



The **ANGRY  
PENGUIN**

Selected Poems  
*of Max Harris*

'Form and a decent degree of clarity seem to me to be the most important virtues in poetry after rhythmical and imaginative power. Max Harris has all of them by snatches, and the last two of astonishing quality'

Charles Jury, patron of  
*Angry Penguins*,  
issue no. 1, 1941

'Max Harris's place in Australia's cultural history is secured by his essential role in the development of modernism in art and literature in this country ... The poems in this selection give him a significant place among Australia's lyric poets.'

Alan Brissenden,  
Introduction to  
*The Angry Penguin*,  
1996

These two commentators, writing over 50 years apart, attest to the strength of Max Harris's poetic talent—a talent little-known outside Harris's circle of family and friends, yet one of such importance to Harris that he considered poetry his true vocation.

*The Angry Penguin* is the first compilation of Max Harris's poems to be widely distributed. Providing an overview of his life's creative work, this volume demands a reassessment of Max Harris's contribution to Australian literature, firmly establishing him as an Australian poet of considerable standing.

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**PENGUIN**  
Selected Poems  
*of* Max Harris

with an introduction by  
Alan Brissenden

National Library of Australia

Canberra

1996

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For more information about Max Harris visit  
[www.ernmalley.com](http://www.ernmalley.com)

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## Introduction

In the preface to his last, wryly titled, book of poems, *Poetic Gems*, published in 1979, Max Harris wrote: 'If I had the courage, the poetry I publish now would be nameless. I have tried to eliminate the personal signature.' The quiet poems written towards the end of his life—he died on 13 January 1995—are nevertheless among his most distinctively personal.

His comments represent a paring down of remarks made 25 years earlier in the journal *Directions*: 'The poet has moved himself out of the picture, and his business lies among the meaningful moments of living; to interpret and record. His function is ethical. He improves what beauty there is by communicating its value. In such labour there is no room for posturing.' The last word is carefully chosen, looking back as it does to the crucial time in the creative life of Harris and of Australia itself, the 1940s, which saw the rebellious birth of Australian modernism. He candidly admitted later that among the artists and writers involved, 'As with any experimental movement there were excesses, absurdities and intolerable posturings.'

Among those artists were Arthur Boyd, Joy Hester, Sidney Nolan, John Perceval and Albert Tucker, who came to know him through *Angry Penguins*, the journal he founded in 1940 at Adelaide University as 'an act of defiance' in the face of the surrounding cultural apathy. His co-editor, Donald Kerr, died in

action in New Guinea in 1942. The title was suggested when Charles Jury, an Adelaide classicist, broke into Harris's reading of his poem 'Mithridatum of Despair' on a line describing drunks in evening suits as 'the angry penguins of the night': 'That's exactly what you young iconoclasts are,' he said, 'angry penguins.' From the second issue the journal embraced art as well as literature, and the connection was confirmed in the third with the collaboration of John Reed, whom he met in 1941. Reed and his wife, Sunday, gathered the avant-garde around them at their Heidelberg house, Heide. There the heady mix of argument, radical politics, art and passion gave fertile nurture to the young South Australian and made him central to the intellectual turmoil that was challenging traditionalism.

Born in Adelaide, on 13 April 1921, Harris lived until he was 13 in Mount Gambier in the South East of South Australia, where, he wrote, 'the kids know all sorts of legends about the lakes and about the volcanic caves ... The children were pretty tough and I lived in a fair degree of physical fear. I had the terrifying experience of being a Boy Scout. I wrote poems for the Mail children's page.' He also sometimes accompanied his father, then a traveller in groceries, on country journeys, establishing the close relationship with the region, and with the land generally, which informs not only poems like 'The Prelude', 'The Tantanoola Tiger' and 'The Death of Bert Sassenowsky', but also his view that the Australian poet's attitude can be expressed brilliantly through the Australian environment—though not exclusively, as the Jindyworobaks would have had it; this group of mainly Adelaide poets, formed in 1938 with Harris as their first secretary, asserted their nationalism through the use of Aboriginal myth, language and relationship with the land. The earliest poem among the Harris papers in the University of Adelaide's Barr Smith Library is undated, in a childish hand,

and describes the beach at Kingscote, Kangaroo Island—eight lines, concluding with the sight of ‘the sunset, all golden, blue & bright, / As gradually the whole island is swallowed in the night.’ The active negativism of that last line remained a significant part of his makeup but it rarely overwhelmed him even when the stresses of his artistic and personal life, which were far beyond the ordinary, were at their greatest.

At 13 he won a three-year boarding scholarship to St Peter’s College, and coped with the difference he perceived between himself and the sons of the establishment around him by becoming a championship runner and rover in the school football team; as well, in his final year, he was a school prefect and captain of his house. Encouraged by perceptive English teachers, especially J.S. Padman, he read Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas and other modern poets then little known. He won over 20 academic prizes, culminating in the Tennyson Medal for the highest mark in the State’s Leaving Honours English paper, even though he left school halfway through his final year and completed his studies in the Public Library at night while working at the *Adelaide News* as a copy boy during the day for 15 shillings a week. He also wrote for the paper, beginning early as a current affairs controversialist with articles containing such statements as ‘The older generation views the future with pessimism and despair, but youth has run away from it ... We do not look forward to 1939—we do not even face it.’ He was aged 17. At the same time his poems in the first *Jindyworobak Anthology* were being singled out by reviewers, James Devaney in the *Catholic Leader* calling him ‘a great literary artist in the making [who] will not be so “advanced” when he gets further forward’, and the *Bulletin* considering him ‘the most interesting’ of the contributors.

Harris went up to university in 1939 an acknowledged published poet. In the July 1939 issue of the *Bohemian*, the

journal of the Melbourne Bread and Cheese Club, he published an article 'I am an Anarchist—So What?' He was a member of the Communist Party. In 1940 the Jindyworobak Club published his first book of poetry, *The Gift of Blood*. He was a highly visible student, making entrances into the University Union, long scarf dangling, followed by his book-bearer, the faithful Mary Martin, who would get the coffee while he began to hold forth on literature, politics, art, surrealism and philosophy. Emulating his English Professor, J.I.M. Stewart, he wore black shirts and white ties; being himself he read voraciously, and one of his contemporaries, Colin Thiele, has described an Honours tutorial in which Max gave a paper on Keats's letters. 'Well, Max really took off that day. He got into Kafka and Rilke and German symbolism, swept through French poetry, especially Baudelaire, had a go at Whitman and Robert Frost, touched on Yeats and James Joyce, and finished with a magnificent peroration. It was a climactic moment. There was then a long silence, purposely created by Stewart. He always tilted his chair far back to the point where it was on the point of toppling over backwards, and puffed at his pipe so assiduously that he was completely shrouded in a cloud of tobacco smoke from which his voice came to us like the oracle out of the burning bush. In this case the silence went on and on, and we could see Max visibly shrinking. At long last after a wait that must have lasted for two or three minutes the Prof let his chair fall forward and his head popped out of the smoke-cloud. "Very interesting, Mr Harris," he said in his high-pitched voice. "Very interesting indeed." He looked at Max with a cherubic expression. "But now, Mr Harris, could you say something about *Keats's Letters*." With Max he always had a bit of a battle to maintain a balance between the wild enthusiasm of youth and the proper study of the prescribed syllabus. Of course he

recognised that Max was a brilliant student, way ahead of the rest of us.'

Poems from these years already show, in 'Let Me Not Call You Lovely', for example, the delicate lyric gift which he later refined and strengthened, a use of the everyday image that can startle, as in the last verse of 'An Elizabethan Song', and the melancholy concern with death which thrums as an undercurrent throughout this selection. He was already in love with the beautiful Yvonne (Von) Hutton, who said at his memorial service on 22 January 1995, appropriately in the University's Bonython Hall: 'When I was 15 I met a 16-year-old poet. At the age of 22 I married that poet. I lived with that poet until 13 January 1995.' Daringly, and shockingly to staid Adelaide society, he used her name adjectivally in his poetry. His energy, his excitement with experimentation were now gathering momentum, and from what he later called the 'literary ferment going on in Adelaide' came *Angry Penguins*, the first issue containing 'The Pelvic Rose', dedicated to Salvador Dali; like *The Waste Land* of T.S. Eliot, the poem was divided into sections, with a note on its philosophical basis and its sources (later an epigraph in a foreign tongue was added as well). Youthfully extravagant in its surrealist imagery, which today seems innocuously obvious, the poem is nonetheless firmly structured and coolly impassioned.

From December 1941 to February 1942 Harris had his brush with the military, in camp, but he was released to return to student life, and became a research assistant in Economics. His second book, *Dramas from the Sky*, was published in 1942, and his mother paid to have his two slim volumes, the first three issues of *Angry Penguins*, and the 1939 issue of the Adelaide University Union journal, *Phoenix*, in which six of his poems had appeared, solidly bound in gold-tooled dark blue leather, labelled 'Works 1939-42'.

He had long rejected the narrowness of Jindyworobak Australianism, and drew on the landscape for its more expansive mythical and imagistic qualities. But the benign inspirational grandeur of Wordsworth's nature is wanting in the South East: 'I measured Man and found Nature lacking, / polluted and transformed by graziers' picnics' ('The Prelude'), and a journey along the Coorong, even though 'There were no reasons for regret' eventually 'showed a world no love could feed [where] all our love is tempered with regret, / and the inner melancholy of harsh / remembrances' ('The Coorong'). Dedications to Paul Eluard and Giorgio de Chirico proclaimed his continued allegiance to surrealism, and the connection was blazoned forth on the cover of *Angry Penguins* no. 4 with a full colour reproduction of 'Maintenance of Identity', a painting by Australia's leading surrealist, James Gleeson, black and white reproductions of works by Nolan, Tucker, Ivor Francis and three other painters, together with art criticism, prose, and poetry by Harris himself and ten others, including Dylan Thomas and the American Karl Shapiro. The international outlook which Harris had constantly pressed for and the placing of Australian culture in an international modernist context were becoming realities. The journal moved to Melbourne after the publishing firm of Reed and Harris was formed in 1943 and Harris became the literary centre of a turbulent world of art and politics, its conflicts embroiling the Contemporary Art Society, communist militants and social realist ideologues.

In its first two years, Reed and Harris, existing 'primarily to provide a channel of publication for progressive Australian and overseas literature', produced over a dozen books and pamphlets, including Harris's surrealist novel, *The Vegetative Eye*, savaged in a *Meanjin* review by Alec Hope. The firm's achievements have been overshadowed by the results of

publishing the 1944 Autumn issue of *Angry Penguins* commemorating 'the Australian Poet Ern Malley'. The revelation in June of that year that the poets James McAuley and Harold Stewart claimed that they had concocted the poems during an afternoon and an evening, the subsequent brouhaha and Harris's conviction in Adelaide in September for publishing obscene material, which no one could have foreseen, have been discussed in many journals and dealt with in detail in Michael Heyward's *The Ern Malley Affair* (1993). The perpetrators asserted that their target was modernism, not Harris and his colleagues, but their attack had the immediate effect of discrediting Harris, Reed and the Angry Penguins circle, and the more long-lasting consolidation of conservative opinion against radical art and literature.

At first Harris could be jovial, at least privately. To a typed series of doggerel couplets dated May 1944 and entitled 'The Philistine', which concludes 'And the whole bloody mob will lynch me one day / For not spelling culture with a capital K', he added a penned 'Addendum': 'And now I've been gunned by this bloke McAuley / Apparently the mêlée [sic] should try me sorely.' With Reed he prepared a December issue of *Angry Penguins* including a large section of critical comment on the Malley poems, now published separately as *The Darkening Ecliptic*. The Adelaide trial, farcical though it was, probably affected Harris personally more strongly than the hoax itself. He was fined £5 with £21/11/- costs. He and Von were insulted openly in the street. These incidents were not isolated. In the same year community hostility to radicalism was expressed elsewhere in the country by the judicial attempt of disgruntled artists to wrest the award of the Archibald Prize from the winner, William Dobell, the prosecution of Robert Close for his novel *Love Me Sailor*, and the banning of another novel, Lawson

Glassop's *We Were the Rats*. Censorship remained an issue with Harris for the rest of his life.

The poetic flow did not stop. 'Military Incident', dated March 1944, is related to, and a literary equivalent of, such paintings as Nolan's *The Baths* (1943), Perceval's *Negroes at Night* (1944) and Tucker's paintings of soldiers, corruption and the city. During 1946 one issue of *Angry Penguins* was published and Harris edited, with various others, ten monthly issues of the smaller *Angry Penguins Broadsheet*, but the tenth was the last, and carried the announcement that the firm of Reed and Harris had been 'forced to close down ... after nearly 4 years of work and the publication of 14 books in addition to "Angry Penguins" and the "Broadsheet", it has now reached the end of its financial resources'. The Harrises had by then returned to Adelaide, where Max began his bookselling career by joining Mary Martin in the bookshop she had set up. An irrepressible publisher, in 1950 he began a satirical cyclostyled review, *Mary's Own Paper*, which for the next decade needled the Playford government and provided a much-needed forum for discussion on art, literature and theatre. But MOP, as it was known, was essentially parochial, and lacked the seriousness and aesthetic policy which had propelled *Angry Penguins*. In 1963 the Harrises became the owners of Mary Martin's, and the business prospered, with interstate branches, overseas connections and a much-read booklist.

Although it did not cease, the once ebullient poetic impulse was slowed. Added to the emotional impact of the Ern Malley affair and the court case were the discovery that the Harrises' young daughter had a devastating disease in one eye and, soon after, major surgery undergone by her mother—events reflected in Harris's poetic content and imagery. It was not until 1955 that he produced another book, *The Coorong and Other*

*Poems*. Privately printed, it contained 22 poems. The former exuberance and challenging or silly surrealistic images were gone, replaced largely by clarity and quiet, a strong thread of melancholy, and, in a poem like 'Aubade', a dry humour. Picturing the awakening of the old poet Oblomov, this was among the poems published in *Ern Malley's Journal* (1952-55), which Harris co-edited with John Reed and Barrie Reid; as Richard Haese says in his detailed study *Rebels and Precursors: The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art* (1981), the new journal 'failed to elicit a deep response from artists and writers and, in the illiberal atmosphere of the early 1950s, appeared to be no more than a faint bleating in the wilderness' (p. 292). But it kept Malley's name alive, and Harris republished the poems several times, beginning in 1961; separate editions with scholarly essays appeared in 1988 and 1993.

If he was writing little poetry himself, he was soon encouraging others again. With two academics, Bryn Davies and poet Geoffrey Dutton, in 1957 he founded *Australian Letters*, which aimed to print verse, stories and essays, and also, as Dutton said when introducing *The Vital Decade*, an anthology drawn from the journal in 1968, 'articles on non-literary subjects that would be part of the experience of living in Australia' (p. 9). As well as printing work by Australians, including Patrick White whom they championed, the editors commissioned such overseas writers as Richard Aldington, Lawrence Durrell, Roy Campbell and John Wain. The *Angry Penguins'* aesthetic philosophy was still active, if without the political agenda. Of particular importance was the commissioning of paintings to accompany poetry, not as illustrations, but as 'artistic meditations, as it were, on the the themes of the poets'. Nineteen such collaborations were published and despite the hope of keeping the originals together, only one complete set

exists: Arthur Boyd and Max Harris, presented to the Barr Smith Library in 1982 by the poet.

In 1961 *Australian Book Review* was established with Harris, Dutton and later Rosemary Wighton as editors, aiming to notice every Australian non-technical book (which says much about the number of such books then being published), and in the same year, with Brian Stonier and Dutton, Harris set up Penguin Australia. Growing impatient with London attitudes, they established the first Australian paperback house, Sun Books, in 1965. On this becoming Sun-Macmillan in 1973, Harris became Australian adviser to the London firm Macmillan; a year later he and Von sold Mary Martin's to them, ending almost 30 years of imaginative and successful bookselling.

During those years, the energetic vitality which had done so much to project modernism into Australian culture made him one of the most widely exposed controversialists in the Australian media. He was chairman and adviser for 'The Critics' on ABC television from 1962 to 1972 and a columnist for the *Australian* from its inception in 1964 until 1991. During the 1970s and 1980s he also contributed regularly to the Adelaide *Sunday Mail* and wrote a book column for the *Bulletin*; he gleefully attacked pretension, political chicanery, sloppy English, bad manners and virtually anything else that would make good copy. For *Who's Who in Australia* he gave his recreation as 'poppy-logging', and he said in 1993: 'I cut myself down to about the right size years ago.' He contributed more enduringly to the cultural debate with essays to journals and participation in symposia. Laurie Clancy justly called him 'a kind of portly gadfly of Australian letters'.

*A Window at Night*, published in 1967, collected nearly all of Harris's poems written since *The Coorong and Other*

*Poems*, 21 of them, as well as 32 written before 1955. In the 1952 *Direction* article quoted earlier Harris had said he wanted to see poetry which ‘penetrates the world of relationship’, though he was ‘not convinced’ he would write it himself. Most of these poems are about that world, several of them about love. The title poem, with its developing argument and conversational tone, resonates with the the lyrics of John Donne, and shows similar control of rhythm. The relationship of ‘At the Circus’, one of the poems illustrated by Boyd, is between the poet and himself—Harris had no sibling—and the irregular last line echoes the dreadful event it describes. The melancholy of many of the poems is most powerfully expressed in the intensely personal ‘Dim the Green Hope’, which was also illustrated by Boyd. With its subtly varied refrain in which ‘there is no bride but death’, it could have provided the lyrics for a lute setting by John Dowland.

Inspiration from the landscape expanded into exploration narrative with the harsh ‘Sturt at Depot Glen’ and ‘The Murder of Kennedy, 1848’, which opens out in the fourth stanza to include all who fear

To be in life alone, and love,  
To live in love when old,  
Exploring for that inward thing  
When the outer love is cold.

A Shakespearian allusion sits easily with the local ‘gibber and snake’ in the first of ‘Two Poems for an Australian Summer’, and in an almost palpable image ‘time on balls of burning feet / Shimmers a track of days through heat.’ And even though at the last it has an undeniable dying fall, ‘Wordsworth in Barossa’, with its ‘sullen Silesian lass’ who ‘smells like an unwashed

sherry-glass', offers a vivid glimpse of the humour which Harris's daughter, Samela, has said gave her 'a childhood of mirth'. Like the well-known 'Tantanoola Tiger', 'Wordsworth in Barossa' makes a social point; like all the best poetry, it provokes thought.

The poems in his last, small collection, *Poetic Gems*, are again a mixture of the personal and the more general, despite his saying, 'Poetry should be about the world. It should not be about the poet' (p. 9). 'A Mug's Game', set in the Sturt Arcade Hotel, sardonically reflects 'Martin Buber in the Pub' written in brighter times when he had not broken with the drinking companions of those days. The lightly deft 'The I in Me That I See in You' recalls 'A Window at Night'. 'George Herbert Revisited', on the other hand, is a satirical comment on society, all the more pointed for its being based on one of Herbert's greatest lyrics.

The final poems in this selection are strong. 'Love's Metaphysic', published in 1988, looks back to the friendship, lapsed for a time, with Sunday and John Reed, who both died in 1981; accomplished, carefully structured, it moves with thoughtful gravity to its enigmatic conclusion. In 1992 Harris was diagnosed with cancer, and he celebrates the symbiotic relationship with his wife and companion of 50 years in the two 'Spouse' poems, 'Spouse: 1942-1992' with its allusion, now affirmative, to the sombre conclusion of 'The Explanation', 'But we have no faith that the heart can change the weather'; after 50 years, the realisation is that the weather is less important than it seemed then:

I do not recall, ever,  
The weather being other than the sounds of  
night, and naught to do with us.

And in 'Sleep Demeter', he similarly deals with the great problems by banishing them, as Coriolanus banished Rome:

The pain of the day, the haunted houses of the  
    night, are precisely  
What we were not born to.

'The Rosarian', his last published poem, directly names wife, daughter, grandsons, and friends whose names are also those of a popular folksinging trio of the 1960s. Time, the weather, literature occur again as themes in the poem, which ends with a play on words implying that as roses need water to flourish, so those he is leaving will be nourished by what they read, and he is taking care of that.

The fluency with words, which from the first was allied with a brilliant and questing intelligence, never deserted him. Blake, Keats, Wordsworth; and Rilke, Eliot, e.e. cummings among the moderns, were some of the poets who influenced him early. Stimulated and fed by his omnivorous reading in contemporary and canonical literature, philosophers as divergent as Sartre, Buber and Kierkegaard, and especially the poet and art critic Herbert Read, poetry and ideas poured out of the young Harris. He revised little, and the words on the page are often as they came new-minted. Phrases linger in the mind, the image bound to the words by assonance, perhaps, as with 'the gentle flowering of your hand / is petalled with content' from 'An Elizabethan Song', or by rhythm, in 'drab time's scowl' from 'Let Me Not Call You Lovely'. Although his metrical control is not always firm, at its best it can encompass the laconic looseness of 'Incident at the Alice' and the strict measures of 'The Bird'. The Ern Malley incident was pivotal in his writing career, turning him into a poet of sparer technique, and

diverting his verbal prodigality into journalism. He had no illusions about being a columnist, saying in the introduction to *The Best of Max Harris* (1986): 'It is a miserable duty to look back over more than a thousand weekly pieces of fugitive opinion-writing. The writing doesn't last ... But,' he added more cheerfully, 'as the years pass, tomorrow's fish and chippery turns into today's social history' (p. ix). And indeed his five books of essays and collected journalism will be a valuable resource to social and cultural historians.

Max Harris's place in Australia's cultural history is secured by his essential role in the development of modernism in art and literature in this country, which honoured him with the award of Order of Australia (AO) in 1989. The poems in this selection give him a significant place among Australia's lyric poets.

*Alan Brissenden*  
*December 1995*

## Introduction—a note on sources

The quotation beginning ‘The poet ...’ is from Max Harris’s essay ‘The Faded Years’ in *Direction*, vol. 1 (1952), p. 12. ‘As with any ...’ appears in ‘Angry Penguins and After’ in *Quadrant*, vol. 7 (1963), p. 7. The reference to his childhood in Mount Gambier is from ‘Harris in Thunderland’ (typescript), University of Adelaide, Barr Smith Library, Harris Papers, 92 H315 p SR, 1.3 fldr 1; the Kangaroo Island poem, 1.6 fldr 1; the undated *News* article, and undated reviews in the *Catholic Leader* and the *Bulletin*, 2.1, cutting book. Colin Thiele’s reminiscence of an English Honours tutorial with J.I.M. Stewart is in a letter to the author (15 February 1995), and quoted by kind permission. Alec Hope’s review of *The Vegetative Eye* is in *Meanjin*, vol. 3 (1944), pp. 44–48. Max Harris’s ‘The Philistine’ is in the Harris Papers, 1.6 fldr 3. His remark on cutting himself ‘down to about the right size years ago’ was made during an interview with Peter Ross, screened on ABC TV, 15 December 1993. Laurie Clancy’s comment is from ‘Max Harris and the Academies’, *Dissent*, vol. 20 (1967), p. 43.

## Let Me Not Call You Lovely

let me not call you lovely. Be  
the chaos of the dream that knows  
nor nature nor lurid beauty.  
be the cramped inturning of the rose  
blown past full flare.  
not smooth, your hair  
a tea-tree storm, your lips a warm  
logfire fantastic burning in the pines  
to the dingo-howl.  
then no fear shows the signs,  
o so young,  
of drab time's scowl.

## Boat-Train

the slope of the smoke of the boat-train skies  
the virgin blossoming, the virgin blossom white  
as the yvonne-breast unseen where the cross lies  
lazily as pall-smoke, the flashing side-lit almond bright  
and the leather seat is cold  
few men cross legs, unfold  
the paper, and Lyly places love across my knee  
Alexander vulgar desperately.  
campaspe, ah yvonne ...  
the blossom leaping  
the smoke revolves—it's funny near the railside slums  
the blossom grows unravished by respectability and comes  
unsuspected slyly over the woodshed for the train  
to pregnate with the tight clothes  
my lady wears about her breasts;  
by loneliness drawn in the traveller reads again.

past the women at fences, whose folded arms  
slope heavily as smoke on blossom, sunk chests  
rosily tubercular; past to the neat palms  
and the neat lawns and the aspect of goodbye,  
the women weeping as the streamers fly ...  
all this and more—for the boat-train stops  
and the traveller leaves in long silences  
suspended down the grasping paper roll,  
and he in serried smiles betrays the senses  
for you can only shake time by the hand ...  
no kiss ... as ah, the blossom is everywhere  
in this land now.

not distant, in trashyards, on the bare  
hill on weighted bough ...  
no kiss

now the tug feels the loose skin tighten,  
its throat sore  
the screws lash the waters whiten  
paramour  
big brassy, and the women weep ...  
the fog-train whistle-shriek.  
the traveller has gone his journey, said his farewell,  
turns now, returns now, the engine is heartless,  
the seat is still warm where he sat ... it is as well  
home is fainter than childhood guess.  
the journey was smutty, he's washed, prepared;  
the blossom is graceful, unshared  
with smoke in wind-change,  
is obviously strange,  
they fall.

the yvonne-breasts have sadly fared—  
lo, happy Appeles, with no blossom falling!

## Sonnet

I hallow her between the temple pillars  
and kneel there with my praying-mantis want  
with rubbing hands and pious heart of love ...  
I worship by the shallow muddy font  
of aspirations, dumb, slow, stupid love,  
while object hallowed darkens slowly mellows  
mocking me with mystery of shadows  
in my green grave, the tomb where need grows  
with every breath and stifles the heart's conquest  
of hidden words of flesh, of lover's jest:

revered by the coldness of the floors  
she whom I hallowed will not come to me  
preferring to be statued in her mastery.

O that I too were stone on Attic shores!

## Mad Jasper

mad Jasper stood poised on the skyscraper wall  
and felt this the moment to end all  
the desires he'd never get,  
to leap from his life's concrete parapet.  
He watched the silly dawn arise,  
the trams creep up the hollow hill,  
the railway's mass of glassy flies  
snouting out of the morning's chill.  
He had aspired to be in this,  
to be the man of the midnight kiss,  
the dancing doll of the pubtalk shams,  
to pivot straps on the rocking trams.  
Yet he'd always been on this lofty sheer,  
never tasted the poppysweet,  
never flared in the anemone-clear  
touch of hands in the moving street.  
And now high up in the morning's pall  
saw he'd never been down to the street at all.

In anguish mad Jasper loosened his grip  
and established one true relationship.

## Words to a Lover

hold hands and have no care,  
walk down the street holding hands:  
you are no refugee  
for the first time in home lands  
and still expecting  
the thumbed nose, the hostile stare,  
and hate from high buildings.  
You, as they, are free and without hope  
and not expecting much—grope  
in your flat for the shielding  
lock, the familiar switch, and change  
your mind, desiring not light  
knowing too well nothing is strange  
as the past's eye and the night  
with its rifles and suspicion had been;  
that your hand will not tremor away  
from the threat you had not seen  
in the terror of the day.  
Believe me, nothing will be amiss  
now that you have learned to love;  
there is no unknown law in this  
nor the steel barrel at your breast.

Know that we are lovers,  
and as such,  
are grown gravely old  
and do not expect much.

## Hills' Scene

*From 'Das verlassene Maegdlein' by Eduard Moerike*

in the cold fog of dawn  
in the hour of distant sounds  
the hopeless echo of the crow  
I must walk the worn  
bush-track to the mounds  
where my herds roll slow,  
and kindle the rearing fire  
with its mocking sparks of desire  
tearing with flare my heavy day,  
and piercing the film of my eyes

there I must watch, wearily stay  
hearing the bush pain-cries,  
and redream the dreams, the pain of your words,  
and move in tears as my lonely herds.

## This Age Has Brought

this age has brought me twenty years,  
till the heart must say 'regret',  
be young no more, forget  
the gentle thrilling and the unknown fears.

we are young no more, and it is age  
has visited the unswept house,  
mother unprepared, her apron loose  
about her. Now we must wage

the battle with this exploiter, profiteer,  
place in the teapot the high rents  
for a voice that persists, never relents  
in its fading and its heavy coming near

as a shortwave radio. The strain  
is that of death betrayed;  
for we cannot be afraid  
who may not love nor die again.

## Mithridatum of Despair

We know no mithridatum of despair  
as drunks, the angry penguins of the night,  
straddling the cobbles of the square,  
tying a shoelace by fogged lamplight.

We know no astringent pain,  
no flecking of thought's dull eternal sea  
in garret image, of Spain  
and love ... now love's parody.

See—chaos spark, struck from flint,  
and the plunging distemper, flare in the dawn's dull seep  
of milkcart horse, morning horse,  
chaos horse, walking at three to the doors of sleep  
with the creamy poison.  
convulsions endure  
from nine to five,  
all life immure.  
and still alive

we know no mithridatum, nor the remembered dregs of fear,  
the glass stands dry and silted: no end is near.

## Preparation

with the children married the old folk prepare to die;  
take a home in some unmoving little town, and there  
the old man pretends that he likes pottering round.  
but oh, the bitterness in the fingers tending the rose  
    and the briar,  
bitterness in the heart at the workbench, fooling around.

but what of you and I, poised in the swoop  
of another drink. Do we hate to die  
day by day in an aeon of pottering around, lie  
to ourselves like the old fool, retirement his death's job?  
we, darling, bravely gyrate in the amorphous loop

of the alive, and drive with the wings of words  
our desires down to the bursting thrill of the giggle  
lapped in the waves of some night episode,  
and wheeling, watch death like Macbeth's dark birds,  
and see the paint of sloping roofs corrode.

## Concessions

granting the water-rats  
scuttling their ecstatic thoughts  
in whispered incidents among the reeds:  
granting all the facts  
like an array of teeth—death  
in the form of the horse that feeds  
its flesh to the lions of the zoo,  
love in the humid splash of the oar,  
and a few caged dingoes—  
all these I must honourably concede to you.

but was there not also a time to pour  
the poison of untruth in the ear of despair,  
to palsy the cynic flesh, our distrust  
of permanence, was there not time  
to offer and take, instead of to state and to state  
like cash registers, incubators, clocks.  
having found ourselves cheap and funny  
could we not have leaned against the wall,  
saying, 'We are the raven shadows of heaven,  
but now our substance forms.'

the denial of beauty was not our spirit's crime.  
we were not lovers. We hadn't time.

## The Pelvic Rose

This philosophic rather than lyric poem divides into two linked statements; one destructive, the other constructive. On the one hand the symbolism describes the nature of the institution of the church and its ritual; on the other hand the same genus of symbolism advances a spiritual attitude which owes much to the thought of Miltonic Arianism, to Aldous Huxley's essay on Pascal, to Sigmund Freud, and to *The Golden Bough*.

I have been accused of sexual prurience in my work. Such charges are too silly to refute. I have used a biological (rather than sexual) imagery through this poem because it conveys best what I want to say; because the processes of biology provide a field of great beauty and spiritual significance for the creative imagination.

The poem as a whole, although contemporary in spirit and technique, is primitive in its nature. It unites the myth-forming power of the human mind with the processes of art. I would refer the reader to Herbert Read's studies of the 'creative myth' in art, in his *Collected Essays*, and the introduction to *Surrealism*.

# The Pelvic Rose

*To Salvador Dali*

'In forma dunque di candida rosa  
mi si mostrava la milizia santa,  
che nel suo sangue Cristo fece sposa.'

Dante, *Paradiso*

## I

the pelvic rose unfolding in the flesh  
gropes its roots into the germs of life,  
esoteric being about the hair roots of the cells,  
spreads wide the set limb, unanswering  
the petal's voice, and through the silent orgasm  
makes a passage to the precise cross-winds  
of thought; burnt to ash of grief  
blown pelvic rose is the speck in the eye  
from many a backyard fire or the willywilly  
hurling the heart with the dead leaf.

## II

the eye to the keyhole, the lip to the bone,  
o darling, what lies beyond the selfless frame?  
the fingers clawing at the switch, the navel,  
what umbilical cord floods shaded lighting  
on our aspirations, illumines the secret name  
written on the wall by death's hand of flame?  
the cord runs to the pole, the wire of power  
to the station and some single blackout finger  
pulls all our efforts out of being—at what hour?  
In the telescopic horror who the actors, who to blame?

from the shimmering noon into the shaded cloister  
whispering among the vines and desires in corners ...  
stand in the arch, observe observe in the dusky  
foldings of the room bounded by the Gothic keyhole  
the old, old man at the withered breast, weeping  
foetus-tears, crabbed fingers sliding the green  
smooth stem, nuzzling the pelvic rose.  
Across the womb-frame, binoculars of vision,  
such a play is acted that fears freeze  
in being and love seems never to have been

not to know what the sullen microscope would mean  
is all our business, all our action,  
deer feeding, hard dying on the seething screen.  
But now the vision changes and the rose is blown,  
petals spiralling the labia to the light  
and where was but the keyhole and the night  
the cord of the belly strangles the bursting  
breasts of delight with light and unknown  
flame writes the epic horror, fiercely states  
'through the ages the old old man masturbates'.

### III

was it this that I had loved, in loving seen  
was this the cord my fingers searched out tenderly  
in the dark; or all the time had my heart yearned  
to be one with the hand at the big switch, dizzy  
with meters and climax? Beyond Faust's silent vault  
beyond the heart, the germination of the rose,  
the inchoate essence has the switch in each neuron and twitch  
of limb, in our kiss, in our aching bodies' love:  
let us spread our love across the soil as the blown  
rose tossed from its pelvic prison and its throne.

o Joy's irreproachable vesture cloaks everything,  
born from the earth's sighing ... the disintegrating flower ...

and waking from the midnight agony it whelms  
out beyond us and the old man and placenta  
like a blood haze across the swimming eyes.  
Born through dream's keyhole into the blaze of war  
o pantheistic essence, precise, tangible, we adore  
the crawling sperm; the sweet dear petal of the rose  
as it is, unfolds, and is for ever from the spiral death.  
Glorious the revolutionary horror of the naked bone.

If then I approach love like a dog licking a stranger's sores  
do not turn away. If with anaesthetic scream  
I pause at the base of the spiral staircase, epileptic  
vision of death at the birthplace of sowing, the bone  
too narrow for childbirth scaring the smile  
of recognition from the lips, stifling the weak  
hot odour of the rose concentrate of life's power,  
do not deny me the simple truths, leave me  
whispering in sick-rooms, removing night-flowers  
on tip-toe, afraid of the dark labyrinth.

stand before me, become the starkest skeleton  
until the vapoured flesh is the vault's shaft  
of atomic light, offer sleep and the milkless breast  
to the old man death, and I will fight my way  
to your love, beloved, I won't be afraid.  
I'll try. I'll try. But it is hard to be scattered,  
hope, desire, the cousin senses, all on the arcs of time.  
But we discover the act is the waking of the dream  
and through the eye and the bone our love grows  
and is all, the scattered petals of the pelvic rose.

#### IV

the village air weighted with solemn bells  
from morning churches endures an agony of suppression—  
*one* vested face leering from the wells  
of the groaning earth's content, the window god  
snuggling in the womb, the navel his telephone  
whence his commands on the living air  
reverberate that the air palpitates  
in strangulation, the old old man stifling  
the lunging freshness of each to-morrow's stride.  
Destroy the murdering churches and the strangling crucifix!

Let love be a unity, acute scattering over the earth,  
dying in the rose, and dying into birth.

## Pushkin

feet

    speak arrogantly,  
poor Pushkin,  
cutting the toe-webs  
that frustrate  
the ankle, voice of bone;  
denying  
regret: Pushkin,  
the grace of women's feet  
trampling his aspirations.

## War and Peace

Dear hearts, in your quiet spaces  
are long solitudes unpillared with regrets  
from too much canvas verbiage about our minds,  
the eyes, reluctant, turning from the threats

of mornings when the drumbeat on the skin  
unites our secret codes with inner meaning—  
long dramas acted from the fading skies,  
charades to curse the prisons we are in.

## The Prelude

the child's myth was the wattle country,  
and the limp lakes set dead in the baking  
volcanic crust and the wild grey soil; near  
this Windermere the wattles met the breaking  
southern ocean, moustaching the mouth  
and the sea's decayed teeth, those ancient cliffs  
whose landslides bombed the sea. Here,  
before me, mad Gordon raced for bets  
down the windswept bay, leapt the inlets,  
to the Schank, to Bellum-Bellum and the Mount,  
and spoke of life's sadistic joy—  
fear locked gurgling in the breast, clanking chains  
in vain at the races or the hunt.  
In the craters, the ghost-pines soared their phalli,  
pyloning the sky, to canvas-in the ogre,  
the lake of torture, that changed its form,  
and Nature's sin gleamed in its midnight eye.  
There were caves where dead sheep up-gaped,  
dythyrambic chorus to the humped hollow tread  
on the honeycomb crust spiralling out for miles—  
beneath, the vast cave-empire of molten decay.  
Night brought  
the unheard sound of rushing rivers, deep  
down in the bowels of the straining town,  
the imagined stream of mystery, feeding  
the solemn blue lake with suggestions  
of Time, stalagmites, and strange deaths  
from the Henty past. Legends of lakes

rose like Palamedes, unsanctified, raw  
and without beauty to the child dream.  
Yet beauty was distilled with primeval fear  
and the winds' genuflexions in this Windermere.

But Nature's essence was no prepossession  
by which I measured Man and found him good:  
I measured Man and found Nature lacking,  
polluted and transformed by graziers' picnics,  
the streams were always washed by admonition,  
she bored one with the seeing, for seeing grew  
to blinking in the space between lunch and tea.  
I found a prepossession, a Force, and that alone  
could redress Nature in its wonted gold,  
could choke the Gordon tracks with wattles' sun.  
The Force could liberate Man, then Nature transform;  
but Itself was neither. It moved within machines  
and it somehow seemed the tears of childhood  
were its food and growth. The woollen mills  
its shrine I thought, and so the child's divorce  
of Nature and Man ensued. I loved the Force.

I could not sing, a Poet, in verbal tone  
that flattened art and image to a landscape,  
the wind, the vile monster—feeling; and alone  
beauty enduring in physical statement, the pure  
being in the word and in the eye, the permanence  
of the heart distilling it well into time.  
My music was to give and not to take,  
creating that would change the course of acts,  
not record them like the clock or death  
that see things true, but always just the same;  
as Wordsworth saw—*one* truth, *one* essence,  
Nature's Mephisto in many forms, denying all the rest—  
and killed music that could murder in his breast.  
I thrust my hand into the dynamo for the Force,  
and it was found there, comrades. One day  
I shall return and through Persepolis  
in triumph recreate the myth, and the way  
of the Force will lie in all our hands; in my hand  
*this* Nature lie palpitating as a soft bird  
and searoar and cliffcrash will be heard  
again, and this Nature will take on its Truth again,  
and the seas' spew for Wordsworths, and life's disdain.

## An Elizabethan Song

the gentle flowering of your hand  
is petalled with content:  
how all the fields of you are soft  
and the birds silent

you are the small grove  
(let me there rest)  
your fingers are the moss,  
the stream your breast

from you let me concoct  
a spring idyll:  
like a stew let me mix  
the body's culinary riddle.

# The Traveller

*To Giorgio de Chirico*

I

Antipodes are born agonies accrue  
and this is the present state of will:  
like the discord of wants men are still  
born in the streets and ratify  
the compact of star with cross

Antipodes arise cries recall  
the absence of long-suffering heads  
bent across the memorial  
of a last image of distress.

till the white and the new  
the recrudescences aspire  
in level tumult to a reaping  
the Ukraine will be a gunshot  
in the barrel of the eyeball.

Antipodes are here, less grand  
mountains spring to the palette  
and brush the morning crumbs  
from our quick duty to run  
for a future that is strange—

the platform cold in grey fog  
distraught dreams pace beside  
the long shimmer of rail curve  
and turn agony into the room  
with the waiting seat impatient

Antipodes refute, lassitude overbears  
the waiting foot; no ticket to procure  
the full stretch of body is secure  
crumpled on the board of lowest stair  
where never foot stood voice screamed

in the will of a hollow station  
we sprang from the newsprint  
over the sleeping foot and died  
for the old life and the hour

of five: seven short dreams  
have never been waiting  
lips with apple-core never poisoned  
the Borgia in the fuming bell  
speaking the sermon of Antipodes

avenue wants the tooth and nail  
of tree burnt in the heart,  
house wants stair-turn  
heaping on the coldened breast,  
eye wants rot in the wood

vision to crumple and at last  
here we are in the drawl of  
slow determination: ether rains  
from the lethal bruise and morning  
darkens the dawn of gleams

with the quietude of inconsolable  
pity: if we could see the bulk  
of motion, porter or train ambling  
into the ache beneath the foot  
how unutterable the impact how

frail and woeful the eternity of peace:  
if we recreate spectre and full  
absence in the empty hollow of  
the peashell cast on iron  
how late the train would be.

seek. drive to the imperative  
work on the ghost platform of  
Antipodes: Andrew kissed  
the pretty waitress and withdrew  
to a lake of solace the sleepers

led to in a vale of griping  
denial: this brings each song  
to an harmonic spasm the stomach  
wanted and the will saw spread  
not here in the sky's vegetation

not there in the stirring spoon  
but in the corner mystery  
where the here-rail met the  
there and both sang loud  
we are the being of each end:

## II

the factitious maker of unity  
paces upon the springboard before  
which the plunge of toothbite  
is unable to weal and the blood  
to pour compassion on the under-

body, raped beyond recognition.  
Having seen the turning eye  
reveal the retinal nakedness  
who can leave a sun bleeding  
or a mother in the contrapuntal pang!

All beings move out of this ecstasy  
Of sickness, suck the gangrened  
Finger pointing our destinies:  
We cannot eat our fate with weeping  
Nor tire a ghost with talk of sleep!

## The Coorong

There were no reasons for regret,  
to see the pipeclay bite into the heart,  
ancient and remorseful, of the wild  
tobacco-land, with its sea-humour  
and death's heads, and the brown  
angry, streaked sand.

The wild brumbies roamed the bluebush  
to the pipeclay edge, the stark salt  
hand on the breast of the past;  
and there, the fishing nets, hung  
with stiff necklaces of sea-weed,  
stretched across the rusted tin.

We had no reasons for regret  
in country foreign to our mutual thoughts,  
but time has taught us best  
how near home the dying fish are caught  
and dried for future use  
to be eaten by the sea.

Because all meaning is retrospect  
of visual trauma and surprise,  
your glances, sudden with regret,  
alone, in all the misery of the eyes,  
see not the gums and dreams paraded  
upon the individual pulse's beat,  
but what I thought you had not seen—  
the sharp recognition of familiar soil,  
and the humped ranges, barring out the sea.  
The wild duck sheeted that iron sky  
with their aura of discontent, while I  
leant to the wind as the yackas bent.

The clarity of your smile, and the speed  
of the miles could not prevent  
the distance curling its waves of heat  
to burn into the mind: the hot  
enigma of snake-skins on the fence  
showed a world no love could feed.

Now all our love is tempered with regret,  
and the inner melancholy of harsh  
remembrances. For sunrise and rank  
odour of decaying sea, fulfilment  
receding beyond the long limb of dividing land,  
cannot accept the immediate eye's command.

## Lines to a Lady

are you gentle, are you kind?  
this, you know, is New Found Land,  
whose forests ache and are designed  
to proselytise the love you planned

have you tears, that fingers reach  
softly touching, through the night  
my imagination crosses with each  
twist and ingrain of despise

have you moved within the lamplit gardens of suffering love  
that you can test each impulse against the moon's anguish,  
the fusion of order and chaos, garden and night, the limpid grove  
where patience is midnight and the garden path your wish?

I have visions of permanence. The tumoured brain resents  
the imprint on the mouth and on the heart, sees deep within  
the mossy wells of sensuous delight to the deep descents  
of waterworn stone this moment cannot illumine.

are you gentle, are you kind?  
this, you know, is New Found Land;  
all my hopes, dear, are resigned  
to the bleaks of morning sand.

you try to build a colony  
by the ocean's torrid roar,  
you cannot serve and still be free,  
you cannot open every door!

## The Ocean

For the last time the old and angular sea rolled  
its sullen eulogy of all floating things  
and was swallowed in its own remorse:

he suffered the immediate spasm of suffering,  
absorbed and choked into the heart  
of the agent he had sung as a stringed instrument

twanged on the bow of starving days and nights,  
when gale and swell gorged eyeless holes  
into the vacant flesh of the ocean night.

The desolation had christened him into his being,  
and its, but that was only prelude to  
the gaunt engulfing and revelry of death;

and as the consciousness of seizure grew  
to certainty of minute love consumed,  
one thought held beyond the infinite blasting

of eardrums bursting, and explosions of the pulse—  
the lethal element strode on in carved remorse  
to toll his death to the patient temporal shore,  
to greet his unmet lover with a surge of tears.

## Acknowledgement

I have been brought near the regions of delight;  
sometimes it is the modulation of a voice, or a movement;  
and perhaps in the shadowy pleasure of sight  
I should be content, nor want the rapture, the tactual consent.

for here is not the substance of bitterness  
that could grow to the giant image in the dark lane  
leading to the place of habitation. There is less  
chance of the lover's harsh burning of the brain.

therefore I say you are very wise  
and I know what you would, and what mould  
produces the copper, what can devise  
the sovereign's splendour and the gleam of gold.

I thank you for the penny commerce of the heart  
dispassionately as the information of a Blue Book.  
I know the laws of supply and demand. And so we part  
with bargains, both enriched, by the course our moments took.

## R.S.V.P.

*To Paul Eluard*

may I not know you, the faraway sister of time,  
dressed in green,  
watching the drooping tenor of trains  
spearing waste fury at moons?  
I have been  
holding in cupped fingers the transition  
of smoke, laying at your feet the request  
for pity, the courtly wish  
to serve at the pantry door  
and carry your dishes to the negro lips of Jove, pregnant  
and scalded with excrement.  
Great days, these, when love laps the sands of morning time.  
loves the dancing waitress who smokes and smokes  
that I may cuff the past's flame  
in my sleeve  
and appear the great magician  
drawing hopes along behind  
on a long long thread of private pearls.

## Love Song of the Son of Prufrock

The militant's daughter's smiles are free  
but aloof as the flight of the wild turkey;  
Oh I guess her smiles aren't meant for me,  
Fiddle-de-dum, fiddle-de-dee.

The militant's daughter's not dressed in silk,  
Finery is rightly despised by her ilk,  
But I bet her kiss is as smooth as milk,  
Fiddle-de-dum, fiddle-de-dee.

The daughter's eyes are cold and clear  
and refuse to shed any feeble tear,  
but the cold of her eyes is the ice of fear,  
Fiddle-de-dum, fiddle-de-dee.

She guards the proletariat of her heart,  
for hunger and they aren't far apart,  
She liquidates love's Trotskyism with accents hard,  
Fiddle-de-dum, fiddle-de-dee.

But at night she lies in her bed and cries  
for the struggle of love in a world of lies,  
cretonne curtains, sham jewellery, dirt and flies,  
Fiddle-de-dum, fiddle-de-dee.

So here's to the militant's daughter dear,  
and the death in the eyes I love but fear;  
yet why is it me that weeps the tear?  
Fiddle-de-dum, fiddle-de-dee.

Still, I've got a girl of the upper class,  
she gives her kiss as soon as you ask;  
Loving her's no difficult task,  
so Fiddle-de-dum, fiddle-de-dee.

## The Bird

The bird that has perched in the twig of my eye  
is known as the friend of the tree  
and the delicate feet are as strength to the bough  
as he sings, wickedly.

The bird that will carol and sing to the sap  
and the caverns of worms concealed  
is desire mocking the cynical land  
and hearts that are sealed.

The bird that has perched in the twig of my eye  
has pecked at the retinal nerve  
has brought torment of rain and the freshness of blood  
down the long heart's curve.

## Military Incident

At the end of a hard day's fight  
we retired to a broad indefinite stream  
and there overhung the deflected water  
with what fragmented dreams we had left.  
Blue, whose image of vicissitude  
lurked in some frond or willow of his pulse,  
the unrelated nights at Luna Park,  
spat, drooped his sodden butt at the lip  
and said 'Those regal hours of laughter  
now approach me from the wrong direction  
and I realise there was much shrapnel fell  
the time I felt soft as a baby's bottom  
and kissed all arms and legs behind the baths.'  
This was quite a triumph for me  
who had levelled the rifle at my mirrored eye  
and burnt so many deaths into my brain,  
that they all had shouted 'Hurrah for Nig  
who kills as he were born in a shooting parlour.'  
Now they knew the enemy's rotting carcass  
was simply a nocturnal disposition of one's limbs  
such as the sea or the constable had seen,  
and infinite wounds gaped in those hours  
of killing prior to the brawn of man.

## Incident at the Alice

There's old Fred Stone who is always crying  
Like an elephant, a small red tear  
In his dull unblinking eyes: his head  
Swaying on its maypole of dried muscles.

He works with Duke Windsor, a half-caste,  
Rolling and stacking drums out at Shell Depot,  
Puzzling out destinies in the rusty maps  
And oil patches in the empty clanging drums.

How lazily this balding goanna of a man  
Raises his head from the giant tea-cups,  
Wrinkles his eyes against the blue of the sky,  
And stares into its waterless horizons;

Until time settles down, indifferent,  
As a cat shuttering its dreams between its paws.  
At five, with a laugh like a rooster's protest,  
His eyes descend, and open in surprise.

He walks in bandy dignity to the pub  
At the Alice, to meet Alec Drage.

Alec Drage moves like a six foot eagle  
Above the browsing bull-ants on the 'drome,  
Never looks up, lets his leather fingers  
Be bitten, then crushes them lovingly.

A passionate electrician, he hates  
All light that is not cased in glass.  
Like a blind conductor he leads in  
The DC3s that sing down with the sun.

But at night he calls the winking birds  
Home in their great hum of desire  
As if he were a bed, or a womb,  
His heart searching the sky with its light.

And time settles down, indifferent,  
Like a tree outside mortality, like a baobab.  
With a gesture that levels his eyes to the land  
He walks like an instrument of perfection,

He walks with gently regulated movement  
To the Alice pub, to talk with Fred Stone.

Bert Mulcahy, publican, and computer  
Of every toss and throw in human chance,  
Gives his big-eared silence to their talk,  
His thumbs like gravestones on the bar.

His pub yard is dedicated to death  
And to the tranquil obscenities of the cockatoo.  
Out there he is kicksorter, selector, filer  
Of all absurd and human intertwinings.

As the green drunk moments fall sprawling,  
As Alec breathes like a shaft into the night,  
And Fred's eyes tighten like a turned screw,  
Mulcahy counts the bottles on the heap,

Adds four for Fred and six for Alec, mutters  
Arithmetical epitaphs for the minds of men,  
While time settles down, indifferent,  
Like the crest of a settling parrot,

And he walks back to his pub, counting  
Imaginary steps from birth to death.

Anon, bushwalker and corpse, had flung  
The sand around in clawing desperation,  
Torn off the shirt that seared his back  
And slowly died of dehydration.

His buckboard scorched a mile back on the track,  
His rifle lay to attention among the gibbers,  
The round of his mouth was black and startled,  
Pursed and poised as if to swallow beer.

Last night he'd bought for Fred and Alec,  
He'd talked immortal talk till closing time  
Laughed inconstantly as a turn of weather,  
And found his place in this company of men.

Now time settles down on him, indifferent.  
Another bottle is counted on the heap:  
A viscid shape of oil slides down the drum:  
The dusty insects walk their circles of intention.

Tonight converging like compass arcs on the pub  
Two men of no meaning set 'em up again.

## Dispossession

To our past attitudes and words we bid a small departure:  
in reluctant piles records, books, and thoughts  
lose attachment and the relevancy that came  
from feeling wise, and objects in their place.

We rummage through a fug of small activity—  
railway station, cab, shallow words,  
having packed a pile of books and thoughts,  
carried objects and wisdom from their place.

Living is the sense of small goodbyes,  
of being ravaged, refugee, doubtful of a home:  
in simple disposals lost attachments  
lie, in railway carriage, cab, or words.

Friends and drinks, laughter, all become small memories,  
detached from the cracking plaster, books,  
and gramophone records piled along the rug;  
it is ravage, tragic doubt of home.

It is microcosm, no small import  
greeted by a shrug, of all men lost,  
detached from records, books, and thoughts,  
from feeling wise and objects in their place.

## The Ploughman

My sad great Piers who met a small field flower,  
How well that bole your brain can bud a lilting thought,  
A thought whose mystic flight above the seven sins  
Leaves your coarse hands helpless, singing at a plough.

My sad great Piers, who met a small field flower,  
Petals bloomed about the dark vernacular of your heart,  
You stammered and tripped, felt hunted like a thrush,  
And your coarse hands were helpless, singing at the plough.

My sad great Piers, who met a small field flower,  
In a small torment, compressed in an enigma,  
You stamped on the flower in a parabola of death,  
While your coarse hands, helpless, sang at the plough.

## On Throwing a Copy of *The New Statesman* into the Coorong

Through the car window goes Kingsley Martin.  
With his neat typography and ageing Fabian gentility!  
It is good to Whitmanise now and again.  
It flushes the liver where the soul sits like an owl.

Kingsley flaps and tatters on a branch of wild tobacco.

The clay and water meet a hundred yards away  
In a shivering froth. Like tumbleweed it breaks  
And rolls with the wind into the dunes of saltbush.  
The great Snake Slut has sudded the water's edge  
For forty miles, and washed her tribe of their scaly skins.

Come December, Kingsley, there'll be proud conclaves  
Of gleaming bellies and diamond backs. You'll love it.

If this dead land traps another rise of sea  
And the tide laps the Ki-Ki signpost (Lonely Track.  
No Water. RAA) the lizards will top  
The fence posts. One frilled head to one signpost  
For sinewed miles that never end ... a dream  
Of St Stylites, great horny frills, licking tongues,  
And death.

The ageless Slut trains her spawn  
To dance. Pavanne. Pavanne. Ten thousand  
Black snakes gather at a time, stand up  
In the water and rock like lilies on their stems  
In the wind, in the winter solstice, in time.

You'll not be lonely. See that tea-tree,  
(Uprooted, its struggling stilled as the bogged carcass  
Of a steer half under clay) with the greatcoat  
Of Nineteen Fourteen tied at the gap in its roots,  
It is the front door to half-caste Charlie's home.  
Knock. Knock. Battling with his plonk,  
He and his tree are one, man and castle,  
Being and reason. Love them together, man!

The wind is no longer serrating sideways down the sand.  
It is the hour of the Bloody Great Drongo,  
The hour of the sand fox, for the brumby to edge uneasily  
With sway back and collapsed belly to the pastures  
Of saltbush. The fretful clan of Murray magpies  
Swoop clear of the sparrowhawk, leave him to peck  
And claw the prey to the slowest promethean death.

The pallid sun sinks, one might think, into the bar  
Of the Meningie pub. Far away. Sleep well Kingsley.

## Refugees from Darwin

We who have come from the rich pawpaw,  
Wheezed our drunken philosophy through the saltbush,  
Are far south in the reaches of men  
And the colder regions where fewer cattle die;  
Are herded here, weary with our new living.  
Our vision is derelict, boarded up, supervised,  
And in a world emptied of its commerce  
There accumulates upon the wharves  
Of our minds the sins of our ancient loneliness.

In that loneliness there was much good sin—  
In those moments, barely remembered, when truth  
Wrote unasked histories beneath the palms.  
In our cynical humour we were outside  
The clubs of war, the mordant trumpetings,  
The habits of egotism in the bars  
That led into vile confessionals  
When the dying, leaning, spoke their thoughts  
While undressing, or preparing for a bath.

From these denials there is little left of love  
To indent heel-marks in the sands of colder days.  
Our yearning tumults have a shoddy end.

Nothing comes after the ancient degradation,  
The triumph of fools in their fulfilment,  
Never to be regained beachcombing where  
Crayfish vibrate beneath the spumes of ice.

## Apollo Bay to Kingston

It ends with the Twelve Apostles;  
Where they wet their feet against the spume of the sea  
And wrap their granite shrouds around them;  
Stare, more basilisks than saints,  
Out into the sibilant undulations of time,  
The sea preceding life. Here at the edge  
Of the sea ... it ends.

Out from Apollo Bay vast tree ferns  
Lift from legendary valleys. Axe  
And bellbird clash across the gullies.  
Mountains, ferns, beeches, dead wood,  
Split logs breathe out a moist secret.  
In this fierce noon the tree ferns steam,  
And uncanny rivulets creep to your feet,  
Lie curled there like tame snakes,  
Whispering rivulets curl at your feet, tame.

In the dank height of beech, dank depth of tree fern,  
It is as if the clocks of the millennia ... clay ... coal ...  
Granite ... sand ... breathing humus ... the pleistocene hours  
Had struck. In deep layers of pain the days of geology  
Live bound alive within this circle of mountains ...  
The dripping tree fern breeding liquid snakes  
That creep like dogs to your feet,  
Perhaps the sloth to eat from your hand,  
The winged tree-lizard to skim along the skyline  
And rest on the wrist in beady-eyed indifference.

God made the Morris Minor to deliver us  
From geological evils, to deliver us  
At the cliff-faces of the sea where saints  
Of rock lie tumbled on a known elevation.  
These creatures are our only enemies here,  
Because they are stone-eyed and without a sense of death,  
Of that eternal element in which we flow,  
Of which we are the wrack, tossed  
Through a concept of time, for all time.  
The tree ferns end: and we are back with death,  
At home, at peace, in our own world,  
Wrapping our granite shrouds around us at the edge of the sea.

It ends with the Twelve Apostles,  
Where they wet their feet against the spume of the sea  
And wrap their granite shrouds around them;  
Stare, more basilisks than saints,  
Out into the sibilant undulations of time,  
The sea preceding life. Here at the edge,  
Of the sea ... it ends.

For a hundred miles the tribes of yackas poise  
And follow the bitumen convolutions. Their spears  
Are raised in hostile neutrality. We have no will,  
No freedom, no more than the humming car.  
This is not ours. Mount Gambier Man, wizened  
And mighty, has cut himself a black  
And pitted strip, in which he makes a narrow-  
Shouldered way to that reach of time  
Where something crept from death and twitched  
A first agony on the molten sand. The terror  
Now begins. The land betrays us to ourselves,  
Nineteen miles from where the crayfish stink  
And the seaweed rots, piled higher than the houses.

The Ozymandias Ozymandias saw is the long whip  
Of sea, dyed to a reptilian skin of clay.  
The first shock of the sea, death abandoning its own  
To create us, is here, the Coorong, our skin of clay.

## Duologues

Forward. The shy glance back. Transfixed.

Poor Mrs Lot!

The physical glass

And the fattening face

Talk to each other,

Innocence and old woman

In the very same grain and line,

Refracting to each other

Such obligations and terrors

And the saltiness of death.

Somewhere it fell. Somewhere.

Poor Paris!

In bending, look up

And a rose stares down.

The seasons of time reverse

And the flowers

Pity the pity of your span.

It is hard to stand again.

The wind swings north. Due north.

You are laughed at.

Indigestion.

Time whose pole you are

Has no freedom.

You can turn and turn

And in all this turning

See all things captive

But yourself.  
In great order and great innocence  
We choose our spring and spin.  
But each and all of us  
How gracelessly we die.

## A Sudden Thought

My hand above the madeira cake  
is stayed. You enter,  
my childless child,  
you enter my mind, I mean,  
and in that shadow (the break  
of time for me  
in my sense of things)  
I live in your hour.

The rain that falls upon your play,  
the gathering of tears,  
my childless child,  
all, brief in you,  
and moving, as the minute in the day.

But I, stilled above the madeira cake,  
living in your time, momentarily die.

## Poem for War-time Christmas

To be loving in the rigour of the sun,  
To hear each other through whorled shells,  
To be in the darkness of those thoughts  
That line Christmas with the veins of age

Is our duty, as the racked cloud  
Must slide its tenderness across a field of wheat:  
Premonitions must hold the stars in place  
While the thunder damns us and anguish is blowing.

Men have given fangs to their curses,  
The incisors grip, and the sudden bitterness.  
Children have died on the rims of hills  
Because they heard music, sensed planetary love.

In this time, friends, we must know each other  
Through the wounds shared fighting with time.  
But we shall be cured in a final weather of blue agate,  
In the sea's shimmer, and washed like the rocks.

## Dead Friends

Padman, Pfeiffer, and Kerr,  
These are dead ones,  
Poets I used to know,  
Dead eight years or so.

I have left it until now  
To mention the fact.  
They were best left alone  
Until a love was grown

That would place them  
Within the flow of time.  
Dead eight years or so.  
With reason, without rhyme.

## Martin Buber in the Pub

My friends are borne to one another  
By their lack of something to say;  
The weight of inward thought is lifted  
And they float to each other  
Like paper darts: they offer the salt of themselves  
Arab-like in hotels,  
Humbler than they would have you believe.  
Humanity is the smallest coin for tipping.  
Colin relates a host of grandiose lies ...  
These are the wafers of our religion.  
Barnes is the butt of malice,  
An unmysterious drinking of the blood ...

And the seas may boil outside. No doubt they do.  
But we are in a silence of some sort,  
Exchanging shells, which placed against the ear,  
Occasionally echo the throbbing of a heart.

## Aubade

Open up, Oblomov: for the dust pan sings  
Tinny-tang for all your years asleep.  
Who knows what maidens may have crept  
And brushed their lids against your cheek.  
Awake old Slav, the kitchen calls,  
Eggs are frying, a saucepan falls,  
Outside an old grey wind begins to weep.

In your bowels a lyric stirs—  
Your toilet call, your morning birds,  
Urging out your lazy feet  
To rest like dumplings on the boards.  
Your brain now beats about its bowl,  
Cake-making, for your acquaintance, Soul,  
Will make a formal call at five.  
This is, if you are still alive.

Old poet, dragging on your drawers,  
Seeking a rhyme without a cause—  
All creation is about its chores!  
Oblomov sighs, subsides, and snores.

## Poem to Hang on a Christmas Tree

*A silver tinsel from the sea's final hazes!*

Hung by our morning hands, a tree  
Dredged from the translucencies within us,  
A silvered Christmas tree, a sea-life draped about us:  
Of memory redolent and warm. This is the gift  
To you, and to you, while laughter is trailing  
Into the green light and the kitchen pomegranate shines.

And (as with all things undulant in the sun, ebbing  
Between the various tides) it is a gift of love tomorrow  
As of the yesterdays that hang renewed upon our ocean tree.  
A gift from then to now, and one from now to then;  
To be exchanged in the daily tide of love, to be exchanged again.

## Happiness

The dust in her hair is cinnamon;  
There is nutmeg in her breath,  
Sweet green ribbons in her eyes—  
The rest of her is death.

A child among the olive trees;  
Breath caught in distress;  
A hand at the edge of sanity—  
then back to busyness.

The ocean moves as if a hand  
Were running through its hair;  
A momentary troubled look;  
A disturbance in the air—

The trembling of our fellow men  
And the motion from without—  
These things give us words and pause,  
A stillness within doubt.

Oh, what a world the poet claims!  
The detector of the lie,  
Arresting moments when we cease  
To live or die.

## Conventional Image

Purple ironstone, and eagles above  
With talons as delicate and deadly  
As a teacup handle. Like love,  
And as heavy, as slow, a dry wind  
Tracks its way up the watercourses.

In the day's horizons or the valleys of night  
Think of this. It is little enough  
To have a conventional image in the heart,  
Which, alien and untenable, comforts you home.  
A concealed and smokeless fire, a question  
Burns faint and transparent on our lips:  
'What in this time is a language for men?'

Accept then in peace these sandy idioms—

Scrub turkeys flopping into anonymity;  
The sun's fall blackening the boulders;  
Goanna, snake, termites, and watercourses  
Tracking in pain and shadow to their rest.

## Sad Ones

The gentleness of Jesus  
And the meekness of the child  
Are false ideas. Christ was fierce  
And we breed our children wild.

The spring girl who is dreaming  
In the branches of a tree  
Knows something of the charnel-house  
And modern psychiatry.

The poor old ancient dribbler,  
Cigar ash on his vest,  
Thinks his seventh stage of life  
Not much worse than the rest.

There is an ache of discontent  
In milktooth and aged gum,  
So let's give praise for coming days,  
For Kingdom-Bloody-Come.

## A Window at Night

And thus, intent, as if intention  
Were a kind of looking into night  
Through glass all stained with bright  
Reflection of thought, returned unasked,

You mirror me unfleshed and glimmering,  
As if I were but an image in your mind  
That does me little credit, draws a blind  
Gesture between intention and your heart.

You are intent, I judge, because you sense  
The weather of me blows outside,  
Yet you can discern only, wide  
And smooth, your own discerning

Of an intention that I do not intend.  
There are cold winds in the brain,  
Leaves may whip and whirl, rain-  
Drops roll down the outer unknown surface,

But neither this nor that, if love is real,  
Is real, weather unseen or image thrown  
By the light we light to make known  
The thing outside us that moves our love.

Be easy, then, to love without intent,  
To shelter from the darkness on a heath  
In some calm innocence or deed of faith.  
In which I'll join, to mirror your content.

## At the Circus

My brother, who is a god, sits by my side,  
Digs tan-bark patterns with his heel,  
Then lifts his head, constrained, with pride,  
To the thighs that are turning like a wheel,

Is engulfed in an ache of want and pity  
For the lady's body, oiled as hawk;  
He dreams on her the stigmata of his loins  
And transports her with his educated talk

Beyond her caravan desires. The circus hands,  
All faded braid, black nails, and seamy lies,  
Are washed like cups in his detergent love,  
And parade their drying gleam before his eyes.

But my brother, who is a god, and who has paid  
For expensive seats and his wicked holy airs,  
Sits beaten and bitter (wings crumpled beneath his shirt)  
Impatient with acts of elephants, dwarfs, and bears;

For it is not good to be a god on earth  
Not knowing the language, nor the dinginess of men,  
Unable to petal the paper flowers of flesh,  
To call a prayer and hear return 'Amen'.

But I, more simple, and of my mother's breed,  
Breathe the fixed smiles, the stale gestures of applause,  
And the tiny prides that trample up the dust,  
Knowing for sure how to sex effect and cause,

And watch the spangled girls above my head  
Untroubled by their invitational ease,  
Until the moment comes for which I've paid  
And their broken limbs lie dreaming beneath the trapeze.

## Necromantics

Seven the things that tempt us,  
Nine the time of day,  
Two the distance between us  
And there is one way.

Green the thought love rests in,  
White the thought that parts,  
Black the shadow tests us  
With our destroying arts.

A sign is enough to live by,  
A shape we make in air;  
A long line of time we follow.  
Does it lead us anywhere?

## Your Eyes Content Me

Your eyes, turning in sorrow, content me,  
For there is in them a new and silent sorrow  
As if your eyes, seeing that content,  
Turn to, dying, that sorrow  
Spent people live in as, dying,  
They rest in some prior deathbed,  
Accepting, loving, in that hour  
The sorrowing eyes that are yet content  
In the love that comes in the loss of love—  
Love occasioned, sorrowed, and relinquished.

Because, in loving, in man's sorrow,  
The heart's settling and dying to content us,  
All is relinquished, determined  
By time and sorrow paid  
And laid within its bed of loving,  
Except love. Your eyes content me.

## A Bad Night for the Washing

March blows even the shadows from the trees,  
Scatters them wide beneath the lights  
That pitch and toss above the resting road.  
Minds and blinds flap equally with unease.

Hands hang high and sigh like tendrils from the cot.  
Lovers in big dreams perch upon the other,  
The surer to grip the night. Some despot  
Threatens their sweetness with the summons of a brother.

On such a night did Esau, Capulet, Kelly,  
Face judgment from a loud tree-howling ghost  
Sprung from the ironbark recesses of a gully,  
To learn perfection is quite simply lost

From life like seasons from the vine  
That blooms in the yard its watery wine.  
A gust of wind names all good moments crime.  
Tomorrow's clean sheets will be twisted on the line.

## Dim the Green Hope

Dim the green hope in your young eyes,  
For there is no bride but death.

There are the things unseen, uncountable,  
The billion photons of each single eye,  
The perfect randomness of all that is,  
The great transformers pounding in each cell.  
But there is no bride but death.

Let life drop from your sleeping fingers,  
For there is no bride but death.

You have grown warm in the sunlight,  
You have averted your head to be silent,  
You have felt divinity because the rain  
Fell grey and loving to the crucifix of your arms.  
But there is no bride but death.

Do not live within another,  
For there is no bride but death.

Bees find only economics in the flower;  
Galaxies expand, explode, and die  
Without becoming other than they are.  
You are born to that species called 'alone'  
And you are born to embrace no bride but death.

## Two Poems for an Australian Summer

1.

Jack the sated snail slides down the bean,  
The tall stalks of the sugar-peas  
Yellow into straw, and the daisies  
Blaze into anger from their beds of green.

The cold nasturtium dies beneath its leaf  
Ashamed of being weak beneath the pride  
Of goldenrods that bend to their own tide  
In their own season, the sun their chief.

In the drying time Nature and man  
Come to a testing less pitiful than flame,  
Both harder and kinder, in a scheme  
Of turning flesh and flower to sand.

Now blue is death, hot brown is peace  
While time on balls of burning feet  
Shimmers a track of days through heat.  
Unthinkable that summer must end its lease.

Gibber and snake have come to terms  
With life suspended in a lifeless land,  
While leathered man and the soursob corms  
Defy their natures, proud not to understand.

2.

Now on the bough hangs the almond tenuous,  
A dry shell ready for burial in the grass.  
North, cattle stamp; an endless overlanding  
Skinny as rakes in Belsen-eyed distress.

No kiss parts lips that are sealed as a letter;  
Summer is in the heat, its humming endless in the mind  
Not as a dead and dying time, but as time the better  
For a dry passion, coolness unremembered behind.

Now to be explorers in the testing season!  
To be an Eyre, the world blazing empty and clean  
Between sky and foot; there is no cool reason  
Why love should survive, die, or have ever been

Save by the sinews we force across the land  
And by our will to see the sun boil down  
On fancies of sinking in bone-hills of sand,  
Face down, long-old, with outstretched hand.

## The Explanation

It is not as if we were not interested.  
Our eyes can open like oysters;  
Our hearts can rise in the flight of birds;  
We can love one another.

But we are climbing to death's higher plains,  
Climbing in a purely technical kind  
To rest bent slightly forward like the undergrowth  
In a shrill and whistling wind of contemplation.

It is not a contemplation to be desired ...  
Hence the phrase 'death's higher plains'.  
We lean against the wind: but do not grow.  
The thinking is bare and true as any hill.

It is not the sort of 'death' that makes for drama.  
Our feelings have been ringbarked at the base:  
The gestures have been stilled: finely twisted,  
Our limbs no longer dance into the light.

That's what we mean by 'death'—to think and be,  
Living truly within such climates as we know,  
But knowing there are other selves like villages  
Invisibly, unreachably far below.

It is not as if we were not interested  
In man's estate, Keats's dream of iron and feather,  
The valency electron and its passion.  
But we have no faith that the heart can change the weather.

## The Tantanoola Tiger

There in the bracken was the ominous spoor mark,  
Huge, splayed, deadly, and quiet as breath,  
And all around lay bloodied and dying,  
Staring dumbly into their several eternities,  
The rams that Mr Morphett loved as sons.

Not only Tantanoola, but at Mount Schanck  
The claw welts patterned the saplings  
With mysteries terrible as Egypt's demons,  
More evil than the blueness of the Lakes,  
And less than a mile from the homestead, too.

Sheep died more rapidly than the years  
Which the tiger ruled in tooth and talk,  
And it padded from Beachport to the Border,  
While blood streamed down the minds of the folk  
Of Mount Gambier, Tantanoola, of Casterton.

Oh this tiger was seen all right, grinning,  
Yellow and gleaming with satin stripes:  
Its body arched and undulated through the tea-tree;  
In this land of dead volcanoes it was a flame,  
It was a brightness, it was the glory of death,

It was fine, this tiger, a sweet shudder  
In the heath and everlastings of the Border,  
A roc bird up the ghostly ring-barked gums  
Of Mingbool Swamp, a roaring fate  
Descending on the mindless backs of grazing things.

Childhoods burned with its burning eyes,  
Tantanoola was a magic playground word,  
It rushed through young dreams like a river  
And it had lovers in Mr Morphett and Mr Marks  
For the ten long hunting unbelieving years.

Troopers and blacks made safari, Africa-fashion,  
Pastoral Quixotes swayed on their ambling mounts,  
Lost in invisible trails. The red-faced  
Young Lindsay Gordons of the Mount  
Tormented their heartbeats in the rustling nights

While the tiger grew bigger and clear as an axe.  
'A circus once abandoned a tiger cub.'  
This was the creed of the hunters and poets.  
'A dingo that's got itself too far south'  
The grey old cynics thundered in their beers,

And blows were swapped and friendships broken,  
Beauty burst on a loveless and dreary people,  
And their moneyed minds broke into singing  
A myth; these soured and tasteless settlers  
Were Greeks and Trojans, billabong troubadours,

Plucking their themes at the picnic races  
Around the kegs in the flapping canvas booths.  
On the waist-coats shark's teeth swung in time,  
And old eyes, sharply seamed and squinting,  
Opened mysteriously in misty musical surprise,

Until the day Jack Heffernan made camp  
By a mob of sheep on the far slope of Mount Schanck  
And woke to find the tiger on its haunches,  
Bigger than a mountain, love, or imagination,  
Grinning lazily down on a dying ewe,

And he drew a bead and shot it through the head.  
Look down, oh mourners of history, poets,  
Look down on the black and breeding volcanic soil,  
Lean on your fork in this potato country,  
Regard the yellowed fangs and quivering claws

Of a mangy and dying Siberian wolf.  
It came as a fable or a natural image  
To pace the bars of these sunless minds,  
A small and unimpressive common wolf  
In desperately poor and cold condition.

It howled to the wattle when it swam ashore  
From the wreck of the foundered Helena,  
Smelt death and black snakes and tight lips  
On every fence-post and slip-rail.  
It was three foot six from head to tail.

Centuries will die like swatted blowflies  
Before word or wolf will work a tremor  
Of tenderness in the crusty knuckles  
Around the glasses in the Tantanoola pub  
Where its red bead eyes now stare towards the sun.

## Colonial Ghosts in the Adelaide Hills

The light grows yellow and is daunted  
By the twisted whiteness of the image  
The old gum presents against the cow-line  
Of the hill. A sea-eaten sun dissolves.

Now your colonial twilight settles its smoke  
Over tin roof and sleek sun-deck  
And you are at liberty to call out your ghosts.  
Out, Judith's bullocky, black billies, and all!

Out my great German grannie to palpate the pump,  
Its squeaking calling the long-dead kelpies home,  
Provoking the morepoke to its nightly dirge:  
And the young fellows gallop the spring-cart to town.

Sir Thomas Elder descends his rich crank's tower,  
His stout breath billowing out in front of him,  
His spy-glass a crutch for his broken drinking-arm.  
All is peaceful in the Banks of Hindley Street.

From the Tiers the wood-splitters shout in Crafer's pub  
Of boiled-down bullocks and eventful stolen mares  
That brought Tolmer stalking in prickled socks,  
To their dying chimneys and the edge of the morning.

Their raddled laughter wears them out. They sleep.  
Father, like a poker, keeps erect conventions  
That died of scurvy in Port Misery's mud,  
Lamenting to his memory the loss of his native tongue.

The black dimensions of this great gallows of a gum  
Hang over the hill, the plain, the urban specks of light,  
Holding its possums and ghosts without a sigh or a rustle,  
And every dead settler worth his grave is posed

In its shadowy form. The dead cling, dismally,  
But they cling, like some shedding bark of immortality  
On a hill as obedient to time as a good wife's breast.  
The ghost-callers grope home. They have done their best.

## Wordsworth in Barossa

Behold yon sullen Silesian lass,  
With her plaits and apron, dirndl, draught-horse thighs,  
Sitting on top of the sloping German wagon,  
Sighing and creaking and rolling her eyes.

She smells like an unwashed sherry-glass,  
Bears her children in the coolness of the vines,  
Shears sheep, fights off men in the picking season,  
Helps the vertical parson trim the churchyard pines.

I sing her praises from Klemzig to Lobethal  
In tones, I hope, of barrel-chested brass,  
Like a gumtree Jean-Jacques I mourn her fate  
To be brought demure to a sheeted bed at last.

O Seppelts, Gramps, Smiths and Rudi Burings,  
Who give dry minds the sight of Elysian Fields,  
Emblazon her name in Latin above your doors,  
Figure her rampant on your winery shields.

George Fife Angas brought her to the Valley,  
For Silesian women were famed as shearers of sheep;  
Their hands clicked neatly down the palpitating bellies,  
And besides he found their wages cheap.

Our South Australian colony of Pommies  
Was saved by their brawn in 1844.  
Without them we'd never have made our gentle money,  
But the Frau and the horse aren't needed any more.

Behold her then from the Pioneer Bus at Barossa,  
Behold this last virgin reddening in the sun,  
Everything changes: love and economics.  
The days of her rumpy loving are done.

## The Death of Bert Sassenowsky

*A legend concerning the volcanic hole at Allendale, in the  
Mount Gambier district of South Australia*

Let me set the elegiac tempo of this poem.  
It is the slow, slightly anxious squeaking of a wagon  
And the rolling eyewhites of its slaving oxen,  
While a sky pitched low and flapping like a tent  
Sheers up its winds from Cape Northumberland.

Above the faint steam of manure and leather  
Bert Sassenowsky sits and rocks, spitting  
Between his teeth at the ambling rumps below:  
Shafts of late light impale his pale eyes:  
In protest he stirs and threatens to come alive.

From under the shallow shadow of Mount Schanck  
The pub at Bellum-Bellum slides into sight.  
The plain of cows and lucerne, now in focus,  
Has hidden its secret of aboriginal blood  
That stained the soil black thirty years ago.

'Bellum-Bellum—aboriginal word for War'  
In a thought more Greek than Latin, Sassenowsky  
Scans the passing gums for scars of spears,  
Imagines the snaking spines in the silent rushes,  
The sudden shouts, the expert whistling nullahs

Of that great tribal war. Explosively  
He leaps and slumps. 'They've got me!'  
He weeps to the great round grinning bums  
And lolls there dead until he smells the pub.

Morning rhythms past Bellum-Bellum are bleaker,  
Full of echo. The winding track is etched  
On a thin volcanic crust of porous rock.  
In the great honeycomb of caves beneath  
The dead sheep rattle to the thumping hooves.

Holes like sightless sockets beside the track  
Bring Bert's hand to the whip. He yells  
For company, and his beasts go delicate  
As goats, picking their way in terror  
To the wet and singing safety of the sea

Nine miles away. 'A bloody failure!  
A carrier of dung! A servant of the servants  
Of the soil!' Bert thought of Bert,  
Of farms, of earth, of mangel-wurzels, mortgages,  
Of the one true union his blind mind

Had wanted from the itching of his scythe  
And the passionate bending, aching of his back.  
'I love you not!' The caves give way  
To the soft and lichenous bogs of Allendale,  
His shout dissolves in a murmuring of springs.

His hate grows silent while the oxen strain.  
Other than defeat, there is only irony  
In return for the ardours of being human.  
Only irony gives answer to the private prayer,  
Dying is the common course of living.  
'To hell with the district!' roars Bert in despair.

The wet soil on its wafer of rock collapses!  
The first ox sits, and slides, a startled grotesque,  
A stiffened corpse on a slippery dip,  
And the next. A watery hole appears  
Slimed with the rot of a million years.

Receives the mud, Bert, oxen, and the wheels,  
The green scum spins, bobbles, settles,  
Hisses, falls still, and listens, listens ...  
Through the hours and days the bodies sink  
In quiet and blackness to the hot rivers

That rush and wind through the airless veins  
Of the burning rocks miles down.

Envoi: the great stone wall built round this hole;  
The road that bifurcates to either side;  
The arum lilies that dream above the slime.

## The Murder of Kennedy, 1848

Jackey Jackey, crazed with love,  
Kissed cold Kennedy to death.  
'I care not for these spears, my boy,'  
Said Kennedy and gasped for breath.

The bleak ice-flowers about him grew,  
The jungle soughed and sighed,  
The python stilled its eerie bulk  
As Kennedy died.

Nature has neither love nor hate  
For any but its own:  
Cape York trembled for Jackey Jackey  
Left in life alone.

To be in life alone, and love,  
To live in love when old,  
Exploring for that inward thing  
When the outer love is cold,

Ah, that the jungle sensed, and cared,  
As Jackey Jackey cried.  
The jungle killed and loved as well  
When Kennedy died.

## Sturt at Depot Glen

*Charles Sturt's Central Australian Expedition set out in 1844 to discover Australia's inland sea. It was a drought year: the waters dried up and Sturt found himself trapped beside the rock pool at Depot Glen. The party was locked up here, unable to move, for six months. Scurvy attacked the leaders, Poole, the second-in-command, dying, and John McDouall Stuart took his place. An aborigine staggered in from the desert and appeared to recognise the whaleboat Sturt had with him and pictures of fish in a book, thus keeping Sturt's inland sea idea alive! Sturt was impoverished, bitter, and 49 years old when he undertook the expedition.*

'This is the country for self-discovery.' Sturt laughed  
And turned on his side to look at Poole.  
'Going forward is no more real than going back. Returning?  
The same as staying put. Even a fool  
Would recognise these circuits in himself. But us  
Wise men, eh?' Their black mouths opened wide ...  
Strands of flesh hung in shreds behind the teeth ...  
And they both laughed as soundlessly as if they cried.

By pressing his mind against the haze across his eyes  
Sturt could discern the whaleboat warping in the shade  
Beside the scum of water. 'And that's my inland sea,' he said.  
'So much for the scale on which men's thoughts are made!'  
'Now there's a soul,' said Poole, his brittle nails extending  
Towards the scree on which McDouall Stuart sat  
Roasting in the sun like a lecherous goanna  
And counting tomorrows in the shade of his cabbage-tree hat,  
'There's a man with ambition swelling in his brain  
The journeys of which are circular, immeasurably wide.  
He'll make discoveries, that one. Easy work  
Where the country is green, watered with the certainty of pride.'

'Consider the ant,' thought Sturt, the men nearer death  
than dreaming.

'We'll make a cairn.' And the gibbers mounted high and hot  
Against the skyline time set in place four months ago.  
Sturt wasn't sure, didn't care, if he were mad or not,  
Like the thirst-crazed abo who stumbled in from the desert  
Blazing with recognition. To him all things were known ...  
The whaleboat too, less a miracle of loaves than fishes,  
For the carp in the picture book ... beneath a sea of stone  
He'd seen it swimming many a time. In that direction there.  
And he pointed any way. It was good enough for Sturt,  
This black truth that you discover what you seek  
If you don't mind a bit of dying or of being hurt.

Soon six months passed round the pool and the burning cave.  
'It's the longest journey I'll ever make,' said Sturt in fun,  
'This continent I've mapped (and it's big enough for me)  
Except for one subtle region' ... clay clods beside a gum  
Where Poole's black body sweltered in its porous grave.  
Sturt rubbed his scabby chin. 'I suppose I'd better shave.'

## Dawn at Sea

A flat and endless gentian grave.  
No man walks upon it. Not even He.  
No man lives within it unless he die  
In its slow sinewed rocking of mortality.

Our luxury is summoned up ... disporting  
Of virgins, old men cloth-capped and trying.  
Each unwitting goes through the most secret rite of man ...  
The bunch of flowers in a jamjar, crying,

A witness of prayer as the priestly steward  
Dedicates his temple to the sun. Portholes  
Open to the grey uneasy lovers on the bed  
Who are making their passage over the dead.

## On Going to Sleep

There comes a time, the tide at ebb,  
The mind receding, the wooden drift  
Of strong affections bedded in sand,  
When the blue haze over the sea's lift

Lowers and broods on the decline  
Of the afternoon's last lambent hour.  
Then desire, receding, leads on  
Illusion lest the wind swing sour

On the day's past pace, the night's dance  
When you turned the wits to work at wit,  
The pen to punctuate the running words.  
But now you sleep: and there's an end on it.

## Bud in Perspex

The bud in perspex by my bed  
Every time I move my head  
Turns a deeper shade of red.

The Mogadon that bring me rest  
Put me to a nightly test,  
Dreams that sort out bad and best,

A nightly mugging of the mind  
Extortions of a brutal kind,  
Forces unevenly aligned.

A chemical brings to the light  
Facts that come alive at night.  
Proving I do wrong to right.

The rose in perspex by my bed  
Watches each move of my head.  
It will bloom when I am dead.

## The Gift

The bud in perspex by my bed  
I take to be a word,  
A word I find not easily said.  
Seen but not heard.  
The word is eerie, calm, and still  
Saved for a windless day  
The word is placed beyond my will  
To shape or even say.

A word, I ask you, what a farce!  
That I who serve their cause  
Must abnegate my task  
Betray my moral laws  
For a rose in perspex, deeply red,  
That's a word of haunting hue.  
Embedded in the plastic of my head.  
Here, I give it to you.

## The I in Me That I See in You

I have come to regard love as a vantage point  
For looking up,  
Or looking down.

I have come to regard love as a subtle taint—  
A corruption of the real  
By the ideal.

Love has seemed to me the oldest school tie  
Linking the man  
To the boy.

Perhaps it is a cunning ploy used to deny  
The I in me  
That I see  
In you.

## New York Fantasy

Little girl, my little sister with no breasts,  
Solomon's bride in wisdom, your grey eyes  
Pierce my sorry flesh, draw blood, and the best  
In my architecture of years crumbles. You are wise  
And I am in my own mind's rubble. How can it be  
That I cannot unlearn the skills of libelling love  
Through counterthrust of wit, evasive action, good brakes  
Applied with fine reflex, with the velvet of the glove.  
Why can I not love and let live; or live  
And let love. As you do. What you give  
Cannot be taken away. And what you take  
With such sweet authority remains with  
Me. Always. I'm in New York alone  
Right now. And you do not exist in name  
Or body, in any substantive presence. I own  
It fantasy. But will write it down all the same.

## A Mug's Game

The Sturt Arcade Hotel is a bit like an elephant burial ground.  
Odd place, the elephant burial ground, Mostly silent, except  
for the sound  
Of pachydermic breathing, raspings, hoarse trumpeting,  
then a mound  
Of flesh, a cairn of bones, Then only the poor beast is at least alone  
as it wished to be when it set out from the herd to find its unknown  
Inadequate identity. Just once before keeling over. On its own.

Well, the Sturt Arcade Saloon Bar is just like that. About the same.  
Gregarious, query. No incestuous. Places where elephants take  
Their ways for death; and bars where men drink solemnly  
in the name  
Of the name someone will carve on a piece of stone. Bloody fame,  
Dear friends, shouting a round to honour your own mortality.

A mug's game.

## Lord Palmerston Said

Lord Palmerston said

(He was ill in bed)

His world could indeed have been filled with treasures

Were it not for the exquisite boredom of its pleasures.

I too can tell

(Even though I'm well)

That one can get up on the wrong side of the world,

Responding to the shadows that make the night-birds call

Their dim elegiac jests.

How one then detests

The glowing lights of purpose, the radiance of

the intellectual plan.

To live by one's lights is human; but is to be less than man.

## Poems for Non-Lovers

3.

When your eyes are flecked with green  
And touch me with their pain,  
I seek a place to give you rest  
Within my craggy brain.  
I seek a place to give you rest  
As seems the loving thing to do,  
But put my thinking to the test  
And I can find no room for you.  
No room at the inn,  
Willing but unable.  
Let me point you  
In the direction of the stable.

11.

I've put it on the mantelpiece, that ornamental mind:  
Pottery shaped in the form of a man at bay,  
Snuffling down-wind, timid, scared, and blind.  
For a dollar at the Royal Show it came my way.  
This migrant bastard, El Greco, makes a lot of the stuff.  
Bloody beautiful! As far as I'm concerned he can't make enough.

Do a bit myself, in the tool-shed, on a long week-end  
When the kids are out raping virgins. On quiet days.  
I shove words in the vice, hammer, shape, and bend,  
Until they look quite artistic. I get a lot of praise.  
There's this kraut neighbour, Rilke, lives three doors  
    down the street,  
Showed me how. Good bloke. But his work is not all that neat.

12.

The Baris Lounge at the Bali Beach Hotel is a holy place,  
The Javanese barman pours his libations with such an  
animist grace  
That Sinatra would fall silent, Bogart contain his distaste.  
And package tourists filter past with their pennant minds unfurled.  
Bintang, Barong, and the Baris Lounge—the morning of the world!

The morning of the world, dear friends, when Adam saw the sun,  
When Eve in simple batik knew that the past had not begun  
Because that sun was merely readied behind the outline of Agung.  
The morning of the world, dear friends, just beyond  
your frosted glass.  
Sip, and sing hymnologies, and time will surely last

Birth after birth, death after death, the sequence of the tides.  
Call the priest for another beer. It scarcely touched the sides.  
Now someone moves, and smiles, and parts the bamboo shades.  
The world is in its dawn all day until it's blessed by night  
And leaves you dying drunk, dear friend. You've had your fill of light.

## On the Death of Ms Adele Koh

She died young. Maybe she dazzled eyes.  
Mine she blinded, for she died young.  
And the young dying I cannot bear among  
The millions still long living but no more wise  
Than she. Or they.

I didn't know her. She was that familiar—hearsay,  
Yet I mourn her. For she died young,  
And I cannot bear the dying of the young.  
The eyes must be averted. They deserve better.  
Padman. Pfeiffer. Kerr.

These died, idiot children in an idiot war.  
They died beautiful and foolish. Still loved  
From many years ago. She died bitter,  
I believe, which is better. And wiser.  
Using mind and tongue.

To protest division of the house, the ringing of bells,  
Which legislates who breathes when and how and why,  
Who shall live or die, the private or the public hells,  
When youth shall be old, and the old may gloat.  
Death has lost my vote.

## Love Poem for Thompson Children: Merricks, Victoria

When the world's not much of a place to be  
I let children love me. Not hard.  
What the heart doesn't miss the eye doesn't see.  
Love comes easily to kids. No guard,  
Defence, reservation. And it's their only gift.  
In the glory of this love there's not much of me left.

I am consumed more than they. Love to me  
Is a scarce resource. It is stored,  
Husbanded, against times of great vulnerability.  
I suppose I want to make an honest woman of the bawd.  
Yet the word sprang up simply with Evan and Kate.  
The word came to a sticky tooth-rotting toffee-apple fate.

Two small children and I confided love to love.  
It has been felt. And said. Today I feel a bit trembly.  
I feel great.

## George Herbert Revisited

Sweet day, so calm, so cool, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky ...  
Irretrievable breakdown. Divorce. Not right  
That elements should live a lie.

Earth and sky in wedded bliss? Kids who?  
There's no dead planet left to rhyme with June.  
Red dead sands wed skies of blue?  
There's nothing of honey about the monsoon.

Alas, a day can be quite sweet. And night  
Can come both cool and calm;  
The earth can be so green and bright.  
But both these villains mean much harm.

Mother earth and father sky, we their progeny  
Declare that Herbert was a fool.  
All who join us in this misogyny  
Know that divorce is nature's rule.

## Love's Metaphysic

*In memory of Sun and John*

There are disguisements, one of which is love.  
Take the hellebore  
It is of and to and with its foliage,  
Yet it is its own flower.  
Is love.

There are punishments, one of which is love.  
Take the pangs of failure.  
They are in and to and with the act of good.  
They are their own success.  
Are love.

There are the deaths of love, all of which are love.  
Take the burials.  
They are in and to and with the deeds of life.  
They are the affirmations.  
Will be love.

There is the poetic urge, the which is naturally love.  
Take the theme,  
Which is not in and to and with the times.  
Is everybody's nothing.  
That's love.

## Ascension

*In memory of Stephen Murray-Smith*

In the heat of a dog-day  
The mind barks  
In the eucalyptus dark  
There is the smell of still.

Silence. And something grows  
With the words.  
The camellias wilt,  
And the little roses blow.

In the cold of the hill  
Is shortness of breath.  
'Climb up! Reach me',  
Says death.

## Sleep Demeter

Sleep, dear Demeter, because sleep you must,  
When the bones, weary of grinding, have left you in peace  
For a span of time. It's all too soon that the mind  
Will send you bad dream messages to remind you  
That the day will bring only pleasures harnessed with pain.

Sleep, dear Demeter, because sleep you must  
When the bones, weary of grinding, have left you in peace  
For a span of time. It is all too soon the mind  
Will shake you awake and I will be on guard then, so  
That your walls don't come crumbling down.

Sleep, dear Demeter, because sleep you must  
When the bones, weary of grinding, have left you in peace  
For a span of time. It is all too soon the mind  
Will have at you with the demanding chores of love  
Which make the world worth it. I can vouch for that.

Awake, dear Demeter, because awake you must be  
In case the bones grind the heart weary,  
And love is lost in the doing for a span of time;  
In case nowness, the subtlest of the flim-flam men,  
Will sell you the present as the purpose of the future.

Escape, dear Demeter, all sleeping for the future.  
Better the bones should ache than on the wheel of time to break  
All the indestructible you, breathing for the now  
We share, all of us, one of another, and for no known time.  
Let us all hold hands and know nothing of clocks.  
The pain of the day, the haunted houses of the night, are precisely  
What we were not born to.

## Spouse: 1942–1992

They say that love submits to the pains of time and the tides of pain.  
I disagree with that. Love is the one certitude of the soul.  
All it has to do is to remove question marks from the life sentence.

It walks gently between the hellebores and lilioms.  
You would have wished to be a different someone, from  
another where,  
This makes for anger at all the insensate decisions of God  
and Freud.

Irreconcilable dreams about ourselves would destroy us if they could.  
But there is that formidable formation of the neurones  
By virtue of which a constancy of love makes the Parma violets grow

And the camellias to smile, knowing that they know who we are.  
We all know that gardens are the thoughts with which we tend  
each other.

The mind is a kind of growing place for heart's-ease, and ah  
sunflowers.

Our love has been 50. It has got itself into a sequence of seasons.  
Drought is drought, and flood is flood. Yet the years have rolled by  
And always the weather has been benign; for words and touch

Provide the nutrients for the sort of love that lives in us untended.  
Thus it has been for half a century, and I do not recall, ever,  
The weather being other than the sounds of night, and naught to do  
with us.

## Blessed Wednesday

The weather it was wiser this present Wednesday.  
It went missing, as they say. The weather is the inner  
And the outer part of us, past or present. It is also  
An envious entity. It makes the rules, and these rules  
Are all about pain. When you are of our age  
We waken to the day, hoping it will be rare and median  
And surprising us with comfort. This may happen,  
And the pains that leave us so much alone for that day  
And that time are, perhaps, a wastage.

I watch her, and it is the last of the sleeping hours.  
There is peace, but a sort of peace between pain and pain.  
It is little to have asked for, but it is too much.  
The wear and tear is always subliminally there.  
And it is not prepared for company. We waken  
To be alone, preparing for company. We waken  
To be alone, preparing for the day's fray. Which pain  
Will be where and how shall the body cope?

Perhaps there shall be a small miracle for  
A kindly space of time. It has happened before.  
Your eyes open. There is the diurnal gesture.  
What is a day? Whatever it is, my love,  
Let us hope that it is going to surprise us.

## The Rosarian

Five people are enough. I see in them,  
A conflagration of roses, at any time of year.  
They are at play amidst a secrecy of green age  
Whether they are sternly budding or whether  
They are defying the sun to burn them in the heart.  
They are sweet and feminine, or dancing a gavotte  
To the rhythm of the invisible weather.

Thereby it comes to be that I am ageless.  
And will be watching their laughter and care.

I have named them, as befits a good rosarian.  
There is Von and Sa, Ryder and Sam, and  
Peter, Paul and Mary. Let the weather do its worst.  
I shall not let it harm them.  
They shall prosper within my gnarled shade.

At least, that is what I choose to think.  
If this is not so, the years will have been  
A waste. Like Elizabeth Browning I shall count the days  
and the ways.  
There will have been enough. I shall look  
To all the watering they will read.



## Salute to Max Harris

When did I last see Max? It must have been in 1946, a few months before I left Australia and settled in France. Then for nearly 50 years we were out of touch. From time to time, someone would give me news of him or forward a clipping of one of his articles. They were admirably done, that goes without saying. But somehow I couldn't get used to the idea of Max as a journalist, however skilful. I found it even harder to reconcile my memory of him with his success as a businessman—his chain of bookshops, I was told, paid off handsomely. He had undergone a startling physical metamorphosis, too, if the newspaper photographs which occasionally reached me were anything to go by. The Max I'd known was lean and darkly handsome, he was (like the rest of us) decently scruffy as to dress, he was (again like the rest of us) an unabashed beer-drinker. I was bewildered by the portly dandy, cane and all, into which he had apparently been transmuted ... He was a familiar figure, I was given to understand, in all the grand hotels of Europe and Asia, a notable judge of fine wines and haute cuisine—a long way from our former diet of sausage rolls and meat pies. I hadn't heard that he'd published any poetry since we were all bumptious young adventurers together. Adding up these intimidating scraps of information, I concluded that the old Max, the Max for whom I'd always felt considerable respect as well as affection, was no longer around.

Suddenly, unforeseeably, indeed unimaginably, after the 50-year silence, I had a letter from him. I've no idea why he was moved to write. I know that I was very much moved by the fact that he had done so and, in particular, his letter made me

joyfully aware that my notion of a changed, unrecognisable Max was grotesquely mistaken. I knew that he had cancer and that he was mostly in pain. I would never have guessed it from this letter of his. He wrote as vigorously as ever, he casually referred to his illness as though it were of no great importance, he had in mind a couple of literary projects on which he thought we might collaborate and he talked about these with enthusiasm. And he was still writing poems. Later on, he sent me some. They were as good as the poems of his youth, which is to say very good indeed. They were better, in fact. He was (as he came to perceive) essentially a lyric poet, but in his early work the lyricism was too often encumbered with derivative scrolls and curlicues. The poems unpublished, which I now read for the first time, were wholly lyrical, pure, sharp-edged, stripped of all decorative foliage.

In this first letter, and in later letters (because we went on corresponding until he was too ill even to dictate), he magnificently avoided indulging in lachrymose evocations of the past, the infinitely remote 1930s and early 1940s. That was when the cultural larrikins—Bert Tucker and Michael Keon and Sid Nolan and

James Gleeson and even inconspicuous me—gave the Australian arts a shock from which they've never recovered. Max was at the centre of the hullabaloo, he was the ringleader. He had all the qualifications. He had read prodigiously; he was abreast of everything that was going on in the great outside world. He was possessed of—it could almost be said he was possessed by—an energy that was downright eerie. He produced an enormous quantity of work. Every week, or so it seemed, there would be a new poem or a new essay. The poems were beautifully crafted with none of the juvenile stumblings which tore the ligaments of much that his contemporaries were trying to do. The essays were astonishingly mature. At the same time, he managed to edit his *Angry Penguins*, the only magazine, apart from Cecily Crozier's temerarious *Comment*, prepared to publish what was then, and to some extent still is, 'revolutionary' writing and paintings.

Just once in the letters I was now receiving he referred to that period, describing himself as having been 'a pushy, self-promoting little bastard'. That wasn't my recollection. We were all pretty brash, the lot of us. I don't recall Max as having been any more self-promoting than the rest of us. What I do recall is his unfailing readiness to 'promote' others. If he was pushy, he pushed just as hard on behalf of those he esteemed as he did for himself. Writers, on the whole, are a mean-spirited and envy-ridden crowd, especially when they're trying to establish themselves. There's nothing they like so much as disliking. Anything of merit which their peers may accomplish irks them beyond endurance. Max was the exception to this dismal rule. He was stern in discriminating between what he thought good and what he considered 'zero', his favourite term of denigration. When something met with his approval, however, he was as delighted as if it had been his own

achievement and he would proclaim his admiration with engaging generosity.

In at least one case, when he and John Reed set up a publishing house, Max was ready to explode the partnership in order to get a friend's book of poems into print. I ought to know—I was the case. Reed knew nothing about poetry. He knew enough about me to feel a sincere abhorrence. His wife, Sunday, who provided most of the financial backing in the enterprise, shared this aversion. The last thing they wanted was to dignify anything I might write with their imprint. The squabble between the partners went on for quite a while. Max won. He even succeeded in getting me an advance—the first money I ever earned with my decrepit typewriter.

There are always people for whom anyone as gifted as Max is an unbearable provocation. A number of them had been impatiently waiting for a chance to pull him down. Two such opportunities occurred almost simultaneously, in 1944. I may have the chronology slightly wrong but I think the first of these occasions was when Max published in *Angry Penguins* some poems by a certain Ern Malley, hailing them as undoubted masterpieces. They may have been masterpieces, but they weren't by Ern Malley. They had been concocted as a hoax by two young poets who disapproved of the 'modernist' aesthetic. When finally they revealed the fact to an Australia which had never before shown the slightest interest in poetry of any kind, whether 'modernist' or billabongist, a vast exultant guffaw arose throughout the country (and even abroad) over Max's discomfiture. Their motive in carrying out this little prank, so the hoaxers explained, had been to expose the absurdity of modern verse, they could be said to have acted in the public interest. It sounded good, like the protestations of a couple of municipal councillors. In reality, it was evident that they were inspired by a

rancorous animosity towards Max himself. This became even more apparent shortly afterwards when Max published his novel *The Vegetative Eye*.

But Max had demonstrated sufficiently that he was a serious writer and one who deserved to be taken seriously. His ill-wishers couldn't have been unaware of the first part of this proposition; they were happy to ignore the second. One of them strained for a while and excreted not a review of the book but a jeering belittlement of the author marked by a most extraordinary malevolence. The reviewer in question, coincidentally, was a friend of the two Malley jokers ... One gradually becomes impervious to reviewers. At 30 you begin to find them merely impertinent, at 35 downright comic. Max was 22. Neither I, nor anyone else as far as I know, ever heard him whining about what was obviously a singularly unpleasant and spiteful vendetta. I don't see how it could have failed to scar him.

I don't have any doubt, moreover, that the threesome who ganged up on him (with some jubilant outside helpers) had as one of their incidental aims to inhibit Max from continuing to write. If this surmise of mine is correct, it strikes one as a curious ambition on the part of fellow poets (because the reviewer of *The Vegetative Eye* also claimed that title). It likewise seemed to be an ambition gleefully realised when in 1952 Max announced that he would not be writing any more poetry since he 'didn't have anything to say anymore'. As the lyrics he sent me in the last months of his life sufficiently proved, he did have something more to say and he said it superbly.

*Alister Kershaw*  
*January 1995*

## Sources of the Poems

From: *The Gift of Blood*

(Adelaide: Jindyworobak Club, 1940)

Let Me Not Call You Lovely

Boat-Train (Original title:

Boat-Train (Outer Harbour, S.A.))

Sonnet

Mad Jasper

Words to a Lover

Hills' Scene

This Age Has Brought

Mithridatum of Despair (Original title:

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From: *Dramas from the Sky*

(Adelaide: Adelaide University Arts Association, 1942)

Preparation

Concessions

The Pelvic Rose

Pushkin

War and Peace

The Prelude

An Elizabethan Song

The Traveller

The Coorong

Lines to a Lady

Acknowledgement

R.S.V.P.

From: *Angry Penguins*, September 1943

Love Song of the Son of Prufrock (Original title:  
Love Song of the Bourgeoisie Who Got out of  
Step with the March of Time)

Previously unpublished (written March 1944)

Military Incident

From: *The Coorong and Other Poems*

(Adelaide: Mary Martin Bookshop, 1955)

Dispossession

Incident at the Alice

The Ploughman

On Throwing a Copy of *The New Statesman*  
into the Coorong

Refugees from Darwin

Apollo Bay to Kingston

A Sudden Thought

Duologues

Poem for War-time Christmas (Original title:  
Poem for Christmas)

Dead Friends

Martin Buber in the Pub

Aubade

Poem to Hang on a Christmas Tree (Original title:  
Poem for Christmas)

Happiness

Conventional Image

From: *A Window at Night*

(Kensington Park, SA: ABR Publications, 1967)

The Ocean

The Bird

Sad Ones

A Window at Night

At the Circus

Necromantics

Your Eyes Content Me

A Bad Night for the Washing

Dim the Green Hope

Two Poems for an Australian Summer

The Explanation

The Tantanoola Tiger

Colonial Ghosts in the Adelaide Hills

Wordsworth in Barossa

The Death of Bert Sassenowsky

The Murder of Kennedy, 1848

Sturt at Depot Glen

Dawn at Sea

On Going to Sleep

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Bud in Perspex

The Gift

The I in Me That I See in You

New York Fantasy

A Mug's Game

Lord Palmerston Said

Poems for Non-Lovers 3

Poems for Non-Lovers 11

Poems for Non-Lovers 12

On the Death of Ms Adele Koh  
Love Poem for Thompson Children:  
Merricks, Victoria  
George Herbert Revisited

From: *Overland*, no. 112, 1988  
Love's Metaphysic

From: *Overland*, no. 115, 1989  
Ascension

From: *The Adelaide Review*, October 1993  
Spouse: 1942–1992  
Sleep Demeter (Original title: Spouse: 1992)

Previously unpublished (written November 1994)  
Blessed Wednesday

From: *National Library of Australia News*, March 1995  
The Rosarian

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Born in the Adelaide suburb of Henley Beach in 1921 and educated at St Peter's College and the University of Adelaide, Max Harris is probably best known as an editor, publisher and newspaper columnist.

Max Harris's influence on Australian cultural life has been profound, receiving due recognition in 1989 with the award of Order of Australia 'for services to literature'. Four years later, he was cited as 'the founding father of Australian modernism in the arts' when receiving the Distinguished Alumni Award of the University of Adelaide Alumni Association.

Harris maintained a lifelong passion for poetry and has received acclaim as one of the best lyric poets of his generation. He died in January 1995 and is survived by his wife, Yvonne (Von), whom he met at the age of 16, and daughter, Samela.

'as drunks,  
the angry penguins of the night'

This analogy from one of Max Harris's poems, 'Mithridatum of Despair', lent a memorable and quite distinctive title to the literary journal *Angry Penguins* established by Max Harris, with other young poets, in Adelaide in 1941, when Max was only 20 years old.

In the early 1940s conservatives used the term 'Angry Penguins' as an expression of contempt for modernism and liberal trends in art and literature. Partly as a result of increased post-war sophistication, the name later became synonymous with the artistic and literary creativity of a movement which helped to change the shape of Australia's cultural life.

*The Angry Penguin: Selected Poems of Max Harris* presents a rich sampling of poems written throughout Max Harris's life, from the early poems of his youth to the more contemplative poems of his later years.

Max Harris is variously remembered as the victim of the Ern Malley hoax poems, or as the proprietor of the Mary Martin Bookshops, or as the long-standing commentator whose weekly column appeared in the *Australian* for over 20 years. This volume will establish Max Harris as one of Australia's leading lyric poets.



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