light then, speak:
We come not to venerate but to give a fair hearing,
To examine, sift, dissect,
And to weigh you in the balances of this generation.

To begin with, let us concede,
As we must in fairness, that much praised mastery
Of stirring speech, the vocal word
In a stately progression of inevitable numbers

That range the stops and keys
Of sentient mind, oft embalming the commonplace
In imperishable phrase's crystal formed
Music – Oh yes, you can use your instrument.

But we of this age ask more
Than resounding phrase, than sonorous platitude.
Death towers and the earth rocks
And the light grows lurid – And what will you say to us?

Far-famed your exalted aim –
And indeed it were splendid, that justification
Of the ways of God to men
In their planned economy of cosmic Purpose.

Oh, fine and brave that faith!
Buoyant as the psalmist's, unimpeded by knowledge –
God calling the stars by name
And rushing in the thunder to the work of creation;

Chaos like a quilt rolled back,
Order struck out; above, the Heaven-footing firmament;
Hell's smouldering pit below,
And in the midst, our Earth and its cherished progeny!

How manifest then His ways!
Who forged us the sun, and set the stars for our night-lights,
Fashioned this Earth our home
And crowned the work with Man, soul and centre of the
universe.

But not for us remains
That cheerful comfort in the starry multitude –
Tale of especial care
Poured down upon Earth by attentive Providence.

To us the heavens uncloseth
But the shoaling of suns and the breathing nebulae
And the interstellar dark,
Those staggering deeps of unfathomable void,

Where, shrunk to pinpoint, voyage
Our wandering world, and we its prisoners,
On through infernal night,
Through the bedlam universe of blazing monsters

Awful in beauty, on
One tiny spark, an ephemeral life-bearer,
On to the Arctic bounds
Of immeasurable space and the last extinction.

Not here God's purpose plain
For men: here's terror and might and majesty,
But little that love Divine
That framed and fixed your comforting cosmology, Milton.

Where then will you show him just?
(For perhaps you plead the needs of poetic symbolism,
Not ignorant so yourself)
Will you prove it by argument, history, parable?

By Comus' fit defeat
And meritorious Virtue so triumphantly vindicated?
By that immortal tale
Of the serpent in Paradise, the first disobedience,

Our exiled parents' woe,
Till the Father in compassion send his Son to redeem them?
By Samson's end, effecting
With the help of his God a Philistian holocaust?

Happy indeed who prove
With a fund of fables Eternal Righteousness;
And this your word of strength
For a world worn thin with its own futility?

Unfixed our solid earth
To circle like a soul in the cosmic immensities:
Unfixed our ancient faith
Like a ship without a course in the incalculable ocean.

'All's best though oft we doubt,'
While the oppressor goes prospering, the weak cry, vainly;
'Ever Best found in the Close,'
But how long must we wait for these assured consummations?

Not here the classic plan,
The unfolding pattern of a purposed symmetry,
But warring forces wild,
Inscrutable, confused as your own Chaos, Milton.

Trapped in a toppling world
What can we hold to but our sceptic honesty?
What have you more than words
To reverberate in the void that echoes our questioning?

They ceased, and in the momentary pause
Succeeding speech I saw the imagined scene –
The Inquisitors, myself and everyman,
Spokesmen of our perplexed uneasy world
Ringed round, attentive, probing, restless searchers,
Not hoping much of value from our search,
But searching still, and hoarding miser-like
Our precious grains of scientific truth.
In circle round they sat, watching the poet,
While with their factual logic they unlaced
That noble vest of language and laid bare

The shrunken corpse of commonplace beneath it.
They ended, and the light now left them, fell
In the midst, fell now on Milton, and he spoke:

To trust in Him alone
Who alone is Lord
Who knoweth His own
There rests my word.

While my body had breath
In darkness and the dust
In the Valley of the Shadow of Death
In Him was my trust.

This said, he lifted up his sightless eyes
To meet the descending beam, and there was silence.
Have you seen, some time, a billowing bank of cloud
Build up its dazzling turrets into the blue,
Build up and up, pile upon glistening pile,
A towered celestial city; and then there comes
A cool insistent wind, and the towers topple
And the gleaming bastions shred away to air,
Shred and dissolve and are not; so dissolved
Those high-built arguments when Milton spoke.
Or have you heard in a symphony first begin
Some sharp uncertain air – woodwind, perhaps,
Trace out a tentative theme, which then the strings,
Shrilling cicadas, catch, elaborate,
And weave to an intricate indecisive pattern,
A petulant thing, uneasy of itself,
Assertive, shrill; then all at once, three chords

Brush it away like cobwebs in the dew,
Three sweeping calm authoritative chords
That dredge the deep foundations ultimate
Of final truth: so Milton answered them.

Or so it seemed that hour; for with his words
I saw him in the winter of his days,
His fiery purpose quenched, his spring of life
Turned back upon its course, his chiefest hopes
Prone in the dust, and all he most abhorred
Triumphant everywhere; like his own Samson,
Samson the wrestler, shorn and impotent,
A Samson sitting in a grey cloth coat
Before his door, contemptuous, solitary,
Among the Philistian worshippers of Dagon
That knew no God of Israel; Samson blind.
Despised, defeated in a world run mad,
In chains, but most intolerable, blind.
Blind, while idolatrous multitudes had eyes,
Blind, the entrusted minister of God,
Blind, while unheeding fools had blessed light,
Might see the daily miracle of Dawn,
Might look on 'Summer's rose' and 'Vernal bloom,'
'And flocks and herds and human face divine.'

At such a time I saw him then; as Job
Bowed to the earth with burdens all unearned,
Or as Prometheus, for his gifts to man
Nailed to the rock: yet as Prometheus, proud,
Amid victorious foes, defiant, tameless,
Eternal; and as Job, undoubting still.

And at that hour it seemed he answered us –
Perhaps I was deceived – But then it seemed
Some more than human help indeed was here,
Was here indeed a strength indomitable
Rooted in God Himself, impossible else;
Impossible but His eye and voice were near
And underneath the everlasting arms.
That hour I saw (unless I was deceived)
Milton triumphant, not as he designed
By studious proof, but his own steadfast soul,
And in His worshipper God justified.
And then there seemed, even in the furtive street,
Even in the sky still droning death, no ill
Unconquerable, nor woes much stronger now
Than those which bowed, and could not conquer, Milton.
That hour I saw him, some storm-voyaging plane
Riding the clouds, or, like a granite scarp,
Stand up out of confused and angry seas
Impregnable; and when he spoke, his words
It seemed ran out in waves to the utmost shores
Of Time and Space, where hang like candelabra
The clustered stars that bound the universe.
Then all Creation rang; they, rolling back,
Sounded as loud through this our timorous world,
Our dubious sapless generation, loud,
Crude, shattering organ peal, uncompromising,
Violent, majestic, mad, illogical,
Heart-searching – ‘All His ways most wise and good –
Oh, perilous, glad, precipitate, unproven!
And ‘Though He slay me, will I trust Him still –
Blind, witless, blank, and world-subduing word.

Notes on Early Poems 1932–1939

A love of poetry was kindled in me when I was eight by my father's reading of Kipling and was warmly encouraged by my headmaster, James Darling, and other masters at school. 'Music and the Heart', 'Bricks' and 'Australia to her Children' were written at school (1932, 1933). The last-named was published in our school magazine and was read by a girl in our sister school, who later told me she had found it 'riveting'. We met as students at Melbourne University, and so began our life's partnership.

'Alone': I was taught by men, including Darling, who had survived the holocaust of a generation in the First World War. His lively elder sister from England was his hostess for a time, and acted impressively in our school plays. I commented to him that she was unmarried. 'Oh,' he said, 'all the men she could have married were killed in the war.'

'Milton Blind' – Newdigate Prize Poem 1938: The Newdigate, Oxford's principal university prize for poetry, founded by Sir Roger Newdigate, has been awarded annually since 1806. Winners have included Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, and Oscar Wilde. The subject set for 1938 was 'Milton Blind'. Milton's poetry had enthralled me from school days. I wrote much of my poem in idyllic spring weather sitting in New College's walled garden. War loomed: bombs were falling on China; in Britain miners' families were starving in those Depression years. Milton had been an outspoken supporter of Cromwell, the Puritans, and the Republic, and a fervent defender of the execution of Charles I. The Restoration of Charles II put him in real danger. He was taken into custody, and his books were ordered to be burned by the hangman – all of this as his besetting blindness became total. He was saved by loyal friends like Andrew Marvell, and by his overpowering conviction that God had called him to his supreme destiny, expressed in *Paradise Lost* (by many ranked the greatest single poem in English), *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*, to justify the ways of God to men.

War Years
1939–1946

The Tunnel

This is where the water hurries under the archway,
This is where we enter the long tunnel,
And the sunlight is cut by the blade of dark.

So long to have lived in the calculable daylight,
So long to have hoped we might not meet the darkness,
And now it has come. Our eyes must alter focus.

Time was, we saw the country spread before us,
Spread behind, around; charting current-speed, landmarks,
Plotted our course aright. That time is ended.

Now night wins. Strain ahead, discover nothing;
Round, above – nothing but the dank and hollow darkness;
Look back, the arch we entered, and the circle dwindling.

Is there an outlet, and into what country?
We feel the pace; spray mounts; what means that muffled
 roaring?
But the end of this tunnel no man knows.

(November 1939)

The Prophetic Hour

In this dread hour for thee and all mankind
Britain, be Freedom's fortress or her grave.
There is no middle way. Conquer and save
The world, no less: fail, and the chains that bind
Our folk shall fetter body, soul and mind
Of all men everywhere. Fateful and brave
Such fight! But if we fail? Hell's flag shall wave
O'er Freedom's self to nether dark consigned.

One thing is needful: turn to God, whose laws
Are everlasting. Whom we own in part,
Obey: His yoke is perfect liberty.
To Him in humble trust commit our cause
And we shall see Hell's tyrant burst his heart
And the whole world start up, amazed, and free.

(July 1940)

The Tactician

Spring held her fire

So long, the long pursuit, the watchers wondered
Would there be ever an end, would winter's keel
Plough the grey lifeless land without a challenge,
Hated but all too strong, and the earth beaten
This year, and bud and blossom bound too fast?

But Spring, the tactician, came,
Certain of herself, silently closing in
On the confident foe. Now, surely, and now
Is the minute of destiny. Strike, nor lose it! Still
Never a shot, and the minute passing. And now
Too late, perhaps, and the battle lost.

She touched

In hedge and tree and lane the explosive charge,
And with one broadside sank the enemy Winter
Under the green wave.

Epitaph on a New Army

No drums they wished, whose thoughts were tied
To girls and jobs and mother,
Who rose and drilled and killed and died
Because they saw no other,

Who died without the hero's throb,
And if they trembled, hid it,
Who did not fancy much their job
But thought it best, and did it.

(November 1939)

To J.S. Bach

Now, when the smoking ruins smoulder low
Of what was Europe once, and Christendom,
When all Creation groans, and men despair,
While they who speak your language, breathe your air,
Lead on the dreadful night of Antichrist
Victorious through the world, now more than all,
Gentle and mighty heart, to you I turn
To heal my mortal soul with heavenly voice.

For you had breathed your Lord's own pain and joy –
Heart-piercing sorrow, speechless joy serene.
You lived the first bewildering breathless awe
That God should grow in Mary's womb, that night
The angels sang so clear. You felt the nails,
Partook the unutterable 'It is fulfilled,'
And laid your Lord to rest, deep tender grief
Big with the Resurrection. You had looked
Into the world's despair and mortal sin
And not despaired, for God so loved the world.

So, in your music's flying counterpoint,
The threads that boldly follow and cross and mingle
And knot themselves, and all at once resolve
Into the absolute close; and so those airs
That comprehend all sorrow, yet are drawn
Out of eternal truth, and good and glad.
O grace of God, that you, who so had seen,
Could tell it so to men! Most holy art
Expressing heavenly love to human heart –
The agony and sweat, the cry, the peace
That passed all understanding, Bach, but yours.

Your joy was new for ever. When you speak
I feel my soul on wings, sublime, that first
Great Christian morning breaking on the world,
The Daystar that was risen in your heart.

(October 1940)

Christmas in Iceland

We lay in Iceland winterbound,
And heard the blizzard blow,
And naught we saw on sea or shore
Except the driving snow.

Then said our Captain to the Cook,
At anchor as we lay,
'Make us a duff with all your might;
Tomorrow's Christmas Day!'

Then said the Cook, 'A Scotsman I,
My season's Hogmanay,
Yet will I make a mighty duff
To eat on Christmas Day.'

On Christmas Day it still snowed on,
No news from home had we,
But we'd the Cook's great Christmas duff,
And our good company.

The wind blew wild, the snow it piled
On decks your boot would freeze on,
But in the mess-deck down below
We kept the Christmas season.

With paper streamers all was rigged,
The officers were messmen,
Of seamen, stokers, bunts and all,
None greater were nor less men.

And there was light and warmth and cheer,
No plate nor glass stood empty,
A genial glow lit every heart
Of all our eight and twenty.

We sang the songs we'd sung at home
In Christmases gone by:
Till some for bawdy choruses
Began to call and cry.

Then spoke our youthful gunner, and
With furious blush cried, 'Nay!
Ye've all the year for that my lads;
But this is Christmas Day.'

Another growled, 'Why rot we here?
A dog's a better life –
Never to see my bairns, nor sleep
Beside my wedded wife.'

But Coxswain answered, clenching pipe,
'T've wife and kids as well,
But I'd fight the sea and the enemy
From Iceland on to Hell,

So be I knew they'd not lose heart,
Though home I never come,
Till they and all true-hearted folk
Have Christmas safe at home.'

So it was done and said and sung,
And our thoughts went homeward winging
Over the long black ocean leagues,
And a quietness followed the singing,

And aloft the snow picked out each spar,
Each stay and bolt and splicing,
And our good ship rode in the Arctic night
Like a ship of sugar-icing.

The Jervis Bay

The Jervis Bay, a passenger liner plying between Australia and Britain, was converted to an armed merchant cruiser on the outbreak of war, and was the sole escort of Convoy HX 84 when it was attacked in mid-Atlantic by the German pocket battleship Admiral Scheer on 5 November 1940. Sunk with three-quarters of her company, including her captain, Fogarty Fegen, she enabled thirty-two of the thirty-seven ships in her charge to escape under cover of darkness.

The fifth day of November, Fifty North and Forty West,
Was edging to its departure, like an undecided guest,
When under the tented edge of cloud slanted a golden ray
That tippled the wave tops, and lighted on the convoy as it lay.
The convoy lay rolling in the steep Atlantic swell
Like a becalmed Armada. You would scarcely tell
They had a port or purpose or power or moved at all
Over the vast ocean. Ships great and small,
Huge pot-bellied tankers, trim, with yellow funnels aft,
Class-conscious liners stepping by with cynical smutty craft,
All shapes and shades of merchant-ship, with multifarious
 freights,
Their holds laden to the hatches, their decks piled high with
 crates,
And the sun on their yellow upperworks gleamed, and on the
 grey
Hull and bridge of the escort, HMS *Jervis Bay*.

In the dusk of the evening the wolf is abroad,
He crouches in the valley at the lonely ford
Where the sheep come down. What help have the sheep?
They must all be slaughtered when the wolf shall leap.
The sheep have the sheepdog. But what can he do,
With his slow old legs and his teeth so few?

He could meet the jackal and never fear,
Or the slinking fox, but the wolf is here –
That steely strength, that merciless art.
He has few old teeth, but a lion's heart.

On either side the *Jervis Bay* the convoy was dipping,
And the Captain as he paced the bridge paused, one hand
gripping
A stanchion, to study them against the amber rim
Of sky – the ships whose safety was entrusted to him.
They spread, a broad battalion, massed in columns nine abreast,
There *Trewellard*, *Cornish City*, *San Demetrio* – north-by-west
Was it smoke or cloud? – *Castillian*, *Rangitiki*, and the rest.
Satisfied, he turned to go below; when a sudden gleam
Flickered in the north, and a shout from the lookout, 'Ship on
the port beam.'
Two seconds, and Captain Fegen's glasses rake the horizon to
norrard,
Two more, and the bells ring Action Stations. Aft, amidships,
farrard,
The guns are manned, loaded and trained – the crews were
standing by –
And the men below are running to their stations, and every
pulse beats high,
And Fegen's pulse is racing hard, but his eye is steady and clear,
And the smudge on the horizon shimmers into shape, and is
the *Admiral Scheer*.

The telegraph clangs to 'Full Ahead'. Her great heart pounding
The *Jervis Bay* trembles and surges forward, sounding

The alarm on her siren. From her bridge the Aldis chatters
To an answering flicker from where the Commodore scatters
The foaming seas, awaiting his orders for the convoy.
'Warship, thought hostile, my port beam.' An envoy
Of wrath, a white column spouts sudden and high
Topping the mast. A detonation shakes the sea and sky.
'Scatter under smoke' – Fluttering flags and sirens blowing
Down the columns of the convoy. – But the *Jervis Bay* is going
Steady onward as they turn. From the smoke floats are flowing
Streams of velvet solid smoke drifting over the ocean swell,
But the enemy gunners know their job. A salvo of shell
Roars in the sea – one, two, three – by the *Rangitiki's* bow
As she twists in flight. Already they have found for line. And
now

A salvo spouts alongside – the iron jaws closing
On the vulnerable spine. Now the convoy are nosing
East, south, west, away fanwise are scattering,
But the shells fall like drops in thunder ominously pattering,
And Captain Fegen had that day a second, or maybe two,
As he stood on the bridge of the *Jervis Bay*, to choose what he
would do.

Astern of him the convoy, labouring heavily in flight,
And one long hour till they could win to cover of the night.
To port the Nazi battleship, with six eleven-inch guns
Secure in triple turrets ranged to hurl their angry tons
Of blasting steel across the miles his guns could never span,
With twice his speed, with a Naval crew, trained, expert to a
man,
With armour-plated sides and deck, a warship through and
through,

The pride of the German builders' craft. All this Fegen knew,
Knew his foeman as he came in overmastering might,
Knew well there was no hope at all in such unequal fight,
Knew his own unarmoured sides, his few old six-inch guns,
His fourteen meagre knots, his men, their country's sturdy sons,
But hasty-trained and still untried in the shock and din of
action.

To starboard were the merchantmen, and he was their
protection.

Rarely it comes, and unforeseen,
In the life of a man, a community, a nation,
The moment that knits up struggling diversity
In one, the changing transverse lights
Focused to a pinpoint's burning intensity
Rarely and unforeseen.

But in the minute is the timeless and absolute
Fulfilment of centuries and civilisations,
When the temporal skin lays bare the eternal bone,
And this mortal puts on immortality.
In that stark flash the unregarding universe
Is a hushed agony. The suns and planets
Stay: the dewdrop dares not tremble:
The dead leaf in the electric air
Waits: and the waterfall still as a photograph
Hangs in that intolerable minute.
And the dead and the living, all are there
With those that shall be, all creation
Pausing poised in the ticking of eternity,
Held at one white point of crisis.

But what does he know, he at the focus,
The man or the nation? Joy and terror knows,
But chiefly a blessed sweet release,
The complex equation at a stroke resolved
To simple terms, a single choice,
Rarely and unforeseen.
So Fegen stood, and Time dissolved,
And Cradock with his ships steamed out
From Coronel, and in the pass
Of Roncesvalles a horn was sounding,
And Oates went stumbling out alone
Into that Antarctic night,
And Socrates the hemlock drank
And paid his debts and laid him down,
And through the fifty-three, Revenge
Ran on as in Thermopylae
The cool-eyed Spartans looked about,
Childe Roland, trembling, took and blew,
The *Jervis Bay* went hard-a-port.

'Hard-a-port' and 'Hard-a-port, sir.' The white spray flying,
She heeled and turned and steadied her course for where the
 foe was lying
'Salvoes, fire.' Her guns speak, but they are old and worn,
The shots fall in the water, short. The raider as in scorn
Keeps his fire on the convoy still, now veiled in smoke, now
 clear,
But the *Jervis Bay* is closing fast and her shots are creeping near.
And now he swings on her his turrets, as a thief surprised
 might turn.

His anger thunders near, ahead. She trembles from stem to stern.
A flash, and she staggers, as through her eggshell plates
Tear the eleven-inch projectiles, malevolent as the Fates,
And smoke pouring and wreckage flying as the shells fall like
rain,
But she fights, and the convoy are scattering fast, and every
minute is gain.
'Am closing the enemy,' Fegen signals. She heaves, and is hit
again.

Now the wolf is among the flock,
The sheep are leaping to ledge and rock
Like scattered clouds. To left and right
The wolf is at work and his teeth are white,
His teeth are white and quick is he.
Soon the flock will cease to be
That grazed along so peaceably.

But suddenly the sheepdog comes
With growling as a roll of drums,
Stiff and heavy, eyes a-blear,
But he knows the wolf is near
And within the aged brain
One thought only may remain,
Headlong as he hurls himself
At the grey throat of the wolf
Where his old teeth sink and stay.

But he, with fury and dismay,
Drops his kill and turns to tear
The creature that affronts him there.

This way and that he rends and claws
But cannot break those ancient jaws
That never while they live relax,
While flanks are torn and sinew cracks
And haunch a mangled tatter lies
And the blood runs in his eyes
And hanging so, he dies.

And it is cold and it is night
Before the finish of the fight
When the panting wolf shakes free
From the bloody corpse, and he
Lies like a sack, defaced and dead,
And the sheep into the hills are fled
And the wolf slinks to his bed.

Now the *Jervis Bay* is ablaze. The fo'c'sle is blown away.
Splinters rive her decks to ribbons and bury her under spray,
And her burning hull as she plunged on was a bright torch
that day.

She shudders. With the clearing smoke her main bridge is gone,
And Fegen's arm is a shredded stump, and he fights on.
He staggers aft to the docking bridge. Another blinding blast.
The Ensign down. 'Another Ensign! Nail it to the mast.'
A seaman climbs and nails it there, where the House Flag used
to fly,

And there it speaks defiance to the shaker of the sky.
He strives to climb to the after bridge, but it is unavailing,
One arm and half the shoulder gone, and strength fast failing.
But there is still the after gun that he can bring to bear.
'Independent fire!' he cries, as heaves into the air

The after bridge. He lives, and staggers forrard again, before
The rolling smoke envelops him, and he is seen no more.
Now her engines had ceased to turn, but still the shells came
pouring,
Till with a roar her boilers burst, and the white steam went
soaring
Away to the sky. Her back was broken, and she was settling
fast,
And the fire blazed, and the smoke-pall brooded like a banyan
vast,
But still the torn Ensign flew from the black stump mast,
And the after gun was firing still and asking no quarter
When the hot barrel hissed into the wild grey water.

So ended the fight of the *Scheer* and the *Jervis Bay*
That for twenty vital minutes drew the raider's fire that day,
When of the convoy's thirty-seven, thirty-two went safe away
And home at last to England came, without the *Jervis Bay*.

But now thick night was over the sea, and a wind from the
west blew keen,
And the hopeless waters tossed their heads where the *Jervis*
Bay had been,
And the raider was lost in the rain and the night, and low
clouds hid the seas,
But high above sea and storm and cloud appeared the
galaxies,
The Bear, Orion, myriad stars that timeless vigil keep,
A glimmering host the stars came out across the heaving deep,
And they shone bright over the good shepherd of sheep.

Coming into the Clyde

Part of me for ever is the January morning
Coming into the Clyde in the frosty moonlight
And the land under snow and the snow under moonlight,
Fall upon fall, a soundless ecstasy.

I alone on the bridge, below me the helmsman
Whistling softly to the listening voicepipe,
And no sound else but the washing of the bow-wave
As the buoys go by like marching pylons.

I gaze from the glory of the bared universe
To the guarded secret of the winter world
Rapt, and the helmsman now is silent,
And I wait for the time to alter course.

To port lift the magic scenario mountains
White above the shoulders of Holy Island,
And nearer, clear as a square-lined coverlet,
All the fields and hedges on the slopes of Arran.

But further and smaller, away to starboard,
The plaited hills of Ayrshire gleam,
And I in thought am over them all
Away to my darling and my little son.

Beyond the moonlit hills that morning
My darling lay, and my little son;
But she in her cold bed lone and waking,
And he in the frozen ground asleep.

Surmise

My little son, whose face I never saw,
Who could not wait to bless your father's eyes
With wonder, but in such mysterious wise
Slipped from our world bound hard by frost and war
But warm for you with love, in silent awe
We ponder, in a shrouded deep surmise,
Your swifter summons to the world that lies
In our own path, beyond the selfsame door.

Was there a need, some work there, sudden and great,
Your work? Or do you there prepare our home?
Lest we be timid, touched with fear and sin,
Will you beside that mighty portal wait?
Who, when your father and your mother come,
Will take us by the hand and lead us in.

Genesis

You spoke, after long years, about the morning
That followed the night your first-born son was born:
The dead of winter, the wartime emergency hospital
Bare, spare, necessitous, institutional,
Quick voices, hurrying feet, then seas of silence,
Snow building, building against the window pane,
You under a blanket, bathed in ecstasy.

This only: he who was to come had come –
No other thing, on earth or out of time.
Beyond the pane, the winter world at war
Endless and dark, where you must lay your child;
Within, no one of all your dearest few,
Belonging cheek or voice, to share your light,
Seas, continents away – all this, yet all
Caught upward in your solar storm of bliss
For joy a man was born into the world.

You spoke, reliving that release of light
That sank so soon to darkness, pain, and death.
I groped, questioned, astray, not comprehending,
Asking in vain, with words of another world.
You turned away, for you could tell no more

Oh let the taloned mind let go its quarry
And let the proud mind fall with Lucifer
Because it is another kind of dimension
And the leap forward is kneeling in one place
And the answer is given silently to no question
And they who ask, in anger or pain of spirit,
Why ever a dead planet was torn to life
Come if they will to mother and child – for she
Because she is the ark of the covenant
Can neither tell nor know a need to tell.

Punt Counter Punt

Mid all these problems we're confronting
I come to sing the praise of punting! –
Not that, beneath the flowing may
One may forget these evil days,
Or drown with strident gramophoning
The echoes of Creation's groaning –
'The sluggard's dream' some would define thee
O noble Punt, how they malign thee!
'Rather, I say, on Cher and Isis
Britons prepare for future crisis,
Our country's foes shall find their measure
In heroes trained near Parsons' Pleasure,
And future Waterloos be won
Where Islip's modest waters run.

For think! how just a punt (and pole)
Can brace the body, nerve the soul,
When slim canoes flash briskly by
With trailing blade, derisive eye,
Or other punts, with cool effrontery
Pass, conscious of superior puntery!
How one accepts, with scarce a shiver,
Down arm and sleeve, the icy river,
Of all things false one is bereft,
Hair, teeth, on passing trees are left,
Man stands alone, and (unlike rowing)
He stands and sees the way he's going.

But if the pole in mud be bedded
And pole and punt, which should be wedded
Threaten to part, his frenzied voice
Proclaims the Hour of Punter's Choice –
Then must he show both Force and Vision
Or take the Plunge of Indecision.

(1946)

A Vision of Degree Day

The drowsy air, the throngs that gaze,
The ceremonial stir,
Mixed with the drone of Latin phrase
Became a distant blur,
In dream I drifted far away
From that Degree-Confering Day.

The grave Sheldonian grew, instead,
A riotous tropic grove,
The towers and spires of Oxford spread
Luxuriant leaves above,
Flamboyant birds among them played
In Academic Plumes arrayed.

The Doctors of Divinity
In crimson feathers fluttered
Or flashed about from tree to tree
While wondrous cries they uttered.
Bright Bachelors of Civil Law,
Exotic MAs by the score.

High overhead BLitts, BAs,
Were flaunting (you could see 'em)
DPHils disported like displays
In some rich rare museum
– These Forest Lords, now full in view,
Appearing in their colours true.

But far below in murky gloom
We common fledglings keep
Our place. Black is our gayest plume,
Our song a tuneless cheep.
Can those bright things and we, poor dregs,
Derive (I cried) from kindred eggs?

But in my dream the loftiest bird
Whose coat was barred with gold
Replied, Although it seems absurd,
Take heart, spread wing, be bold !
The Difference in Kind (said he)
Is but a Difference in Degree.

(1946)

Stella Polaris: Homebound

On passage by transport from Africa to Britain after a year and eight months' absence in the West and South Atlantic: June 1943

Above the great ship's lifting bow
I watch the Pole Star nightly stand,
nightly climbing clearer, higher:
ancient friend to sailors, now
lead to that remembered land
the end of all my heart's desire.

How often from my own small ship
I caught you in my sextant glass,
in those long months when hope must lie
in chrysalis, and I watched you slip
downward, and out of vision pass,
and the Southern Cross went up the sky –

those timeless months when time would slide
from watch to watch, from night to day
to night; when every thought must be
the moment's, lest, too fiercely eyed,
our tenuous hope dissolve away
and leave us with the endless sea.

And now (these dwindling leagues remaining
between me and my soul's delight)
fear fades, I grasp the promise given
as, scarce the turbulent joy refraining,
I stand with dumb full heart tonight
to watch the Pole Star climbing heaven.

Notes on War Years 1939–1946

'Epitaph on a New Army' records the mood of most of my generation. (No trace this time of Rupert Brooke's 'Now God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour'.)

'The Prophetic Hour', published in *The Times* on 18 July 1940, reflected Churchill's uncompromising trumpet-call to resistance, surely one of the most unequivocal hinges of history.

'The *Jervis Bay*': Written in 1941, while serving in trawlers on convoy escort duty in the North Atlantic. As one of the five 'Bay Boats' of the Aberdeen and Commonwealth line, the *Jervis Bay* had regularly plied between Australia and Britain. In 1928, Fogarty Fegen had been Commander of the Australian Naval College at Jervis Bay. I was given access to the Admiralty records of the action, and met some of the survivors. The captain of the *Scheer*, Theodor Krancke has since published his account, in which he records looking at the blazing wreck of the *Jervis Bay* and saying to himself, 'God knows, those men have put themselves in their country's debt this day.' (*The Jervis Bay*, by George Pollock, 1958.)

'Coming into the Clyde' (1945): Before sailing from Londonderry with an Atlantic convoy, I had rung my wife in Dumfries and heard the joyful news of the birth of our first son, Robert. Unknown to me was that during our ten days at sea, he had struggled with an undiagnosed ailment, had died and had been buried.

'Punt Counter Punt' and 'A Vision of Degree Day': Samples of light verse that I contributed to the Oxford *Isis* in 1946, after my release from the Navy and while writing my BLitt thesis on Browning's 'The Ring and the Book', before returning to lecture in English at Melbourne University. Despite the hardships and shortages of postwar Britain, I revelled in the liberation of that year in Oxford. After six years I could pack away my uniform, in favour of a baggy old sports coat, and be reunited with my wife and two children, with lively student visitors, and the stimulus of mentors like Neville Coghill, C.S. Lewis, and my relaxed supervisor David Cecil.

Melbourne
1947–1971

For James Ralph Darling

In that keen morning it was good to wake.
The sun that roused the swans on the lagoon
And caught the clock-tower in his kindling beam
Made every day a lordlier circuit. Wide
The sky of our expanding universe.
The air had tingle. In that heady spring
Music and drama, art and poetry
Flowered from the ground, with handicrafts and skills
Buried till then. A pulse and pain of growth
Set the blood coursing, and the earth was young.

Yet was the new engrafted on the old
With a wise husbandry: the rule of law,
The athlete's and the soldier's discipline
Not scorned in that renaissance of the mind,
But guarded in a general scheme of good,
The intended growth of body, mind and soul
For all the freemen of our commonwealth.
'Lovers of wisdom, but with manliness' –
The Periclean trumpet-call you blew
Stirred us who knew your coming, stirs us yet
With gratitude and pride that we were there.

But more than grace of Hellas, Italy,
The Roman virtue, or the rich ripe store
Of Shakespeare's England and humanity
There was a treasure hidden in a field
Worth all the world, there was another road
You knew and told of, questing still yourself,
– Adventurous, stony, but the way to life
For men and nations in a dying world.
'Christ is our Wisdom.' Blazoned out by Paul,
Chosen by those, the builders of our house,
Bold master-builders, wiser than they knew,
To be the crown and cornerstone; that all
Our pride should melt like snow in sun at noonday,
That all who glory, glory in the Lord,
God's foolishness, that makes our wisdom nothing,
Lest in his presence any flesh should boast.

Now, while the earth waits trembling for such morning
Or such a darkness as we have not known,
We would take up with you the task eternal
To walk that road and see that morning break.
Nothing is lost in all the universe.
The pearl of price lies ever in the hand
That grasps no earthly jewel in its stead,
And the great wheel of stars that we have seen
In frosty blaze above Corio Bay
Gaze, powerless in their longing, to behold
That marvellous dawn light every land and people,
And brave men choosing for a world reborn.

Autumn Song

The sun like a centaur leaping the ranges
Shoots to the heart my garden, shatters
The dew in a volley of wild carillons
And glittering birdsong breaks and scatters.

I love to madness these autumn mornings
When the sky goes high and the trees are taller,
When bellbird and thrush are delirious drunkards
With the magpie, the masterful morning-caller.

Then our window's an eye on the dawn of creation
Light stirring the mist and the maze of beginning
On the dew on the grass, before footprint or serpent,
And a world from its womb into wakefulness winning.

So it was at your summons my sombre spirit
Burst from its dungeon-keep cold and narrow,
You who beside me inhale this dawning,
You are that messenger, you the arrow

Sent so precisely to stir and startle
My slumber of selfhood gross and towering –
I bless you with all my heart's abandon
My importunate light, oh my autumn flowering.

Shoreham Morning

The rousing sun's sea-dance and dazzle
Burnishes grassy cape and cliff,
But under leaves is quenched, refracted
To shifting grey-gold hieroglyph.

A wind brings word the tireless ocean
Washes afresh the new-born beach,
And every bush bird of the morning
Bursts into Pentecostal speech.

Robin and wattle-bird and whistler
With lark and thrush, each in his tongue –
Well might you say, These birds are drunken,
Were not the morning still so young.

Such prodigal and pure abandon
In ecstasy so clear and strong
Each heart and throat and breath and being
Was wholly emptied into song.

They did not sing for hunger, courtship,
Or listening ear of praise or blame,
Only because the appointed signal
Came down and touched them like a flame.

Address to Mount Bogong

Stentorian mountain, resonant as your name,
I greet you with joy, I greet you, I give you thanks
With joy for being and sounding what you are –
Black whale-back, dugong, sea lion, walrus rising
Out of your element a ponderous island, scattering
In spume the forests dripping from your flanks.

As once I saw, in another world and time,
Atlantic ranges stampeded by the gale
Whelming from dark to dark, from nothing to nothing,
Savagely flecked, self-purposed, and then one wave
Blacker, more huge than all – Well met, O enemy!
So you among your brothers whelm and rise.

Indigenous mountain in your name and nature,
Whose roots suck up their legend from this soil.
An air of breeding haunts the height of Hotham,
Buffalo blows another West than ours,
Salute Kosciusko's gallant alien laurel!
Your name louder than all echoes and towers.

Your name, that on the Aboriginal tongue
Was food and life, feeds now my hungry ear
With promise of a music bold and strong,
The authentic prophet voices of our land
Joined to mankind. Burred on our speech, your name
Softens to moth. Hear then that older tone,
That Behemoth who drinks the rivers up!
Deep at your root reveal the Sanskrit stock
That yokes your name for ever with the ox,
Man's early friend. Great Bogong! You I bring
This praise of joy. Rise, lower, and, like a bell,
Utter your name till all the ranges ring.

Note: Mount Bogong is named after the Bogong moth, which is found there at certain times of the year, and which the Aborigines gathered for food.

Creation

Straggling off the highway in search of firewood
Past the tins and bottles, through the rusty wire,
I found a track of sorts, when, sudden as Doomsday,
The earth before history had me entire –

A gully, intact since the morning of Creation,
Where grey-gum and wattle hung their leaves in the sun
And fresh-coined heath-bells. But the branching silence
Was felled by my axe, like the stroke of a gun.

A wallaby, shocked from his timeless siesta
(A hundred thousand years ago he lay down to sleep)
Fled between the trees like the ghost of a people
From the loud invader, the steel biting deep.

But I was not alone, for the bush birds gathered
Indignant yet curious, was I foe or friend?
With eye-glint and wing-flash they watched, without doubting
That nesting and singing are world-without-end,

And so resumed their song, born somewhere in the beginning
Of the world, out of stuff time can tear but not destroy,
Born when the morning stars sang together
And all the sons of God shouted for joy.

Flying to New Zealand

Hauled headlong starward by the quadruple conviction
Of lion-lunged engines in their pride of power
That roar for their prey on the fleecy cloud-veldt
The droves of distance and the dwindling hour,

We in their wake mounting winged as eagles
Are mingled with the moondrift, surprise time past,
As the hundreds and thousands of a glimmering coastline
Are brushed into darkness by our spurning blast,

Till we rest at the equipoise of sea and firmament
All night in the cradle of a rocking wing
And the clouds file by us in ceremonial order
And the stars wheel backward, and the engines sing,

And the ocean that was adversary to Cook and Tasman
Crawls abject, tiny, through a cloud crevasse
And suddenly with the sunrise we are in collision
And the sun boils molten from a gold morass,

And the Long White Cloud of the first discoverers
Lies billowed far below us, and the land they found,
As we sail transmuted in the solar morning
In a soaring solitude drenched and drowned.

The Gull

Riding the wind, in planetary sweep,
The gull wheels on the radius of a wing.
Ocean and air, concourse of height and deep
Acclaim the exultant orbit of their King.

Precise he lands, defter than any dancer,
Red legs, red eye, white body whiter than foam,
No loveliest yacht so light to lean and answer,
No soul so white in its celestial home.

Oh Attic joy! Oh grace made visible,
Beauty and power embodied into bird!
Malice or truth – which is it pricks your spell
With sarcasm of the loathsome and absurd?

Those lacquered feathers, sleek to wind and wave
Or downy to the softly fingering breeze
Are an infested jungle, a living grave,
The haunt of lice, mites, parasites, and fleas.

Filth feeds that savage beauty, when head, beak, eyes
Plunge in the putrid whale, or, harsh as sin,
Are stretched agape, with cannibalistic cries,
To tear the wounded body of his kin.

Beauty born of death, to death returning,
You are our Middle Earth, nor Heaven nor Hell,
You are ourselves, our turning globe still turning,
The fractured light in which we have to dwell.

Here truth is ever tangent. Therefore, gull,
Gorged with the stinking offal that you eat
Rise in the light, infested, beautiful,
In fragmentary loveliness complete.

The Extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines

Heavy at heart I felt that sombre story
Close in a creeping numbness on my brain;
Here was a misery cold as mountain rain,
Forked by no lightnings of heroism or glory.

How shall we mask the measure of our disgrace?
They were foredoomed and fatal, do we aver?
Not felled, not murdered? Let it be so: they were
Manslaughtered children, they were a ringbarked race.

Whether they fought – through tribal bush and plain
Hunted – or fled to hills that did not save,
Or whether from Flinders Island, their exiled grave,
Gazed to the shore they would not walk again,

They are fled, as a catspaw wind flees over the grass,
They are gone, as the shadow of a cloud gone over the hill.
There was some trouble and fighting, but now they are still,
Stilled: we have seen a voiceless people pass.

No voice, no word, but a wild cavernous cry
From man's dim infancy of primal gloom,
No echoing protest, no prophetic doom
Why it was written a race of men must die.

Why it was written? But we to answer why
With the whole wheeling Universe must stand,
And they with still-born suns, and worlds ill-planned,
And stiff cold fledglings fallen before they fly.

For Yarmuk, Elder of the Ulupua Tribe

buried at Cummeragunja on the Murray, 14th August 1959

A worn-out body laid in quiet earth,
Attendant trees, a wattle's throb of gold,
The unhurried river hollowing its path,
Wind in the grass – what more is to be told?

You, last of all that knew your tribal tongue,
Rest now with them in this ancestral ground.
Above your grave the towering ancient wrong
Speaks in a silence pregnant and profound.

For named and nameless ills your people bore
From us, who killed by bullet, axe, and pride,
For our stone blindness; for the day we tore
In kindness' name your children from your side,

What could we answer if your ghost should rise
To curse our children's children from the grave?
You rise, but with compassion in your eyes.
Before we knew to ask it, you forgave.

A fire of truth and love was lit in you
Who unembittered fought with bitter fate.
We took the land and life your fathers knew,
You never claimed your heritage of hate,

But poured your life unstinted for the sake
Of those you loved, caught in the world's dark mesh.
Sleep well: but let your burning spirit wake
Till hearts of stone are melted into flesh.

Boris Pasternak

This death of a man, this sudden stop of life,
Such total end, or such a faring forth
Into what regions? Then, if so, what light
Returning on our world? We pause, we strain
To catch some signal from the furthest stars.

Where now are you, whose crumbling body lies
By Moscow, in the churchyard of your choice,
Turning to Russian earth? While from that earth
Mushrooms a power to probe the universe,
To prick the moon, lasso the sun, explode
In space, to break the bands of earth, burst free –
But not to bind the spirit of a man.

You said, The rule of numbers is at an end,
And when those numbers, fanged and fiery-eyed,
Came round you for the kill, across the snow,
You faced them with your back against a tree.

In the crescendo of collective birth
You grieved apart, and would not name messiah.
You said, But the beginning was not here,
Was in the life once nourished by a girl,
Not self-begotten, but a breath breathed in –
That was a word they could not bear to hear
And, angry, strove to tear you from your soil.

But then you stood, willing to be struck down
But not uprooted from the earth where sprang
Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, where you grew,
Where unextinguished under silent ash
Burned on in heart and hearth a sacred fire
The promise of your people and your land
To all mankind. So you believed, so stood.
The lightning faltered. You rode out the gale,
To fall entire, unbroken, at the end.

Stout heart, lie still; bold spirit, wander free
About this planet where your bones are laid,
Or else beyond the nebulae, beyond
The flagged moon and the rocket-riddled stars
Orbit, until the breaking of that eve
When History cries aloud, It is fulfilled,
All men made brothers by one only Man
And holy Russia lifting up the world.

The Last Enemy

Could we locate the enemy of mankind
(I mean the GHQ, the Centre itself,
Not some mere outpost, or segment of the network)
Our Search and Destroy operation might succeed.

Sometimes we seemed to have it in our grasp
That final victory, the enemy mainforce beaten,
No more than mopping-up now left to do
Before the breakthrough to the land for heroes.

But then the erupting skin of our sick globe
Broke in a carbuncle with another core.
The infection was not finished, must lie deeper,
Go further than we guessed.

Though we were wiser
Than our young parents, in their delirious joy,
The war to end all wars. We saw it coming
Again, more schooled to meet demoniac forces,
Went tighter-lipped to a job that must be done
Yet hoped to win more time, hardly believed
How swiftly above a charred bunker could form
A cloud of another colour, vast, pervasive,
Ringing the world, passing through walls and doorways,
Noiseless, odourless, sapping the soul. Was this
The ultimate foe, the apotheosis of evil,
The field of Armageddon?

It would not do.

For one thing, there were too many border-crossers.
Love and hate breached the frontier. The questioned prisoners
All breathed and spoke. If you pricked them they would
bleed.

The line blurred. We could not use our weapons,
While the mushroom shape went climbing, climbing, climbing
As non-aligned as the sun and rain of God.

In such confusion who can see to fight?
Is there no enemy? Was it all illusion?
The stench of death, the valleys of dry bones
Merely the moon-scenes of a mindless planet?
Or is the Prince of Darkness passing by?

It was in the morning I met him face to face
In a fraction of time brighter than a thousand suns,
The enemy of the world. We knew each other,
As he looked from my shaving mirror with level eye
Returning my gaze, telling me a bare-faced lie.

Thermopylae

The story, as now we see, was over-written
By Herodotus, bless his warm Hellenic heart!
Emotion swayed him – the drama of his theme,
The cosmic battle-canvas, East and West,
Darkness and light, Barbarian versus Greek,
Free men conjoined to hurl the tyrant back
And rescue civilisation! Who can blame
The artist's eye for kindling on such matter?
A case, what's more, if not beyond dispute
At least compelling, when you contemplate
That surge of genius startling and sublime
That, like a spring from some unfathomed sea,
Rose in the wake of Persia's routed horde.

And so he drew it larger than the life
In black and white, abjuring shades of grey,
Dwelt hard on Xerxes' barbarous fits of rage,
His impious, dark, un-Greek activities,
Nor scrupled, where it helped his picture out,
To rearrange the date of an eclipse,
Or (patriot wish being father to the thought)
To multiply by ten the Persian forces
Deployed against the Greek so-splendid few
Whose valour needed no extravagance.

Therefore he stands convicted in his tracks,
Father of History, by conclusive tests
Found wanting, biased, partial, and involved,
By zeal misled and quick credulity.
This we concede, and honour justly those
Who sift the fact with fierce integrity.
We have come a journey, can no more return
Where lofty Truth may override what's true,
Great faith excuse small falsehood. Here we stand
Exiles for ever from that treacherous ground.

But can we come again to that great heart
And that large spirit capable of fire?
We who live habitually in the Hot Gates
Between the precipitous mountains and the sea
Dulled with the din of conflict, shall we find
A Spartan wholeness in our world's most need?
How shall we grasp how momentarily we are choosing
Ourselves to be that vast obsequious army
Hurried on the ebb and flow of tyrant tides,
Or those three hundred named and nameless men
Who died in the pass, and will not die again?

Notes on Melbourne 1947–1971

'For James Ralph Darling' (1961): I contributed this poem in 1961 on the occasion of James Ralph (later Sir James) Darling's retirement after thirty-two years as Headmaster of Geelong Grammar School. My five years there transformed my life, giving me a whole new confidence and Christian faith. 'The Boss' talked to us in chapel, classroom or the playing field, promoting art, music and drama in his program for 'The Education of a Civilized Man'. Professor Bate has written, 'Darling is remarkable for the consistency of his actions and ideas, which were those of a statesman. For him, unselfish service to others had always been, and always would be, the hallmark of a civilised society.' One boy who was there in early days later told Darling, 'Your relationship with each boy was as friend to friend.' His aim was outreach to Australia and beyond. Examples include musical ventures, copied by most schools, and the 'Timbertop' experiment when relatively few had understood the importance of Environment. His 'retirement' began with chairmanship of the Australian Broadcasting Commission. He continued as a figure and a force in Australia's public life up to his death at ninety-two. A distinguished Geelong Grammarian, Sir David Hay, who knew him well, considered that Darling's greatest gift was his capacity to inspire others to take responsibility.

'Flying to New Zealand' (1949): My first long flight, taking off at midnight from Rose Bay, Sydney, by flying boat, and arriving at dawn at Auckland, New Zealand.

'For Yarmuk: Elder of the Ulupna Tribe': Mrs Theresa Clements – an Aboriginal elder of great dignity and grace, well known at Cummeragunja and surrounding districts. One of her daughters, who was forcibly taken from her, Mrs Margaret Tucker MBE, has told her story in *If Everyone Cared*, perhaps the first of the 'stolen children' accounts.

'Boris Pasternak': The Russian poet and translator who was one of the pioneers of resistance to the murderous repression of free thought and expression under Stalin and his successors, and who was prevented

from accepting the Nobel Prize awarded to him. At the end of his famous novel *Doctor Zhivago*, the two old friends, sitting in Moscow in the evening light, experience 'a presage of freedom'.

'The Last Enemy' (1964): Reflecting some of the language of Vietnam and the Cold War, when Hitler's demise led swiftly to Stalin and the apocalyptic spectre of a clash between nuclear-armed superpowers.

'Thermopylae': The attempt of the mighty Persian empire, under Darius and Xerxes, to conquer Greece was defeated by an alliance of Greeks led by Athens and Sparta. Herodotus, 'the father of history', depicted the struggle with uninhibited extravagance. The story was completed by Thucydides, 'the first and greatest of Greek critical historians', who shared the vision of the charismatic leader Pericles of an Athenian empire based on naval supremacy. The extraordinary creative outpouring, inspired by the defeat of Persia, was primarily Athenian. It included striking innovations in art, architecture, literature and philosophy which have affected world civilisation ever since. The Persian advance was checked at the narrow pass of Thermopylae by the three hundred Spartans under Leonidas. Overrun, they all perished; but their dour heroism left a permanent legend of duty and resistance to tyranny, and the famous inscription: 'Stranger, go tell the Spartans that we lie here obedient to their commands.'

Canberra
1971–2004

A Place of Meeting: Glimpses of a National Capital

I The Name

What's in a name? Much, if you think about it.
Give a dog a bad name and hang him,
Names to conjure with, names to love and hate,
Speaker: I name the Honourable Member,
a child's first words the names of things and people,
and that mysterious launch of a human life
parents and friends stand mute, 'I name this child
in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.'

How name a capital city where kangaroos
stare between leaves, past dome, construction cranes,
lake, fountain, avenues, gleaming Parliament House,
flag, highway, bridges, office tower -then drop
to crop the native grass; where currawong
parrot and magpie claim due precedence,
air comes Antarctic clear?

The name was here
before white faces came, or boot and hoof
disturbed the Limestone Plains: these valleys, hills
were home and life and spirit-land to a people
fifteen or fifty thousand years. While still
the English tribal tongue was unbegotten
they spoke this name: the timeless gift remains
Nganbra, Kemberry, Canbury, Canberra,
a place of meeting.

II War Memorial

Mount Ainslie haloes a green dome
a Sphinx with outstretched lion paws of stone
this temple looks across lake, buildings and hills
to an infinite sky and thither the tribes go up.
Who reads the Sphinx's riddle?

From Cairns to Perth they gather, busloads and cars
schoolchildren clamber on juggernaut tanks and guns,
crane necks at flying-machines their space-age heroes
would shun with fear. Crowds drifting, drifting
new friends, old foes bare-headed lay their wreaths
a few Gallipoli veterans march, a few.

Shrine of a new-formed nation, fused in war,
diffident, defiant, standing up to be counted
on silent walls a hundred thousand names
equal in death, no rank nor race nor age.

To this lost valley at the end of the world
came, unawares, a woman of France
mother, grandmother, veteran of Resistance
scarred with Europe's tortures, stood transfixed
name upon name

'They came so far, they came to help us'
tears of compassion, recognition.

A German officer, patriot, but no friend
to Nazi or Wagnerian myths, was mute
then wistfully, 'We have nothing like this.'

A Finn, 'We faced impossible odds,
We fought the invaders on our sacred soil:
these gave their lives for freedom in far lands.'
A place of meeting.

The broken years
courtyard and cloisters thronged with old and young
voices of children
old letters, songs – sunlight on a distant headland –
agony, humour, heartbreak, courage, loss
the dream of those who died, of those who built,
no warlike race, but a people proud, embattled
till war shall be no more.

III Parliament

Stand on the War Memorial steps; your eye
is marched peremptorily, without debate,
down Anzac Parade
a regimental red, but flanked
by eucalypts. Griffin called them 'a poet's tree'.
Thence his land axis leaps the lake, leads on
by softening lawns to the old Parliament House
temporary over sixty years, now yielding
sceptre and sway to a prodigal successor
leaning with wide embrace from Capital Hill,
designed corona, hub of a city's wheel,
symbolic keystone for a commonwealth,
halls, chambers wait, a new house swept and garnished,
to know what spirit will enter and possess.
This focus and forum, modest in elevation,
lifts on its silver tower a nation's hopes
as the flag droops or swells, white clouds blow by,
and stars by night blaze the enormous sky.

Parliament, place of talk, cynics deride
dreamers deplore, supremos circumvent,
but people of a threatened planet give their thanks
for a place where conflicts flame or are resolved
in words not wars,
no power unquestioned and no question silenced
a place of meeting.

Opening of Parliament, Nineteen Twenty-seven.

A photograph survives

winter sun on the dusty Limestone Plains

the stark white block of Parliament House

a lone Aborigine watching.

One who was there recalls

he rose, approached, and bowed

with dignity to the Royal Duke

then passed, with dillybag and dogs,

a gesture made, gratuitous courtesy,

a place where, through millennia uncounted,

his tribe and wandering tribes of east, west, south

met for exchange of goods, corroboree,

feast of the Bogong moth

secret initiation of young men

the timeless Dreaming.

IV St John's Church

Modestly apart from the statement of Anzac Parade
from shielding trees a slender spire ascends
a parish church and churchyard
lych-gate, Gothic doorway, cypress walk
ideal for picturesque wedding photographs
bells chiming an English shire
replicate lands the colonists once called home –
Is this the sum?

These stones build up an ampler story
from the day when Merchant Campbell brought his sheep –
seven hundred and ten – to pasture on the Limestone Plains.
Named for the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness,
in the old sketch it stands, church, schoolhouse, trees
in the empty plain, not Jordan but Molonglo.
Here faithful shepherds laboured unsparingly
faced flood and fire, bushrangers, sickness, death
riding to lonely homestead, farm and hut.
From the first day these walls
quarried and cut from neighbouring native sandstone
nurtured a lamp of care for a wider world,
sent alms to Irish famine, suffering Highlands,
succoured the lonely, needy, near at hand.
Here lie no bones of saints, but symbols speak:
the stones set firm in earth
the skyward pointing spire
a window looks to the east

a bamboo cross
brought by Yashiro
first visitor from our five-year enemy,
the gift inscribed
'Reconciliation and Repentance'
in Japanese characters.
A place of meeting.

V Psalm for an Artificial City

When enemies cry against you
with vipers' tongues shooting malicious darts
sneering 'unreal, alien, artificial',
rejoice, be glad
grapple their empty slanders to your soul
and glory, glory in being artificial
as are those Aboriginal artefacts
strewn in your valleys, shaped by human hands
aeons before such things as cities were.
Rejoice, yours is a noble sisterhood
as artificial as the brick and marble
on Tiber's seven hills, the Acropolis
wearing its Attic crown, Hangchou, the lake
man-made, the scholars' garden, Xanadu,
or Arnold's dreaming spires
where oxen found a place to ford the Thames.
Rejoice in man's and nature's partnership.
Be glad that from contending tongues of Babel
at length clear voices and wise choice prevailed,
that some, where others wavered, held their hope,
prophets of a wilderness that yet should flower.
Be glad that Burley Griffin,
before surveyor's pegs, huts, buildings, highways,
long before fountain, lake that bears his name,
stood on this ground
lifted his eyes to the hills, sun, mist, and cloud,
the singing light, the beckoning Brindabellas
and willed his plan the servant not the master
of a chosen place.

VI To Our Grandchildren

What city, people, planet will you see
when we are dust, or hearing
with Herbert church bells beyond the stars?
We peer through lightning-laced volcanic cloud
to an undecoded future
measureless menace, boundless promise,
hurtling headlong.

But you came purposeful, the human mark,
eager to breathe and feed and find the light.
Yours be the level eye that recognises
millennial Eden notable for its serpents,
Mammon's demesne contesting holy ground,
fatal infections not imported here
by foreign agents, but Cain's parting gift
to the human species.
Yours be the generous hand outstretched to strangers
and neighbours over the fence, or nearer still;
yours be the listening ear, the gift of silence
tuned to the unseen wind, the still small voice.
Yours be the lifted head, the outward gaze
like the great sunflower dish at Tidbinbilla
tracking through space a cosmic conversation.
Yours be the marvellous light
that moved across these mountains and these valleys
long before brown men came or white men came,
that touches now the rocks, remotest tree-tops,
things made with hands,
light, lethal to lies and hate
love's only dwelling-place
and place of meeting.

No explanations needed, my dear fellow!
We'll simply do our tour some other time
Convenient to yourself. The sun is climbing,
The city goes to work, and you are here.
You chose a marvellous morning to be born.

Ballad of Old Sox

"'Old Sox", Gwynne Sutherland, 83, died on 30 December in his shack on the side of Mount Ainslie – the last of several squatters who had built shacks in the area after World War II. Some two weeks later his home was demolished and burnt.' – The Canberra Times 1986

They're burning Old Sox's shack
Just two weeks since he died.
The tumbled timber, twisted iron
The line where singlets dried
They'll bulldoze down, let bush grow back
Along Mount Ainslie side.

We should honour the pioneers
The lone hard roads they taught us.
He, in our ordered city-state
Of planners, builders, plotters,
Stood fast in older days and ways –
He was the last of the squatters.

Through forty years he watched
From bush a city growing,
Bridge, highway, suburb, office, tower,
A tide towards him flowing:
He fed his hens and dug his patch
And heard his rooster crowing.

Dog, cat, and cockatoo,
One sheep, a handy tree –
Time was his only title-deed,
Loneness his property:
Authority's humaner eye
Looked past, and let him be.

Now with the curling wisps
Something that was is ended.
He's gone. Let walls and fences fall
There's nothing to be defended.
Where's Sox? Working another patch
Where odds and ends are mended?

How does it look from there –
Look sad, or glad, or funny?
The smoke and ash of forty years
Through sombre days and sunny,
Roof, chimney, cupboard, box and bunk
And the creeper-covered dunny.

On Mount Franklin

On the mountain-top, before the coming of snow,
The everlastings starred the tufty grass,
Stiff-skirted ballerinas, brisk evzones,
Prim yellow courtiers with their ruffs of white.
You gathered some, explaining how they last.

Standing on the roof-ridge of the visible earth
Seventy miles southward to Kosciusko
North, West, and East the ranges' rolling surf
We owned a world alone with everlastings.

Voices come first, then climbing steps, then three,
Man, woman, boy. We stand, smile, share the world.
The man leans on a stick, offers a fag,
A dry sardonic Geordie, had migrated
After the war, agrees it's a good country,
'There's room, good money, suits the wife and kid,
We've no complaints. But I had the Aussies on
One night, arguing at the construction camp,
Up in the Snowies. Every race on earth,
A right United Nations – we'd the lot –
I says out loud, The Aussies are all right,
There's nothing wrong, I says, with the Australians,
Excepting for the white ones. You'd've laughed.
I ducked for cover while they worked it out.
The wife here she's from Germany.'

She spoke
Of separate worlds, her parents in the East
'We visited with their grandson. They are well,
They have enough. But oh it's like a prison,
Walls, fences, guards. Here we have air to breathe,
Here is our home.'

The boy jigs restless, tugs,
Kicks a loose stone. They nod, move on, leave us
In late sun on the mountain with everlastings
Flowering before the coming of the snow.

Space Window

For my daughter in another hemisphere

Waylaid by Handel's theme, I think of you
Now half a world away, and hear you say
'His music always seems like coming home.'
Each bar – begged, borrowed, or plucked from Paradise –
Signed 'G.F.H.' with confidence sublime,
A confidence of joy, a journey dared
In certainty of finding journey's end.
Was it those hearty meals of English beef,
Good English guineas, the acclaim of crowds,
Or, as he told, he saw once with his eyes
'All Heaven opened, and the great God Himself'
And based his foot upon the rock, 'I know'?

Tomorrow men will walk upon the moon,
Brush with their moulded boots rocks that were made
They say, when first our universe began.
Will they be lying there when it concludes?
But they, the intruders on that lifeless orb
Swiftly, before the lunar night, will rise
Circle and head for home, will see, each hour,
Grow larger, like a golden lamp, our earth
Hung in the pit of space, our marvellous earth,
Womb, home, and tender tomb, our loved belonging,
Our breath and bone, blessed mote in the abyss,
Will see brown lands, blue oceans, curdled clouds
Form and divide, in dazzling shape and hue,
And know they are coming home.

Perhaps they'll see
Our separate continents, twin hemispheres,
Like stepping-stones, with one blue strip between,
A stride at most.

So far, so near we are,
Household of one small planet, ark of life
In the great void, a match struck in the dark,
Or else, with music of the universe,
Moving mysterious to its journey's end
When all its sons and daughters have come home.

Last Stand

The Truchanas Huon Pine Reserve, south-west Tasmania

These trees reached up for light
when Jesus walked on earth,
a thousand years of rain and sun
sealed their archival growth.
A thousand more they stood in state
in their lost world inviolate.

Till white man with his lust
to plunder, reap, and sell,
rifled their forest solitude
ruthless to find and fell
with axe and chain and screaming saw,
the planet's final predator.

But one man, late in time,
born beyond distant seas,
burned with impassioned mind to save
these rivers, mountains, trees.
A tide was stemmed before he went:
these pines remain his monument.

Now for our race our globe
our fragile only ark
swung between fear and hope we ask
what waits in the great dark –
a rendezvous with some new birth,
or the last stand of man on earth?

Sea Waif

At Kioloa Beach

No dolphin it was, but a six-month suckling whale
gashed and shark-mauled, tribeless, motherless,
a twelve-foot half-ton ocean waif
pressing to the beach in search of succour.

Twice pushed to sea by helpers, holiday-makers,
twice it returned, starved, bleeding, blowing,
sucked human hands for the lost teats,
clicked *Save My Soul* as clear as Morse.

Salt pain quickened a warm convection current:
Ken, Betty, Craig, Stephanie, Fi, Elaine
days, nights, wrestled to save a life
nursed, fed, caressed with touch and voice,

in rain, dark, cold, laboured unheedingly
tended the whale with drug, salve, heart's devotion,
science and care alike in vain.
Was it in vain or not in vain?

Dying, it nudged and knew its comforters.
The coast of life and death glimmers with wonder
Mother Teresa in Calcutta
eyes that know love before they darken.

Splitting the Red Box

The tree-trunk rounds, a fallen Doric column,
are tumbled on the grass beside my gate.
Once more, in sacrificial Rites of Winter,
to be their priest, or butcher, is my fate.

Passers-by mock the laggard execution,
the tardy headsman leaning on his axe:
can you, old patriarch of the bushland, pardon
a friend, remorseful even as he attacks?

Poets are called to making not destroying,
to celebrate, where star or flower unfolds,
the intricate form and pattern of creation,
revealed design, the centre that still holds.

Instead, as I was taught, searching your weakness
I cleave your lines of growth, wheel within wheel,
splitting, dividing, in a world divided,
unmaking history with relentless steel.

The red sap runs, the patterned grain is shattered,
all's done that need or precedent requires.
A hundred million branching years dismembered,
I stack your corpse to feed our winter fires.

Though you precede me into ash and vapour
I greet you, near my own three score and ten.
Will the expanding universe return us
coherent and concentric once again?

Mozart's Clarinet Concerto

He wrote in shadow of death
ringing within his mind
the Requiem that he reckoned as an omen,
two months before his own last journey
by cart to the unnamed paupers' grave.

He wrote while she he played with as a child,
the Queen of France, gazed out through glass
at the hoarse mob uncomprehending, soon
to lay her porcelain neck upon the block,
while his own life
that dawned with royal fireworks over Europe
was flaring to its end of shame and dark.

He wrote with genius, wrote it for a friend
the master-clarinettist Anton Stadler
who made his instrument a voice.

Listening,

I am bereft, lost in the mystery
of music leaping quenchless, undefiled
from bowels of earth to iridescent day –
something he carried from another kingdom
some secret spring of light in monstrous darkness
joy born again from heartbreak of farewell
exuberance of a traveller between worlds.

Post-mortem

When a man dies
We find that suddenly there's time to praise him.
Then pardon his surprise
If, seeing the pinnacles to which we raise him,

Or, stunned to hear
Tongues dumb till now pronounce him good and great,
He gropes – 'I'd no idea...
I might have stayed...but now, it's a bit late.'

What iron vice
Lockjaws us silent till death do us part?
What breath of Arctic ice
Congeals the Gulf Stream of a generous heart?

Safe on his bier
Our man reaps all a lifetime's panegyric,
But while he's with us here –
Sharp eye, tight lip, assessment less than lyric.

Will God or man
Cut the self-guarding cancers that alarm us
Until we dare and can
Praise living men, with power to top and harm us?

Then would we see
Men having nothing making many rich,
Setting the prisoners free –
See statues leap from pedestal and niche

In marble joy
Running unbound among the startled crowds
And the winged horse and boy
In supersonic bronze soar to the clouds.

Sea Change

Down the cliff path, in morning sun
Sliding, we stopped. The beach had gone,
The clean hard tongue of flawless sand
Held in the mind hot miles inland
Clasped in the bracelet of the bay
Had broken faith, had slipped away
Leaving, to fret the assaulting seas,
A grin of rocks and cavities.

The storms, they told us at the store.
Last week it was. Happened before.
The spume came by like smoke from guns
The waves were lifting sand in tons.
It could be soon, it could be years
Before that small beach reappears.
Though times and tides you just can't track,
What the sea takes, the sea gives back.

Look south, look north, the straining eye
Headland on headland can descry
And, drawn like glass, the thread of sand
Joining, dividing sea and land,
The wind-bent scrub, the dwindling roar,
The crumbling and returning shore,
The tireless waves, one life to each,
Taking and bringing back the beach.

Rain after Drought

Waking to a diapason in the downpipe
I peer through curtained panes to a curtained sky
Something extraordinary, half-recalled, is happening –
Water falling spontaneously out of the air
Without the aid of bucket, hose, or sprinkler...
Machinery of the mind creaks, jerks, retrieves
Out of archival dust a phrase – ‘It’s raining.’

The garden hoses gleam like water-snakes
With wetness not their own. Leaves shine. Plants purr
Arching their backs under the rain’s caress
And breathe in deep. Earth sighs. Snails, drunk with joy,
Turn catherine-wheels; and – proof the thing’s no dream –
The unmended patch of guttering pours its flood
Exuberant as in past remembered years.

A glance at the chart dispels all mystery.
This ridge of High, advancing, rode too high,
Tripped on the Southern Slopes, there met this Low,
In consequence, cleared off in deep depression,
Whence, from a scientific point of view,
Precipitation became inevitable.

But I, still subject to simplistic impulse,
Can only mutter, ‘Thank God for the rain,’
Reverting to a phrase which Russian peasants
And primitive peoples use, personifying
A being who in their minds had invented
A system for recycling planet earth
And was, in an early form, the first ecologist.

Fragment of a Chinese Classic

For H.M.T. – A Birthday in Beijing

Catching the distinctive T'ang of old China
She chooses for herself the character of Punctual Autumn
Appropriate for a visit to the Middle Kingdom.
She has left the pounding woodblocks of her Cobby Street
laundry
The imperious tinkle of telephonic obligations
Others must man the Great Wall protecting the Natural Order
Against the encroachment of heedless barbarians
For an invitation has arrived from son Du Wei Tz
To visit his pavilion at the world's centre.
Parents accept without hesitation
Convinced that neither rasp of metal nor rasp of well-merited
tongue
Will be further needed to ensure filial devotion.
They are not disappointed. The journey is celebration.
At Canton a banquet of gastronomic perfection
Mirrors, like moon on lake, the happy harvest
Fulfilment of fifty-year-old faithful friendship.
At Hangchou, lake and walking in scholarly gardens
At Shanghai, the sails of junks, a river doing exercises.
At Beijing, a citadel for the cultivation of stability,
Preparatory to launching on adventurous explorations.
Punctual Autumn, resilient enthusiasm, infinite variety
Her smiles are carrier pigeons flying over inarticulate walls
Winning response from strangers, big-nose and small-nose.
How active is the eye of her clicking camera
Yet different from the shameless wink of an immodest girl.

She savours the varied riches of timeless humanity
Spicing ancient tradition with four modernisations
And so we celebrate with supreme gratification
The birthday of one incapable of limited affection.
Should Heaven add to longevity and tranquillity
The further blessing of electronic writing
Undoubtedly the Birthday Book of Punctual Autumn
Will be asked to accommodate a thousand million more names.

Uluru

At first it seemed a trek of migrant ants
climbing the skyline of this great red rock
six hundred million years a stranded humpback,
a continent's weathered navel.

Closer view
identifies human forms, ascending, descending,
traffic of Jacob's ladder
laborious pilgrims, breathlessly devout,
gathered from nations near and far, intent
to attain the summit, there inscribe their names,
press to the next objective.

These are my tribe.
I too look up with lust
but, hearing wiser counsels, do not climb.

Around the base we walk with Pitjatantjara.
They do not look up, but round, across, or down,
in sand, tree, scrub, see what we do not see,
grub, honey-ant, telltale tracks, medicinal gum,
from spinifex-seed distil a potent glue,
with kangaroo-sinew bind the quartz-tip spear,
show firestick, throwing stick, ancestral skills,
prehistory camp-fire smoke.

They tell, we listen.
Before we board the bus, timetabled tourists,
programmed surmounters, scheduled for departure,
hear the survivors of forty thousand years.

Cultural Interface

Walking Mount Ainslie early, with transistor,
Mozart – divine duet from *Don Giovanni*,
resonant baritone, fluting Scots soprano,
persuasive rogue, the charmed distressful maid.

Magpies heard, open-beaked.

Three kangaroos, grey eminences, rose
staring, paws crossed, with worried faces fixed,
casing the intruder.

The tallest seemed to say,
'Is this some ghostly forebear
with warning from our dim ancestral past?'
The second peered, indignant, 'What's that noise?
Is that what they call music?'

The third paused, poised for flight, scratched, and turned back
torn between curiosity and alarm:
shall I go, shall I stay?

With the third I felt vibrations of rapport –
the pain of inescapable decision.

He would have understood Hamlet's predicament.

Metamorphosis

The young magpie, as large as either parent,
Piteously pleads the pathos of his need.
With drooping feathers, outstretched neck, shrill voice
Vibrant with suffering he proclaims, 'I'm starving.'

Mother is easy meat. It's only nature.
He's needed her since first he broke the egg.
Anxious, alert, dreading inadequacy,
She leaves her breakfast of half-shredded worm
And pokes the remnants down his gaping throat.
He bounces back for more.

Father is cooler:

Detached, he lends a hand, deprecates fussing,
Passes a grub, then distances himself.
Though at that age he fed himself (he had to)
Seasons do change: he'd hate to see the lad
Feel disadvantaged, with more favoured mates
Fed by their elders...

It seems the cyclic pattern

Need never end. But at some inner signal
Or cosmic clock, both parents with one swoop
Take off and disappear beyond the hill.

Momentarily the tragic mendicant
Crouches, stunned, beak open. Then occurs
A miracle of metamorphosis:
Claws grip, legs straighten, head is lifted, feathers
No longer drooping sleek themselves for action.

Erect he stands. Now he is his own bird.
Now piercing eye, proud mien, commanding beak
Give notice to the world: he is a magpie.

Approaching choughs and lowries alter course,
Frivolous insects flutter in vain escape,
While far below, grubs in their clammy tunnels
Tremble to sense a new relentless blade.

Bamboo: A Portrait

For V.M.F.G. – 90 years young

The bamboo cut to suit you from our garden
Has become your favourite stick – dried and varnished
Rubber-tipped each end. You lean resting,
Your knuckles over the knuckles of bamboo.

Your ankles are like bamboo, but your feet are firm
Though they will never know the stirrup again,
Your sunhat tipped at a slightly rakish angle,
Skirt and jumper chosen not casually.

Spring sap is stirring, the season Chaucer rode
With folk longing to go on pilgrimage.
With palmer's hat and staff you stand, a pilgrim
Who never looked back long enough to grow old.

Now people must speak up, but you are listening.
Your eyes cannot see far into the distance
But they look outward, onward, as you stand ready
To take the next step and the step after that.

Farewell to Skye

Little death of a little dog
In a death-wish world of news by body-count
What is a little death?

Yesterday, your own authentic self,
Though slowed and weighed with fourteen zestful years,
You nursed your loved routines almost to the end.
This morning finds you not yet cold, but stiffening
In the old box you owned since puppyhood.

How close and sharp, in coming days and months,
Your shape will haunt us like an elusive ghost:
An anxious face watching us drive away,
A scuttering scamper greeting our return,
A punctual nip reminding biscuit-time,
An old sack yielding still its faint aroma.

Today we dig your grave in the back garden –
Your range, patrolled with territorial care –
And rest you, ears still pricked, coat fine and wheaten,
Comely to the last, secure in your own ground.

Here lie, untroubled by alarms and scandals
Unbearable in life – nefarious cats
On odious paws brazenly passing by,
Door-knocks unchallenged, treasured bones at risk,
And insults from the next-door Pekinese
Flung through the fence, evoking no riposte.

All that we know: a life and course completed.
We tread the kindred earth, and set a stone
To mark the place where lies what is not you.

Pause

You are late coming home
To the house we share
An audible silence
Chills the air

Nothing unusual
Cause for alarm
I am the jangle
In this dead calm

Chairs stand about
Books, papers lie
What are they there for?
No reply

The clock's hands follow
Their programmed pace
All you get is a print-out
From its silly face

Belongings, photographs
Down vista'd years
Cherished but blank
To the leap of fears

The mind concedes
Not comprehends
That all beginnings
Have their ends

What if that past
Is all our past?
Our last argument
Was our last?

Wheels in the driveway
Squeak of a gate
A touch, with groceries,
Sorry I'm late.

Christmas Tree

Fresh from the forest, piled on jolting trucks
The trees arrive and wait their picking over
Like captives of some ancient war.

Chosen tree

We lift you over the threshold to our hearth.
There you will stand through the twelve days of Christmas,
A messenger, a presence
Filling the house with resinous smell of pine
Your glooms conceiving needlepoints of light.

Radiata pine, primitive first last tree,
Soon you will brown, an outcast, on the tip.
But for this hour
You hold the timeless in your brief green boughs
The cardboard angels, home-made crib, the straw,
The new-born baby older than Abraham
The tinsel star outshining nebulae.

A Talk to the Willow

When you were caught red-rooted in the drain
You wept of course, but did the same again
Not a year later. Look me in the eyes
And do not bother to pretend surprise.
Recall the second time the drainer came
And summon, if you can, some sense of shame.
The case was clear. 'Want my advice?' said he,
Folding the cheque – 'You'd best take out the tree.'
You heard, or did not hear? It's hard to tell.
But the next spring, as I remember well,
You spurted such a torrent of pure charm
As might excuse Beelzebub from harm,
Such waterfalls of soft bewitching green
As never in our garden had been seen
In any previous year.

Well now, attend.

Assume your spirit wishes to amend
But thirst is strong, I will not be judgmental
Or ask too much of passions elemental.
There is a history (let us wear no blinkers)
You come of a long line of heavy drinkers.
Therefore your restless roots shall be confined
By a deep trench, with plastic sheeting lined.
You shall be watered well, to ease temptation,
So can we hope for your cooperation?
Though to the pure, they say, all things are pure,
Please try to keep your thoughts out of the sewer.

Airport Departure

Flight now boarding by Gateway Number One.
That's you. Don't hurry. Time to check your lists –
hand luggage, passport, coat-bag – before you're plunged
in the buffeting tide of strange somnambulists.

John Donne would have no tear-floods nor sigh-tempests.
At seventy things are different, anyway.
Together we planned this measured separation:
no question but you travel, and I stay.

Socrates did not dally with the hemlock
but drank it and lay down when it was due.
We've said all that we needed to. You stand
gather your things, and move towards the queue.

The sword dividing: Customs and Immigration.
My love, I watch you thread your way, and turn
with a small timeless smile, and trail your trolley
unhurried through the gate of no return.

Travelling so long together. Custom, habit.
Journeys have ends. The fact is widely known.
We argued about the route on the way to the airport:
now every chance and choice is mine alone.

Driving away, I peer into a distance
inscrutable as the abyss of cold night sky.
Who will go through the door that swings and closes?
Who turn back to a house of no reply?

Passover

Between the tumult of crucifixion
and the diapason of resurrection
that bar of absolute silence.

Were they in Time at all
those hours in the rock-hewn tomb,
the body wrapped in linen cloth
the stone, the pregnant gloom?

Some who came after believed
that was his conquering hour
preaching to prisoned souls in Hell
his majesty and power.

Others who followed near
a different secret guessed
when fell on ravaged limbs a balm
of more than earthly rest:

If, not yet risen, he stirred,
cried, 'Father, it is done,'
there came a voice beyond all worlds,
'Sleep, my beloved Son.'

The Child and the World

'... a young father drugged his beloved six-year-old daughter and then dropped her off the Severn Bridge. He told the police: 'I had to do it. There was no future for her in this world, with drug addiction, prostitution and nuclear power. What a terrible world to bring up children.' – London Daily Telegraph

It was a terrible world
And into it came a child
His mother sang for joy
That she should bear a boy
The prophets had foretold.
But he was for the world
He was not hers to hold.

He grew in grace in lakeside Galilee
The Sabbath worship, shepherds and fisher-folk,
The pungent shavings planed from plough and yoke,
Lilies and birds, the marketplace of men,
The lamplit home, seed-time and harvest. Then
The Baptist hailed him, and a dove descended.
Thirty years were ended.

Three more remained. A dark demonic world
None knew it more than he. Herod the fox,
The Baptist's head with stony steadfast eyes,
Jerusalem, the murderer of the prophets –
He wept most for the lost shepherdless sheep,
The famished, blind, maimed, sick in body and soul,
Emptying himself to make them whole.
They followed him, then fled. The twelve he chose
Wavered: one broke, one sold him with a kiss.

Hand-washing Pilate squirmed, made efforts, buckled,
His job being on the line, and Rome relentless;
Wrote 'King of the Jews' and handed the prisoner over
To a criminal's death.

Hanging, he saw his mother and his friend
At the cross's foot
The dicing indifferent soldiers, the savage mockers
'Father forgive, they know not what they do'
Six torturing hours
Thirst's agony. The psalm he knew since childhood
'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me...'
The penitent thief received to Paradise
At last 'It is fulfilled'
His Father's will, in heaven, on earth,
That man with God and man be reconciled
The meaning of his birth

A terrible world it was
Into it came a child.

Taking Leave

for Keith Hancock

From this window, year on year, we have watched the ebbing
of light
over tree-tops, Memorial dome, lake-glint, to the mountain wall,
light shifting, rippling gauze, blue shadow reaching the skyline
where single trees stand clear, faint colour drains into death.

In the hospital by the lake, where white men first built huts,
a frail old man lies waiting the final lifting of light,
frail frame, but the sinewy mind chafes the expended body,
ready to travel further, time to be up and away.

Ninety years youthful, questing through generations,
historian of two hemispheres, quickener of other minds,
lover of your own country, Gippsland to the Monaro,
searching with fearless beam the fate of humankind,

this travailed world your span: but home in the end was here.
Clear voice, warm friend, farewell. A cloud beyond our guess
goes with you over the ranges to another country and calling,
to a fellowship of all souls, to a light we cannot see.

Last Post

Heard how often, still the notes compel
Unused to awe, we stand listening.
The bugle speaks
Its oscillating graph
Defines a life
Swiftly it joins the restless world of men
The to-fro tumult, test, action, decision,
The being expressed in ceaseless doing
Issues in closing calm, inevitable
Not held, not hurried
The last long note
A vapour-trail reaching beyond the horizon
A molten thread of glass drawn infinite
A shaft of light escaping the universe
Travelling towards that country from whose bourn
No traveller returns.

Banquet

For Margaret Masterman

Frail body, questing eager mind, a discipline of joy,
Expecting to see a banquet spread, here in the land of the
 living,
A heart's concern for closest family, for a world in travail,
Strangers and friends embraced in your extravagance of
 giving.

Warriors of antiquity traditionally fell
Grasping shield and spear, face towards the foe.
You they found fallen, holding a garden hose,
Where, year on year, you watered, weeded, nurtured things to
 grow.

Yours was a warrior spirit, for peace and justice fierce,
Yet instant in compassion for a human need or loss.
Self-pity in your more-than-stoic heart found little room:
Your remedy for a stony road, to carry another's cross.

Astronomy

'The love that moves the sun and all the stars' –
When Dante wrote there was no telescope:
Beneath his feet, the damned and their despairs,
Above, the spheres, a Paradise, and hope.

A supernova seen from Siding Spring
Ten thousand million light-years from our Earth –
Where will it meet with angels on the wing
Shepherds and Bethlehem, the stable birth?

Or was a fable fathered by desire?
What pledge of peace, goodwill, or mercy mild
In myriad galaxies of ice and fire?
Yet star-led sages, searching, found a child

Born to unlock a universe's power
Streaming from scaffolds, bursting prison bars,
And children, kneeling, find amid the straw
The love that moves the sun and all the stars.

Christmas Gift

Glossies cascade from my letter-box,
a mind-numbing coloured cornucopia,
each dazzling gift a bargain.

The first-ever Christmas gift was found
wrapped in straw and non-disposable nappies,
in Palestine, at the census,

stamped with a star, but posted beyond the stars,
marked 'No Commercial Value', signed, with a cross,
'From heaven to earth, with love.'

Yin Barun Road

Crossing the highway, furtive as a snake,
it slips through bush towards indeterminate hills.
We turned aside and stopped,
two ancients and an ancient car,
after a northern summer's pilgrimage,
homing to a sacred site through years remembered.
Eve-like, you rummaged in the picnic basket;
self-conscious Adam, I found a handy tree.
But no one went and no one came:
the place received us, with silence and acceptance.
The barbed-wire fence, the galvanised iron shed,
spoke in a childhood language. In spring-wet grass
the grazing bullocks did not lift a head.
A distant buried roof raised not an eyebrow.
In the near paddock red-gum veterans flexed
their knotted muscles, their lost limbs on the ground,
each tree a rugged individual, alien
to ordered woodlands, regiments of pines.
But from their tops a grace, like leaves descending
ministered to my spirit, and from the ground
an essence seemed to rise, a liberation
of coming home, Catullus' joy in greeting
his longed-for hearth after long foreign travel,
all burdens laid aside.

The moment's stillness
suddenly broke. A Holden ute bumped by,
mud-and-dust spattered; from its cabin window
a wordless grin and wave. We had come full circle;
fulfilment, thanks. The First Australians knew it –
not Terra Nullius: rather being owned.

Australia 1914

Gone away, away,
Suddenly at a word departed,
Left their homes and happy labours,
Gone away to war.
Morning shall come
Stepping from wave to wave-top over the Pacific,
Leaping at a bound from the Barrier, lightly shall skim
The beaches, brighten the western plains;
Shall sift and sieve through stirless leaves,
Latticing the silence of southern forests.
Evening follows,
Deep-shadowed in mountains, fiery over desert.
But these neither shall morning find
As once, scattering abroad to their labours
On plain and hill, nor evening aureole
Home returning, these are gone,
Gone away to war.

Now tilts the plough in the half-ploughed furrow,
Now wild things play by unfinished fences,
Cold is the water in the pot among the ashes,
Where the tree falls it lies.
The reins hang loose, the team wanders,
The axe stands in the half-cut trunk,
These their marks: themselves are vanished,
At a word are risen, vanished,
Stolen away to war.

The Anzac Graves on Gallipoli

You may not pass this place. Here you must stop,
Though all the world's great tides run heedless by
These quiet graves, where wandering goats now crop
The thyme and saltbush, under a silent sky,

Where pine and myrtle speak our pride and sorrow.
The boys who made us men lie buried here,
As once in Greece men mourned their lost tomorrow
And said, the Spring was taken from the year.

These hills, where trenches fill and crumble under,
And migrant birds find peaceful resting-place
Erupted once in such a cosmic thunder
And fire, as when a star is born in space.

Here, racked with thirst, and dazed, and blind, and sweating
Through pain, and dread, and ecstasy, and blood,
Our flesh and bone climbed to their self-forgetting
And in this place was born our nationhood.

Therefore I say to all who now inherit
Their name and lands in freedom, Dare to know
This chosen ground, and walk these hills in spirit,
And pause a while, and choose before you go.

The Sun Ringing

I heard a man of science tell:
The sun is ringing like a bell,
Within its thermonuclear heart
Tremors, vibrating bell-notes, start
And rising to the restless face
Echo its secrets out to space.

Philosophers in bygone years
Strained for the music of the spheres
Too pure for mortal ears to share;
But Herbert, as he knelt in prayer,
Musician, poet of the Word,
Church-bells beyond the stars he heard.

Can you then fuse, tempestuous sun,
Physics and poetry in one?
Is there a music we may find
Brought to us on the solar wind?
And if your tongue at last we learn
Will it come winged with words that burn?
A cosmic cry, conceived in fire,
Furnace of never-slaked desire,
Consuming agony of love
That moves the stars, but may not move
Your station nearer, to embrace
Our planet with its lovely face
Or touch just once this tender earth
And kill the life you called to birth.

Extraterrestrial Report

Arrived at the heavenly mansions, the blessed Saint
(female on earth) was welcomed by St Peter
enquiring whom she most desired to meet.

Mother Mary? Positively no problem;

Let me conduct you. Presently, bathed in bliss,
they sat together, in light and joy and fun.

The Saint was charmed. Mother, how can it be –
you so divine, yet still so down-to-earth?

I don't forget; and here I have my Son –

As a sword pierced my soul, he from the Cross
gave me in tender care to his dear friend,
my Son, my Son.

Yet there, as you have read,
he learned obedience by the things he suffered:
So did we all...

The Saint took courage, asked,
diffidently bold, Those pictures we so loved –
the Babe and you adoring: did we catch
ever a trace of not-quite-perfect joy?
Mother Mary twinkled – I was young:
I'd really wanted a girl.

Fred Hollows

Did not go gentle into that good night,
Raged, raged against the death of others' light,
Toiled, fought, till sick and blind received their sight.

A kind of larrikin saint? Well, not the sort
Niched out of reach, aloft in paint and plaster.
Like Andrew Marvell, as his time grew short,
He drove himself to make the sun run faster.

Life poured with heart and gusto was his story:
Moved mountains, deprecated triumphs won,
Hosed down heroics, sacrifice, and glory
With 'Fancy getting paid for having fun'.

The first Australians drew his healing powers.
Out to the world his huge compassion spread.
We, shamed by those with needs far worse than ours,
Stand tall when Eritreans call us 'Fred'.

Equal Rights for Emus

Come down from that Crest! It's Australia Day, Emu –
We just want to say, mate, how much we esteem you.
Don't leave all the glamour to that Kangaroo –
Claim your right self-esteem: let's evaluate *you*.
Kangaroos do their tricks, with hops, joey and pouch,
But how about running? They'll find you're no slouch!
'Don't rubbish Australia!' You never refuse –
Eat the lot, and digest it, and put it to use.

Family Values! That's where you come into your own,
Where the signs of a true Aussie battler are shown.
And what you may lack in charisma or beauty
Is more than made up by your high sense of duty.
Some birds flash their feathers, and make a great noise,
But just when they're wanted, they're off with the boys.
Not you! When the wife lays her eggs, says 'That's done,
I'm off with my friends for some food and some fun',
With patient acceptance you start on your sitting,
For food or diversion your post never quitting.
For fifty-six days there you sit and you sit,
Never once heard to use the expletive 'Oh, blow!'

And when the chicks hatch, start to peck, fluff and waddle,
To fathers of families you're still a role model.
You guide them and teach them and keep them in sight
And gather them in from the chill of the night.
If asked what impels you to such dedication,
'I'm sitting,' you say, 'for the great Emu Nation.'

Yudina

Sneeroes abound, but there are heroes too.
I praise a heroine of the Soviet Union,
pianist Yudina, through Moscow's gloom
spelling a Mozart magical concerto.
The monster of the Kremlin heard, beguiled;
telephoned the conductor. 'I require
at once the record.' Crisis: there was none.
But who can quibble when a deity speaks?
Through the night hours soloist, orchestra
were summoned back. By morning the recording
was laid on Stalin's desk. Yudina wrote,
'Comrade Stalin, I'm glad you like this music;
I love it too, and with the gift I promise
each night I'll pray for you and your black soul.'
She went unscathed.
Soon afterwards they found him
Slumped on his study floor in deathly coma,
Mozart's concerto in the record-player.

The Word

The greatest word in the greatest book
is that conjunction, 'Nevertheless',
(*'Plen'* in the Greek: you could translate *'However'*)
when the man of Galilee, very near his end
foreseen, self-chosen, with set face and foot,
came to the garden in agony of soul,
his sweat like drops of blood falling to the ground,
his friends sleeping (the heat was far beyond them),
the Son of Man, split by a human cry,
cried to his Father, 'Father, some other way?
Something, not this! Father, I want, I fear:
Nevertheless, your will, not mine, be done.'

For Nkosi Johnson

died of HIV/AIDS on 1 June 2001, aged 12

Roused by heroics of an earlier day
– Horatius, Captain Scott, the *Jervis Bay* –
I kneel now to a life sentenced from birth
but raised by love to speak life-giving truth
to leaders, world, to us.

A child's voice stirred assemblies, hearts, opponents
with brief impassioned courage; but the sword
most pierced my heart when in the midst he cried,
dropping his head, 'I don't like being sick –
why can't I be well like my sister?'

His question ranged the echoing galaxies
of empty cold unanswering space, returning
home to our earth.

A Letter to Judith Wrlght

(died 25.6.2000)

Dear Judith, you're my junior by one day
but quicker off the mark. Lover of country,
unresting traveller, now you share with Hamlet
the undiscovered country from whose bourn
no traveller returns.

Where shall we write? You left us no address
on the other side. But may you meet with Jack
your husband, Oodgeroo, your spirit's friend,
others past number whom you stirred and served
with warrior's faith in final victory.

Your poet's soul, disciplined, never dead,
spoke in that final walk across the bridge,
symbol of what lay nearest to your heart –
apartness conquered by the power of love.
Carry us with you as you journey on.

Mousetrap

Bedtime, the kitchen tidied. As I drowse
A venturesome mouse scuttles and skips for cover.
With routine hands I bait and set the trap;
Hair-trigger poised, cheese redolent, gently placed,
Unwelcome chore; then sleep.
With morning light I find the trap upturned,
A wooden shroud hiding a thin curled tail,
Fine delicate form, trim nose, fixed sightless eyes.
One click: a creature passed from world to world.
With joyless spade I dig the tiny grave
Asking, who made me lord of life or death?

Farewell

Written to the tune Finlandia by Jean Sibelius

Fare well. We come to send you on the way
we all must walk, so final, secret, strange.
In wondering awe, in grief and hope we pray,
pilgrims of time, to one who does not change,
whose love can lead us through the darkest night
to life and joy in everlasting light.

No more we hear your voice or see your face,
gone from our world, our close familiar home.
Yet one who went before prepared a place,
his Father's house, with room for all who come,
whose love can lead us through the darkest night
to life and joy in everlasting light.

Now for your life, your love and labours here
our hearts give thanks. Your spirit we commend
to him who told his sad flock not to fear,
'Look, I am with you all, till time shall end',
whose love can lead us through the darkest night
to life and joy in everlasting light.

Far from our sight you journey: travel well.
All still are one who hear the promise given –
one battle joined to conquer death and hell,
one Lord of all, on earth as now in heaven,
whose love can lead us through the darkest night
to life and joy in everlasting light.

For Australia

Written to a tune by Henry Purcell

Lord of earth and all creation
let your love possess our land;
wealth and freedom, far horizons,
mountain, forest, shining sand:
may we share, in faith and friendship,
gifts unmeasured from your hand.

People of the ancient Dreamtime,
they who found this country first,
ask with those, the later comers,
Will our dream be blessed or cursed?
Grant us, Lord, new birth, new living,
hope for which our children thirst.

Lord, life-giving healing Spirit,
on our hurts your mercy shower;
lead us by your inward dwelling,
guiding, guarding, every hour.
Bless and keep our land Australia:
in your will her peace and power.

Notes on Australia – Canberra 1971–2004

'The Honey Man': Collecting honey from a beekeeper friend, I was astonished at his freedom from bitterness as he told the story of a colleague who had cheated him of a substantial sum of money. I thought of Yeats' poem in which he grieves over Ireland's Civil War ('more substance in our enmities than in our love') and calls for a change of heart – 'O honey-bees, come build in the empty house...'

'A Message to my Grandson' (1976): Walter Burley Griffin was the American architect who won the worldwide competition for the design of Australia's new capital city. His plan, illustrated in his wife's imaginative drawings, emphasises respect for the beauty of the natural setting and incorporates the existing topography.

'St John's Church': Bishop Michael Yashiro was the first Japanese to be granted an Australian visa after the Second World War. The bamboo cross remains at St John's.

'To Our Grandchildren': George Herbert's mystical poem 'Prayer' speaks of 'church-bells beyond the stars heard'.

'On Mount Franklin': Visitors to Australia have been struck by the extraordinary sense of aloneness that the Kosciuszko ranges can convey. The Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority conserved water for the most extensive system in Australia, feeding the Murray-Darling Basin. It was an unprecedented example of collaboration between the Commonwealth and several State governments, and mobilised an international work-force that inaugurated a new multiracial chapter in our history.

'Last Stand': Olegas Truchanas, a gifted photographer and passionate conservationist, migrated to Australia when his country, Lithuania, was handed over to the USSR at the end of World War II. He fell in love with his adopted country and explored the romantically beautiful rugged wilderness of south-west Tasmania. When thousands of his superb photographs were destroyed in the devastating bushfires of 1957, he set out to restore the loss, and was drowned negotiating in

his kayak the turbulent Gordon River. His personal investigations disproved the Forest Commission's claim that there were abundant huon pine reserves available for logging and saved the last great stand of that unique and ancient tree. (See *The World of Olegas Truchanas*, Max Angus, Hobart 1975.)

'Fragment of a Chinese Classic': Written during a visit to China in 1979, when our son was ABC correspondent in Beijing. Punctual Autumn is the name of one of the many pavilions of the Forbidden City. At Canton, my wife met for the first time a Chinese grandmother who had been her schoolgirl penfriend in the 1930s.

'Uluru': The Aboriginal name for the huge sedimentary rock in central Australia, now a tourist focus, which the Europeans named Ayers Rock.

'Christmas Tree': In 1945 a food parcel from Australia reached my wife in wartime Britain, living on her own in a small house with two children, while I was away at sea. She made the box, with figures to scale, into a vivid crib scene, which remains part of our Christmas celebrations still.

'The Child and the World': See Psalm 22, verses 1–24.

'Taking Leave' (1988): The distinguished historian Sir Keith Hancock was the first Australian to be elected a Fellow of All Souls, Oxford, and gave his autobiography the title *Country and Calling*.

'Astronomy': The line quoted, the culmination of Dante's search and vision, is the concluding line of the *Paradiso*. Siding Spring is the Anglo-Australian telescope in the Warrumbungle mountains in western New South Wales and is in the front rank of observatories exploring the universe.

'The Anzac Graves on Gallipoli': Originally inspired by Alan Moorehead's evocative *Gallipoli*. Cynics of the 1960s predicted that, as the old marching soldiers died, their myth would fade and be forgotten. In fact, the opposite has occurred. Bands of young backpackers now crowd Gallipoli. This poem is read each year as part of the service at Lone Pine.

'Fred Hollows': The eye-specialist who aggressively devoted his life to bringing sight to millions. The poem was read at his grave side in Bourke, in 1993. Jack Waterford, Editor-in-Chief of the *Canberra Times*, described the response of ordinary Australians to his 'humaneness, selflessness, Australianess, and crankiness'. Through his Communist friend Frank Hardy, he gave years of service to the Aboriginal people, and then to Kiwis, Eritreans, and thousands in Australia and overseas. Weakened by terminal cancer, he redoubled his efforts. The Fred Hollows Foundation, sponsored by his widow Gabi, carries on his heroic crusade (a description he would reject).

'Equal Rights for Emus': Inspired by the conviction that our crest elevates the Kangaroo at the expense of the Emu, thus violating our proud Australian claim to equality and a fair go for all.

'Yudina': pronounced 'Yewdina'. I heard this story of the renowned pianist Yudina in a BBC program on Russian music.

'For Nkosi Johnson': The catastrophic spread of AIDS, if unchecked, could depopulate Africa. I was stirred by an article in the *Canberra Times* of 8 June 2001, and a TV interview with Nkosi Johnson.

'A Letter to Judith Wright': As well as being one of Australia's best and best-known lyric poets, Judith Wright was conscious of an even greater calling. In her last years she gave up writing, with the throwaway words 'Oh, anyone can write poetry.' She had a passionate commitment to the environment, notably the threatened Barrier Reef, and to the cause of the indigenous first Australians, including the poet Kath Walker (Oodgeroo). Just before her death, she struggled to take part in the Canberra bridge walk for reconciliation. Her hopes were lifted that at last substantial change in Australia was really on the way.

'For Australia': Written in collaboration with my wife in 1986 to the Purcell tune known to church musicians as Westminster Abbey. It was sung at the Australia Day Bicentennial celebration at the Sydney Opera House, and at the opening of the new Parliament House, Canberra, on 8th May 1988, and is in regular use on national occasions.

Birthday Poems for HMST

Honor Mary: Seventy-Nine – 21 September 1993

(‘But you have kept the best wine till now’ – John 2 v.10)

My dearest love, at seventy-nine
You’re not, and never have been, mine.
Before we met, or love had grown,
Another sought you for his own.
You listened (like that other Mary)
Through doubts and fears and hopes contrary:
In anxious quest, now bright, now dim,
You gave your heart and will to him.
So when I found my friend for life,
Companion, critic, wellspring wife,
I knew, and know, that boundless blessing
A gift for joy, not for possessing.
Beyond the range my vision spanned
You hungered for the promised land,
And, while our love might be the start,
The human family drew your heart.

Quick starter, if you first explore
(As once beyond that airport door)
Be first to meet me, trundling after,
With news and friends and joy and laughter,
And light once more my dull perceiving
With gleams beyond our wild conceiving.

This present, as you stay or leave,
Here, now, together, we receive
The music of the great design,
The best, the everlasting wine.

For HMST – 21 September 1994

My dearest love, where'er you are,
just through that door, beyond that star,
exploring mysteries of heaven
this year without 4711,
I will not try to understand
that realm beyond air, sea, and land
nor vainly strive to clutch and hold
our sixty years of variant gold
nor rack my mind to comprehend
how life so live could ever end.
My birthday present shall be this
(the first I gave without a kiss)
– the promise that I made to you
to walk expecting a way through,
to trust, to trample down despair,
for those who've loved us, here or there.
You still are mine and I am yours
in all I do while life endures
until I come where you have gone
and know, with you, as I am known.

Willow Tree: Two Years After

For HMST–21 September 1995

Spring, at a bound. Once more the colourful chorus,
Daffodils first declare their lyric yellow,
Prunus, two shades of pink, blue winter iris,
And then, green youth renewed, our friend the willow,
Through twenty years our blessing and our bane,
Shoots to embrace the power-lines still hell-bent,
Roots itching still to riot in the drain,
How much to prune remained our argument.
Your covetous eye caressed that cherished scene –
The troublesome tree, but loved beyond all blame,
Those waterfalls of soft bewitching green...
The joy I nurse now cannot be the same –
Something that would have seemed beyond conceiving,
I and the willow staying, and you leaving.

For HMST – 21 September 1996

Now for your birthday the single prunus bough,
by neighbour's kindness spared on a sentenced tree
shakes off Spring storms, blossoms in purest white
in bridal joy, luminous, virginal,
dressed for the visiting bee.

I sit in your favourite chair.
If I turned quickly round, would you be there?
What's given is enough
to keep our compact safe.
On the corner-table you arranged
nothing is changed –
the stack of books, each photo in its frame,
they're the same;
so without moving, I can count and name
our golden wedding, your mother as a deb,
a bonneted distant forbear; closest, nearest
two figures stepping from the Gothic arch
of a dim, wintry church,
one twinkling, dark, one glowing white –
that's you and me.
Beyond, the blossoming tree.

For HMST – 21 September 1997

Always a step ahead, you're eighty-three,
My life-support, contending other me,
Or am I other you? It's hard to know,
But Maths make plain – two into one won't go.
'The posture of duality', I wrote.
You loved the thought, but struck a different note:
The twain one flesh, the faith in which we wed,
Two glad but different persons in one bed,
Would be fulfilled as spirits, yours and mine,
Were yielded to the hands of Love divine.
We took that bearing for our life's True North,
Though compass needles wobbled back and forth.
Though from our course we strayed, perverse and far,
We knew the turn to find our guiding star.
Comrade, competitor, true love, best friend,
One day I'll catch you up, and time will end.

'Just Coming'

For HMST – 21 September 1998

Down arches of the years I hear your voice
explaining serials of our late departures,
each unforeseen but quintessential detail:
my cue, relax and turn the engine off,
think of George Herbert, church-bound, newly wed,
'Stay not for the other pin...oh be drest.'

'Just' was my signal to unwind, to ponder
mysterious elasticities of language –
Einstein on space-time, Relativity,
how light can bend, be flexible, conceptions
beyond my grasp. I drowsed
till in you bounced, sat, clasped your seatbelt, settled
and we were off.

Now is my turn to be just coming
with liberties of time that 'just' allows.
I must send words beyond our universe
where, roles reversed, who knows?
You wait with patience in some new dimension -
the love that moves the sun and all the stars.

HMST

85th Birthday – 21 September 1999

Six years since your last birthday in our midst
seems yesterday, in this same so-loved house,
family and friends, near, far, love overflowing,
letters, cards, calls, from the world's corners came,
your birthday poem, the last that I could read you.
Six years. Have you escaped our universe
to unplumbed space; or do you hear us still?

Now it is spring again, just as it was,
Your birthday season.
Attentive Andrea (you were twenty-three)
acclaimed you 'Signorina Primavera'.
You blushed, held firm, but tucked away the phrase.

Here, things you loved return: pink prunus blossom
After blue winter iris, gold acacia,
The willow's virgin tresses, the apple gum
With blue-green leaves that feast small fluttering birds...

Spring life and colours celebrate your day
with store of joy and riches overflowing
poured out on us beyond all measuring –
the story that we hoped to tell.
But as I range those shared eventful years
Sudden, unbidden, breaks a flow of tears,
not for the piercing grief of loss or pain
but joy that was, and may not be again.

For HMST – 21 September 2000

Your seventh birthday, where? In seventh heaven?
There, Dante tells, lifting his eyes he saw
Beatrice enthroned with all the heavenly host.
Far off, she smiled at him, assuring grace,
Then turned her head to the eternal fountain.
So Browning, four years grieving, strained his gaze
into the blue that hid his lyric love
yearning that, spite the distance and the dark,
what was, again might be 'some interchange
of grace, some splendour once thy very thought,
some benediction anciently thy smile'.

Saying goodbye
We knew no words could reach; but you had written
'Eternity and time becoming one'.
For ever is the promise. I will trust
To share with you the same light and same dust.

Near and Far

For HMST – 21 September 2001

'Eternity and time becoming one'
you wrote for Daniel's one day in our world.
Now do you share his new day, his new world?
We yearn and ask, unanswered. Yet we know
To the penitent dying thief our Lord said, 'You
this day will be with me in Paradise.'

You, who were half my life, and are so still,
hover by chair and fireside, rocky hill;
but, as in our goodbye we knew full well,
nor you nor I could tell
how close, now, or how infinitely far
a being you are.

Only when I by grace, can let all go,
all right to keep or know,
when I can breathe in hope and conquer fear
then you are near.

Going up to the Rocks

For HMST – 21 September 2002

When our life broke in half
Knowing the time was short
Yours was the instant thought
'Let's go up to the Rocks!'
Our chosen cherished climb
Through years our loved resort
Where a voice spoke to you
Ainslie's enchanted view
Dome, trees, lake, sparkling air
Mountains beyond compare
There you conceived a place
Of peace, renewal, grace.

Now it was months, not years
You had no room for fears
With wave and joyous laugh
Half to the other half
You set our spirits free
Defying time for me.

Away Day – Ten Years After

For HMST 24 November 2003

Ten years since that incalculable day
When from all worlds we know you slipped away
Trusting in one for whom a thousand years
Are as one day, whose love had quenched your fears.
Your heart was free, for you had given all
To him who knows a single sparrow's fall.
No more I hear your voice or see your face
But you are with me, spring of life and grace.

Notes on Birthday Poems for HMST

1993: At our wedding in Oxford in 1939 the text chosen by our friend Joe (later Bishop) Fison was St John's Gospel, chapter 2 verse 10: 'You have kept the good wine until now.'

1995: We both loved the green charm of the willow tree in our back garden, but its intrusive roots brought concern and debate.

1998: The seventeenth-century poet George Herbert gave up his hopes of a career at Court, married and became parson of the country village of Bemerton. His collection *The Temple* includes some of the most beautiful and moving religious poems in English, along with realistic counselling to his flock and a reminder to his wife not to be late for church. The twelfth-century poet Dante's ecstatic vision of Paradise concludes with the line 'The love that moves the sun and the other stars.'

2000: Beatrice was a real Florentine girl whom Dante loved before and after her death in 1290. To him she was a guardian angel who intervened for his salvation. He prayed that she would continue 'to bring my soul to Paradise'. Her role was to draw him not to herself but to see God ('the eternal fountain'). So, too, Robert Browning in his 'Invocation to E.B.B.' (his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning), who had died four years earlier. A novelist and poet in her own right, she was his 'lyric love' whose continuing help and inspiration he prayed for as he embarked on his monumental poem 'The Ring and the Book'.

2002: The Rocks – an outcrop on the southern slopes of Mount Ainslie. This is the spot where Honor Mary, appalled at official plans to build two-storey townhouses opposite our house, cutting us off from our cherished view, experienced what she felt was divine enlightenment: 'Don't just resist the wrong idea. What is the right plan for this special piece of Australian bush?' In 1978 these fifteen hectares were gazetted as Remembrance Nature Park. Backing the Australian War Memorial, in the heart of our national capital, they continue to bring refreshment and inspiration to many. In 1993, when we received the news of her terminal cancer, her immediate thought was 'Let's go up to the Rocks.'

'The poems in this collection...are accomplished, substantial, quietly witty and always well made. Private concerns of family and friends are always set in wider historical, religious and cultural contexts. Michael Thwaites is a skilful and practised craftsman... Fashions come and go, while the genuine article endures.' – R.F. Brissenden, Chair of the Literature Board of the Australia Council

'The poems are notable for their various intelligent and effective rhythms and their often deeply moving tone. Michael Thwaites is too modest; he should be much better known.' – A.D. Hope, Foundation Professor of English Literature at the Australian National University

'These poems have received deserved recognition in overseas anthologies, including *The Voice of War* and *The Faber Book of War Poetry*.' – Professor Ralph Elliott, Australian National University

'"The Jervis Bay" stands up still as a fine action ballad and as one of our few accomplished poems of war at sea.' – Peter Pierce, Professor of Australian Literature, James Cook University

'These poems should be in every Australian home.' – Matthew Abraham, Australian Broadcasting Corporation



Born in Brisbane in 1915, Michael Thwaites was educated at Geelong Grammar School and Melbourne University. In 1938 as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, he won the Newdigate Prize for poetry, and later was awarded the King's Medal for poetry. His poems reflect the experiences of an unusually varied life, including six years at sea in the Navy in World War II, lecturing in English at Melbourne University, direction of counter-espionage in ASIO in the Stalin era, and deputy head of the Parliamentary Library in Canberra, where he now lives. He has three sons and a daughter, and nine grandchildren.

 GINNINDERRA PRESS

ISBN 1-74027-249-8



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