

weste^{rly}

Registered at the G.P.O., Perth, for transmission by post as a periodical.

summer issue

A quarterly review price 60c

stories • poems • reviews



*'Study the past if you
would divine the future'*

CONFUCIUS



IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF OUR PAST AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

westerly

a quarterly review

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Westerly is published quarterly by the University of Western Australia Press, with assistance from the Commonwealth Literary Fund. The opinions expressed in *Westerly* are those of individual contributors and not of any member of the above Committees.

Correspondence should be addressed to the Editorial Committee, *Westerly*, Department of English, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Western Australia (telephone 86 2481 or 86 5531). Unsolicited manuscripts not accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope will not be returned. All manuscripts must show the name and address of the sender and should be typed (double-spaced) on one side of the paper only. Whilst every care is taken of manuscripts, the Editorial Committee can take no final responsibility for their return; contributors are consequently urged to retain copies of all work submitted. Payment will be made for all contributions published.

Subscriptions: \$2.40 per annum, plus postage (Australasia 20c, Overseas 60c per annum). Single copies mailed: 68c. Subscriptions should be made payable to "The University of Western Australia", and sent directly to The Bursar, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Western Australia.

Synopses of literary articles published in *Westerly* appear regularly in *Abstracts of English Studies* (published by the American National Council of Teachers of English).



University of Western Australia Press

westerly

SUMMER ISSUE being 4/1966.

CONTENTS

STORIES

THE GARDEN	5	<i>R. G. Howard</i>
PAST MASTER	12	<i>Lloyd Davies</i>
JOURNEY THROUGH YESTERDAY	20	<i>Irene M. Summy</i>
SOMETHING IN COMMON	26	<i>Margaret Houlston</i>
THE CAT	34	<i>Terrence D. Scott</i>

POEMS

THE OLEANDER	11	<i>William Grono</i>
THE MIDNIGHT SHIFT	15	<i>Joan Williams</i>
VOODOO MAN	16	<i>Charles Higham</i>
LIZZIE	18	<i>Charles Higham</i>
HALF-PERCEPTION BY THE POOL	24	<i>Reginald Griffiths</i>
SINCE DECEMBER, 1948	25	<i>Reginald Griffiths</i>
AND I REMEMBER SPAIN	32	<i>Anthony Rutherford</i>
PETER FREEMAN IN THE BANK	33	<i>Thomas W. Shapcott</i>
LEGEND OF THE GREEN COUNTRY	36	<i>Dorothy Hewett</i>

REVIEWS

ONCE AROUND THE SUN	42	<i>Glen Phillips</i>
AUSTRALIAN MELANGE	43	<i>Felicity Haynes</i>
KENNETH SLESSOR	47	<i>William Grono</i>

THE GARDEN

WHEN PETER'S GRANDMOTHER was coming to visit them he would go out to the front gate in the white afternoon and await her arrival. The first thing he would see was not the bus itself but a dazzling spray of pink and grey birds—for a flock of galahs was always feeding on top of the hill and, startled by the bus's approach, they would whirl into the air with a loud screeching. As the bus glided smoothly into view Peter would run back up the steps to the wire door and give rapid warning to his mother before tumbling delightedly out to the bus-stop. The birds would settle down on the hill—and there was Ma saying goodbye to the driver and turning to meet him.

"I don't know why you won't let Harry pick you up at the station Mum," his mother would say as the visitor stepped into the house, "it would be no trouble for him."

Laughing and hugging the little boy her mother replied, "But why should he take any trouble at all when there's a perfectly good bus running right past the front door?"

It would be time to bring out the presents. From a little white paper bag Peter would draw, without knowing until the last moment what it would be, for he was still young enough not to guess from the shape of the parcel, a pink sugar pig. Or else it would be little mushrooms made out of fudge (and when he grew up he remembered these with special fondness because they seemed to have vanished from shops), or a box of candy in the shape of tiny fruit, bananas, apples and peaches, ripened with a touch of saffron or of cochineal.

When Peter was supposed to be too busy with the sweets to notice, so as to give her daughter less reason for complaint, the old lady took from her string bag a further present, a picture book or a blue jumper she had knitted herself.

But Peter's mother always drew his attention to the second gift by saying loudly, "Mum. You shouldn't do this. You're *spoiling* him. I keep telling you not to buy all these things."

"Oh Vera," said the old lady, "I only come once or twice a year and because I bring him a little present you say I spoil him. Aren't I even to be allowed the pleasure of giving my grandchildren a little present when I want to?" His grandmother sat on the edge of a chair, picking the knots in her string bag. "What else would I do with my money?" she asked, "an old woman doesn't want to spend it on herself."

Then, seeing her mother was on the point of tears, Vera replied, "All right. I'm sorry Mum. I didn't mean it like that, but . . . if you could just bring him one thing at a time . . ."

A moment later Peter would notice a tear still trembling on his grandmother's lid and without understanding why she was sad he would run over to comfort her.

His grandmother sometimes said, "One of these days you must come back to Sydney with me and stay in my little flat for a while." Peter wanted to leave straight away; but somehow the journey never took place. When his grandmother died he knew he had lost forever the opportunity of sharing the magic existence in that little flat. He called her Ma which was his contraction of Grandma. The first hours of the visit he would drag her here and there showing the strange, exciting changes that had taken place since the last time.

There was one of those visits that developed in a special way. Peter himself might never have remembered it, except that he heard the story told so often in family conversation; and the frequent repetition by others made up for the deficiencies of his own memory. In the end he wasn't sure if the pictures he had of it were true fragments of his past, or facsimiles fashioned by his parents.

He was especially urgent that year in wanting to show something to his grandmother. He warned her that it would mean a long walk, and they set out on the dusty road hand in hand. Currawongs, rigid with distrust, followed their passing from the edge of implacable eyes. Ma was wearing an eyeshade, a little peak of white celluloid with a green band, and Peter laughed because it looked as if she were going to play tennis. But he was glad that she wore her white-spotted blue dress.

"It's your best dress isn't it?" he asked.

The old lady smiled. "Well, almost my best," she said. And added, "Is there some reason then, why I ought to have my best dress on?"

Peter nodded gleefully, but before he would explain he wanted her to bend down so that he could examine the brooch pinned on her dress. He dreamily touched the smooth yellow stone and smelled the lavender her clothes were scented with.

"Who are we going to meet then Peter?" she asked again.

"Someone."

The road they took rose steadily but in easy stages, curving a bit to allow for undulations in the land. Hills and gulleys were uncovered, except for bristly light-coloured grass. Here and there grew wind-warped gums, mostly dead, dried out, no more than awkward bony gestures in the expressionless landscape.

It was a spare enough country. Yet, in the memory, it takes only the wanton flutter of jewel-green lorikeets to make it a place of enchantment.

The sun was hot and after they had walked a fair distance Ma had to have a spell in the scattered shade of a dusty tree.

"I'm taking you to see my friend," Peter revealed at last.

"Oh, your friend," said Ma.

When they had resumed their walk Peter added:

"He's not very handsome, Ma."

"Who's that, sausage? Your friend?"

"Yes."

Ma only said: "Ah." But in a while she wanted to know, "Has Mummy met your friend too?"

Peter was silent at first; then he admitted, "No." His friend was an old Chinaman, and in the matter of handling small coins at least he knew that his mother strongly disapproved of Chinamen.

"How often do you see him, Peter?"

"I haven't seen him for a long time, I don't think."

Ma was forced to ask soon after, "Is it far *now*, Peter?"

"No not very far," he replied. And in a few more minutes they had made out, wonderfully incongruous, on top of the next hill, a miniature forest in the middle of dusty fields, a dense aggregation of European trees, all in rich green leaf.

"There it is," said Peter pointing.

There was a sign at the front gate with the words: PINK PEARL NURSERY. Prop. F. KHOO. Rhododendrons, Azaleas, Camellias.

Peter ran ahead to open the gate. He disappeared among the shrubs while Ma stood awkwardly outside. She took off her eyeshade and put it in the pocket of her blue and white dress. Peter came back with the Chinaman who had on his working clothes and an old straw hat.

"Here he is, Ma."

The Chinaman stepped forward and said:

"Frank Khoo, ma'am. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

Ma smiled. They stood diffidently, looking at Peter who examined each in turn with pleasure. At last he said, "Show Ma the flowers, Khoo."

The Chinaman nodded: "Yes . . . if you would like it?" he asked Ma.

So they moved into the nursery, the old lady holding her grandson's hand; and they soon had before them a view of plants, growing in old tins, set out in rows. There were the cuttings that had only just taken root, two large shiny oval leaves, carefully bisected; and successively bigger plants up to quite sizeable shrubs that were already offering one or two blooms. They walked down an aisle between the plants, where it was cool and damp and the ground felt spongy under their feet. The Chinaman paused now and then to pull out a weed or straighten a tin that had fallen onto its side. "These are rhododendron plants," he explained and he told them the names that some of the plants had: glimmering names that were to prepare imagination for wonders to come.

They passed through other bush houses where azaleas and camellias were arranged in the same way. "I take you to the display garden," said Mr. Khoo, and leaving the last of the bush houses they entered the garden whose colours burst upon them like fireworks. There were several big trees growing at intervals on the lawn, an oak, and beeches and maples, and the gaps between them were filled with flowering shrubs of great splendour. Ma saw bushes that bore huge, indolent white flowers with the perfume of spices; shrubs as big as trees decked with clusters of pink and mauve flowers hanging like paper lanterns. Smaller plants, orange and yellow, glowed here and there among green foliage where a ray of light slipping through the leaves switched on, as it were, their lambent colours.

Ma let go Peter's hand and stepped further in the garden. From a pyre of sombre green stems fiery red blossoms blazed and arched furiously towards the sky, while between the borders of adjacent shrubs a branch of scarlet flowers,

intermittently thrust forward by the breeze, flickered in the shadow like a dying flame.

"Unfortunately it is too late to see the camellias. But the rhododendrons are at their best," said Mr. Khoo, "and the mollis azaleas."

Often the blossoms grew so thickly that seen from the bottom of long lawns they fused and flowed into one pool of colour. And yet as they stepped closer they could see that each separate bloom in this confluence of petals was perfectly shaped, its throat faintly speckled.

Ma was overwhelmed. Peter laughed with delight at her face. She turned from one fluid colour to another, not knowing how best to divide her attention. Mr. Khoo invited her to smell now this fragrant bush and now another; or to notice, where it was springing from the ground in dark little corners, the sweetly scented lily-of-the valley.

Ma had been standing a long time before the deliquescent yellow of azaleas when Mr. Khoo at last spoke to her. She was startled for she had forgotten the circumstances of her being there.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful," she said, "hidden away up here. And to think I had to wait so long in life before seeing it."

Mr. Khoo repeated his invitation to tea and Ma accepted. They had to find Peter first, he had run off to look for Mr. Khoo's dog.

In the house Mr. Khoo gave Peter a chess set to play with, and lying on the floor the boy began to examine the pieces one by one.

"Do you live here all by yourself, Mr. Khoo?" asked Ma.

The Chinaman poured out tea. "Yes," he said.

"You keep your house so tidy," remarked Ma, turning round in her chair.

There was the gleam of polished wood, and a careful order in the disposition of things.

"A lady comes in the mornings," he explained, "although at the moment she is taking a holiday."

Ma bent over the tea cup and discovered a new fragrance. She smiled rapidly, "Everything here smells beautiful." A bowl of pink flowers was a reminder of the garden.

"Do you like it?"

A large bookcase on one side of the room was packed tightly with different coloured books. Khoo affirmed that he read a great deal; but also he liked to collect things.

"Oh yes," said Ma, "the crockery too," meaning scalloped plates that stood in a cupboard, and opal-tinted glassware, and vases, some filled, others self-sufficient.

"You are the first he has brought here," commented Mr. Khoo with a glance at the boy stretched out on the floor.

Ma blushed with pleasure. She looked round the room again with a satisfied smile. There were prints hanging, fine bird drawings, scenes of famous towns, flower studies and old hand-coloured maps.

"Do you . . .," Ma paused shyly, "Does your family live in this country Mr. Khoo?"

He shook his head.

"I live alone myself," ventured Ma, "sometimes it can be lonely." And then she paused again, sipped her tea, "don't you find it lonely—at times?"

Mr. Khoo looked back simply. "I am lucky," he said. "No. I don't think I have felt lonely here."

Ma was surprised. She drank her tea and stole a few glances at the old man who explained the names of chessmen to Peter.

Ma watched the chess lesson thoughtfully.

"I have lived in this house for thirty-seven years," said Mr. Khoo when he was sitting up at the table again, "without ever leaving."

"I suppose that friends often come to visit you?" Ma asked.

He poured out more tea. "No," he said, "a few people come, who are interested in my garden. But whether they come, or not . . ."

He was moving an ancient blue vase a little nearer and when he went on to speak, turned it about as if displaying to Ma the skill with which it had been put together. It was archæologically old, and being carefully restored from an incomplete set of fragments, it was largely composed of common clay in which the pieces of blue porcelain glowed with the brilliance of precious gems.

"I came many years ago, looking for solitude. I have made myself very content. My garden gives me a great deal of pleasure," said Mr. Khoo, "and sunshine, or a bird singing . . . this vase . . . There are many things to give me pleasure, so I don't miss people."

Ma's eyes were wide open, "But can you be happy without people?"

His answer was firm, "Yes. That's the only way it's possible."

Mr. Khoo put the vase back and took out his pipe.

Ma was thoughtful, "People are not always kind," she murmured.

While Mr. Khoo was preparing and lighting his pipe Ma began to examine some of the things in his room. Yet she did not read the pages she was delicately turning and was hardly aware of the special fragrance each volume breathed out to her. She peered into little glass paperweights where boiled-lolly coloured beads were embedded but she was thinking about Mr. Khoo.

Eventually Peter rose up yawning, "Where is your dog, Khoo?"

Mr. Khoo himself rose, "Shall we go and look for him?"

Peter went ahead while Ma said to the Chinaman, "I suppose you've grown fond of Peter?"

"No," he answered bluntly and then seeing Ma's alarm he qualified: "at least, Peter is a good boy and . . . it's good to have him here. But . . . I'm not disappointed when he doesn't come to see me." He smiled ever so faintly. "In any case he'll soon find something better to do than visit an old man."

Ma said no more. They joined the boy in searching for the dog. It was not really Khoo's dog, he explained to Ma. One day it turned up in the garden. The housekeeper fed it. Then the dog had decided to stay.

They looked in the bush houses and in the old sheds where Khoo kept his tools, and heaps of clay pots and fertilizer in sacks. The dog was not there. They went to the front gate and looked up and down the road but it was not to be seen. Nor in the paddock next door where two draft horses watched in surprise. Mr. Khoo did not have a name for the dog so they were not able to call him. But Peter said that his name might be Rump and he began to call

out. Still the dog did not come. They looked under the house where it was black and cobwebbed, and into the garage where an old van stood.

Soon they were among the rhododendrons again. They lifted branches bent low under their precious burden of heavy white flowers and peeped behind bushes whose flowers had burned away to brown crumpled skins, until, finally, they found poor Rump lying half under a litter of white petals, half-covered with the white ashes of spent flowers.

They stood silently looking down at the white dog with black spots. Ma turned to the Chinaman.

"He's dead."

Mr. Khoo replied, "I'm afraid so."

"Has he just died, Khoo?" asked Peter.

"No. I think he has been dead for a while."

The dog was partly decomposed. Large patches were bare of fur and the skin was shiny and purple. One lip was shrivelled or was eaten by ants so it seemed to be snarling. Now that they were close to it they could smell a stench which the perfume of flowers almost concealed.

Ma glanced at the Chinaman again, more intently.

When the adults were not looking Peter couldn't resist the urge to crouch down and see more closely this thing which lay there so stiffly. With a twig he pulled out from under his foot he gently poked the unrecognised dog in two or three places. Then he wanted to ask questions but looking up he saw that his grandmother was crying, while old Khoo watched for a moment, inscrutably, before moving and stooping to take up a shovel. Peter crept over and held her hand but he knew that she was not really sad this time. Ma squeezed his hand and gazed at the Chinaman, and at the dog, while big tears rolled heavily and silently from her eyes.

Mr. Khoo had been right, for not long after that day Peter found other distractions, or perhaps he had been taken to school, but in any case he stopped going to see his friend. And by the time he was old enough to take an interest in the past and went back to the nursery, it had long since changed hands and no one knew about the Chinaman.

Now Peter was a young man and that day was so completely broken off from his present he might only have read of it. Sometimes he thought of it, when he saw pink and white birds. There were smells that reminded him, a spicy perfume like the heavy white trumpets of rhododendron, or the pungence of leaf mould and damp earth. A sugar pig, a green and white eyeshade, or stern-eyed currawongs made him recall the past, scenes long ago reconstructed like one of Khoo's vases. The bus gliding over the hill. The road to Khoo's house. The garden and the poor stiff little dog; and Ma's tears slipping quietly, slowly down her wrinkled cheeks.

But it was all very distant, remote like the pages of his coloured story books—Tom and the Water Babies or Tiny Thumbelina, riding, in a picture, on the back of Robin Redbreast.

THE OLEANDER

20th January 1964

Each morning lately I
have seen the warm east wind ripple and shift
our long-limbed uplifted oleander so that the high
red flowers (blood-bright, dark) tremble, lift

and sway in light. Red
and high, they would with their persistent blaze
wave all summer. Yet, burnt, diminished, brown, and dead,
some fall each day to where my daughter plays

pale in the grassy shade.
This morning she turned two and took with mild
surprise kisses, clothes, some toys, a ball, a hand-made
garden swing (O my little light child,

you shrieked and flew as high,
you thought, as all the trees and sky, hung—
lovely, frail—until backward through the flowing air to my
aching outstretched arms and heart you swung).

Now she gravely hugs
her birthday doll and lies it, limbs askew,
on a bed she's made of some badly-folded bunny rugs;
and now, singing a song I never knew,

she strokes its glistening hair.
It's eight o'clock. The flowers blaze in their scent.
The wind as warm as blood or breath moves slowly west to where
pale in the light, a murderer, intent

on breathing, stands, falls
into shade, hangs trembling, hanged. The wind as it flows
sways and shifts with a mortal sound like a sigh, and still
beneath this lively tree, these blazing flowers

(ah, dark heartsblood red!),
dead petals fall. Each morning takes its toll.
Nothing frail can stay. A body swings inside my head.
My child breathes life into her rigid doll.

WILLIAM GRONO

This poem was awarded the 1966 F. W. Simpson Prize for English Verse by
the University of Western Australia.

PAST MASTER

WHEN THE LABOR GOVERNMENT was narrowly beaten after 30 years in office no one was more pleased than Master Godby.

This was not because he was a partisan—as a senior civil servant he could not be this—he was a traditionalist, a rules man. As Master, Registrar and Sheriff of Our Honourable Court he was guardian and executor of the Rules.

It was Godby who ensured that the Crown Law Clerks did not whistle in the corridors, smoke in the strong rooms or flush the toilet while the Courts were sitting. It was Godby who ensured that office fires were not lit prior to June 1st and ceased forthwith to burn on August 31st. Even such dignitaries as the Crown Solicitor and Crown Prosecutor were uneasy at the sight of his gnarled fingers shuffling through the Book until an aged misshapen nail dug out the fatal passage (“I think you’ve over-looked Rule 36”) and there was an end to another easy way of doing things. And silent prayers would go up that Master Godby would have another and a final coronary.

But his principal adversary was that vast guerilla army of the law, the private practitioners, the barristers, solicitors and proctors, their clerks, managing, articulated, and junior. He and his deputies were a human barrier to the documents the profession tried to file in the Court. With searchlight scrutiny they would pick on the tiniest error and back would go the document for initialling, retyping or re-execution.

The Profession swore Master Godby had shares in the Law Stationers; but it was no good complaining; the answer always was “It’s in the Rules” and it would be there all right, however archaic and nonsensical, it would be there.

And this was why Master Godby was glad to see the Labour people go. They used to buck the Rules—or try to. They would have a Minister for Justice instead of an Attorney General. You never knew when the corridors wouldn’t suddenly be filled with deputations of unionists and such like. All kinds of jumped up people were likely to be appointed judges or Queen’s Counsel.

Worst of all was their monkeying around with judicial decisions, the quashing and commuting of sentences, reprieves and the like.

The case of Joe Piercy was directly in point. Joe Piercy was undoubtedly the person least pleased by the fall of the Labor Government. Joe Piercy was under sentence of death for murder when Parliament was dissolved, and no one had thought about reprieving him before the election was held.

One of the first decisive acts of the new Liberal Government was to announce

that the Law would take its course and by order of Executive Council set a date for Piercy's execution.

Master Godby, of course, was told promptly of the decision; as Sheriff of Our Honorable Court it was his duty to arrange the function.

Mentally the Master nodded approval and telephoned the Comptroller of H.M. Prisons with his instructions. The Comptroller was a little querulous in his response.

"It's all very well for them blokes in Ex Cow to set a date, but we've got to build a new gallows."

"What's wrong with the existing structure, Comptroller?"

"The white ants cleaned that up years ago."

"But surely it shouldn't take three weeks to construct a new gallows?"

"Prison Act Regulations specify 4" x 4" English oak for the uprights and cross-beams. We'll have to import it, and I can't see our Accounts Section authorising Air Freight for that lot."

"I regret to say that I seem to have mislaid my copy of Prison Act Regulations. Tch. Tch. It's out of print too. Would you be so good as to make me an extract of the relevant regulation? I will discuss it with the Crown Prosecutor. There must be some alternative procedure."

"Don't think there is, you know. I remember the same thing came up over in West Australia a couple of years ago. Judge ordered a birching and they had to import English birch for the instrument. The Act specified it. No way around it. Of course they wouldn't have had the freight problem we have."

He was right. There was no way around it. The execution had to be postponed two months, pending the arrival of the specified timber from the U.K., and for a further six weeks when the Commonwealth Government intervened for quarantine and inspection against a suspected syrex wasp infestation of the imported timber.

This raised a considerable protest among certain sections of the population who considered it inhumane that Piercy should be subjected to a protracted vigil in the death cell. The protest rose to a crescendo when it was learnt that Piercy was clearly in earshot of the construction and spent his last fortnight listening to the carpenters at work.

The Government ignored the protests as a matter of policy. It is doubtful if Master Godby was even aware of them.

Three days before the execution he had a final conference with the Comptroller. They found it necessary to deal with a certain recalcitrance on the part of the Prison Superintendent.

"He wants to be excused from attending", explained the Comptroller. "It appears he witnessed one as a young warder in the twenties and went blind for six weeks, I told him he could resign his post if he felt so strongly about it."

"I consider you're perfectly right in your attitude, Comptroller. The regulations are quite plain on the subject, aren't they?—The Superintendent must be present at all times."

"Yes, and as I pointed out to him if anyone has a good medical reason for not attending it's you, sir, with your heart condition. And you're not trying to back out."

"I?" Godby croaked, "I attend the execution? I should not think that would be necessary."

"But of course", the Comptroller gasped back at him. "Regulation 48" he shuffled through the pages, "See—'The Sheriff or his duly prescribed deputy attend and shall give the Order for Execution to the hangman'; That must be you. Ex Cow hasn't appointed a deputy has it?"

The cold morning wind was finding little runnels of sand to blow from the grey limestone walls as the Deputy Superintendent led Master Godby through the stale sweat and phenyle rustiness of the prison corridors.

Each clanking lock and crashing bolt set him shuddering. The primitive brutality of the place was an inconceivable revelation. But nothing approached the crudity of the scaffold.

In his 75 years the Master had been to hospitals and to funeral parlors, had ridden in an ambulance and seen a morgue or two. Somehow he had expected this place of suffering and death to be in category, to possess at least hygienic efficiency.

The new gallows, it is true, were neat and modern, flush jointed and veneered, the nail holes neatly puttied. Beneath them, however, was the trapdoor of massive axe-hewn timber slabs, held in place by rusty iron rod which led via an elbow joint to a crude lever of bush timber. None of it in any way changed since the convicts constructed it.

As he gazed at the final implement of the executive process he heard more clanging down the corridor and the shuffle of reluctant feet. The shivering within him merged with the beating of his heart and lifted it to a drum beat that drowned the questing wind and held him electrified, the sweat pouring out of him as he gaped at the five men trudging towards him, their faces gaping back with a sort of horrified embarrassment.

As the cortege moved off the older practitioners agreed—*sotto voce*—that it was the grandest funeral the profession had ever put on.

"He was a bloody pettifogging pest, but we'll miss the old boy" they agreed.

The Chief Justice threw in the first handful of earth, the Attorney General followed, and both moved slowly away to their official car.

"Pity the old boy didn't last another ten minutes" the Attorney General mused.

The Chief Justice scratched his nose with a wing of his glasses and drawled wryly:

"What surprises me is that a hangman should have such respect for the departed that he refuses to complete an execution just because someone drops dead at it. I thought that it was the purpose of the exercise."

"Oh he'd have gone on all right. He was after his bonus. The Superintendent stopped him. Regulation 48—The Sheriff shall give the Order for Execution."

"And my court's now at sixes and sevens because it's got no Master and no one will volunteer because no one wants the job of hanging Piercy."

"And under the Law we can't hang Piercy without a Sheriff."

"Well, can't you change the Law? You're the Government."

"Not just at the moment, the Opposition would make too much capital out of it."

"Then you'd better reprieve Piercy, hadn't you?"

"I'm afraid we have no alternative" the Attorney General agreed.

THE MIDNIGHT SHIFT

The masthead lights swing to and fro
Upon the men who sweat below:
Our daughter sleeps but how can I
While my man heaves the small flour high
And cold winds cut and shiver?

O, he will work through velvet night
Until the sun's red eye glows bright:
Is my man watching enviously
As prostitutes go sidling by
To feed a sailor's fervor?

And will he smell of sulphur fumes
Or soda ash to clog my brooms
When the midnight shift is over?

But should a sling of cargo slip
Or steel into the soft flesh rip
Where will I find another?

So will I laugh or will I weep
Or take a lover home to sleep
Lest the shift should last for ever?

JOAN WILLIAMS

VOODOO MAN

At evening, lit by a forest
Of torches, walk through those blazing cane-fields
With three negroes beside you,
Dressed only in a silken cloth,

Your body prepared with oils
Each muscle gleaming, manhood caught in a knot,
Stalk-stubs pricking
Your feet, and your hands brushing a scatter of spiders.

Until you reach
In a blaze of moon that distant shanty-town
Where fruit is set in circles
And children cower. Hear the drums, the drums!

Thudded by corned palms, driven
Through the aching body of night like a thunder of blood,
They call you, they call you.
And under that shelter the peristyle

Waits, drawn out in paint and chalk.
Strip off your silk,
Kneel, and bedeck your genitals with unguents,
For he is coming, damballa

Uedo, the serpent god,
To course like a river of quicksilver
Down that bamboo stake
Into your soul, your soul.

Wait. There's a cry, a cry!
They have taken your spirit away
Like a brittle shadow to the inner hut.
You faint with despair,

And the pole! The pole is alive!
It is a serpent! You are part of it!
You writhe in the sawdust, your fangs
Sting the women!

Out to that iron jungle
You glide, writhing with desire,
Clusters of eggs betoken
What your lust has become!

Only at dawn you revert
To your ravished humanity, turn
To the sun, to the thighs of girls,
And know that all things are denied

You, stumbling drunkenly back through the cane-fields
That swish past, sounding with jibes,
Your spine bent, your hands brushing the soil,
An ancient fit for the stoking of winter fires.

CHARLES HIGHAM

LIZZIE

The wallpaper stood up and breathed,
Swarming with patterns, and the diseased
Roses that held cold, cankered hearts.
Above her head flew fungus trees,
Grey branches waving like drowning arms.
Within her brain the heat-clouds wreathed
All through that shining, bitter noon.

At breakfast, those two humans she
Dreaded more fiercely than anyone
Had wounded her with kniving glances.
Fat arms pushed hard on cloth, and flesh
Danced in her eyes with loathsome size.
She longed to feel her body free.
But they clamped steel upon her breasts.

She ironed. Pressed the stiff linen
With practical hands upon a board,
Each pleat precise with hate, while in
The upstairs room, her stepmother's
Brisk skirts scraped over steaming floors.
Her father banked and talked with sin.
She longed for the cooling of the moon.

But only that sickening blaze kept on,
And the tall wooden house, correct
And prim encased a woollen heat.
Outside thin birches drooped. Each leaf
Swollen and still. She stripped her dress
And stood, a flabby, buxom thing.
Within her white flesh beat a sun,
That terrible eye which never rests.

Late morning, and he had come home;
He fumbled with the lock, and she
Seeing the fates lean on their loom,
Laughed at his struggle in the dust.
He walked into the parlor. Now
The time had come. Naked she took
Upstairs a blade her mind had honed.
Its glitter was her final boon.

A dusting woman's printed dress
Flew up. Eyes were like dolls'
In fright. The wallpaper swarmed and danced.
A picture of a woodland scene
Sweated a sap of blood. Two birds
Trapped in the room beat round and round
And died within a linen-press.
Death's icy light shone on their crests.

Now strong, stiff-haired, she made the stairs.
She trod round the one step that groaned.
Across the hall, where Bridget could
Not hear her. Under a newsprint tent
Her father lay. His flyblown doze
Droned in thick air. She raised the thing.
It went as smooth as knives through pears.
Down the high walls the roses swooned.

Forever then she could sleep tight,
Firm in that beautiful thing she did.
The nights were fine. But day by day
The roses grew, the thorns pierced on.
The wallpaper with swarming petals
Flew round her writhing arms. And each
Day till she died she had to go
Kill them again, because she loved them so.

CHARLES HIGHAM

JOURNEY THROUGH YESTERDAY

IT IS NO LONGER important what happened that day. But at the time, from where I stood in history, it was important, for every day to a child is a journey, a preview of things to come.

The house, where I lived in Copenhagen, faced a tall factory wall on which, two stories up, hung a clock with two hands that moved between twelve numbers.

One morning I saw the Virgin Mary where the clock used to be. She wore a long blue frock that trailed along the pavement like a liquid pool of sky, and a small brim of gold framed her face. I ran to the window and stood there waving happily when mother came in.

"Who are you waving to?" she asked.

"Mary," said I.

Mother came up beside me and peered down into the street. "There's no one there."

"No, now there isn't," I admitted and returned to my porridge wondering why I was privileged by heaven, and she apparently was not. Something in her past, I decided, and felt a little lost at this first hint of sin, where virtue had seemed absolute.

Mother believed in building independence and sent me shopping on my own. Two pounds of sugar and one pint of milk. The grocer on the corner was fat and jovial. He called me *Spirrevip*.

"Good morning," he said, "and how is my *Spirrevip* today?"

The other customers laughed, and I laughed too, because they laughed.

It was spring, and on a table near the door stood boxes with strawberries. On leaving I picked a berry and dropped it ostentatiously into my mouth.

"Why you naughty little girl," said a woman passing by on the street. "I saw what you were doing," she added, and called to the grocer: "She's eating all your strawberries."

The grocer came out from behind the counter and seized me by the arm. "Put them back," he demanded, no longer jovial.

I yawned in his face and wriggled my tongue to show there was nothing to hide. The grocer dragged me down the street and up the stairs to mother.

"Stealing . . ." he said, presenting me like a puppy.

I kicked him hard in the shins and screamed: "I did not, I did not I did not . . ." until the neighbour opened her door to watch us curiously.

"Stop it," said mother and brought out her purse. "How much?"

"Well," said the grocer and mentioned a price that staggered both mother and the neighbour. "That's per pound of course," he added quickly. "But she didn't eat that much."

I kicked him again, harder this time, and mother pulled me back. "That's enough," she said and paid him for a pound. The grocer said thank you and mother slammed the door in his face.

"How could you?" she asked, dabbing at her eyes with the edge of her apron. "Why? What made you do such a thing?"

"But I didn't, I didn't, I didn't . . ." I started chanting again, until her hand came flying at me, and I stepped back beyond her reach.

"You aren't blessed," I cried in desperation. That stopped her at once. Her hand fell down. "You didn't see the Virgin," I continued victoriously .

"Who? What are you talking about?"

"Mary, the Virgin. I told you this morning. She waved at me."

Mother sighed. "You must not say these things. You and I know you're just pretending, but other people . . ."

"No, I saw her. Honest I did."

"You thought you saw her darling, but you did not *really* see her."

"But I did. It's true. I did."

"If you keep saying that," said mother impatiently, "I'll send you to bed for lying." That brought back the strawberries. "And for stealing."

I envied the people in the bible. They weren't sent to bed. I would much rather have fought a lion.

"I thought I saw her," I capitulated.

"That's my girl," said mother and patted me on the back.

Later that day we went to visit father. He did not live with us, but when I needed clothes, mother and I would go to a huge, noisy, glass-domed hall and wait at the foot of a ladder from which, presently, father would descend on us with a smile on his dirty face. He and mother spoke in low, passionate voices that eventually grew loud and shrill.

"I didn't come here to argue," said mother. "I know my rights."

"All right. What is it this time?" asked father wearily.

"Shoes," said mother and showed him the soles of my sandals. He took out his wallet, handed her some notes and—waving at me—climbed back to heaven. He worked there, I thought.

"Does he mind the fire?" I asked as we were leaving.

"Fire? What fire? Who?" asked mother irritably.

"Daddy . . . you know."

"I most certainly don't. I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

I looked to see if she was joking. Sometimes she spoke like she had never read the bible at all.

"The fire," I repeated patiently, "where they wait to be judged. The purgatory. Does he take care of it? Is that how he got dirty in the face?"

Mother shook her head. "You'd get dirty too, working in a ship-yard. Be quiet now. I'm thinking."

Ships! Heavenly ships!

"My Daddy works in heaven, building aeroplanes," I told the children in the street.

"Nobody works in heaven," they said, and one of them threw a stone at me. It grazed my cheek and my hand came away smeared with blood. I was wounded at last and hurried upstairs to show it to mother.

"I'm talking," she said. "Can't you see that I'm talking? You mustn't interrupt when I'm talking. Say hello to grandmother."

"Hello grandmother," said I, loudly, slowly and distinctly. Grandmother was German, and I could not always understand her foreign accent.

"Don't shout at me, child," she said, speaking just as loudly, slowly and distinctly. "I'm not deaf." She had a long, hooked nose and wicked, cackling laughter. Secretly I thought she was a witch and feared her, yet yearned for her affection.

"Go and wash your face," said mother. "It's dirty."

"It's not dirt. It's blood."

"Don't argue," said mother.

"I worry," said grandmother, "always I worry. Did you hear what happened to Billy yesterday?"

"No," said mother. "Now what did he do?"

"They threw him out. Yesterday at the coffee shop where he goes every afternoon to read the papers." Grandmother pulled out her handkerchief and wiped her glasses. They clouded easily.

"Why?" asked mother. "He must've done something."

"Nothing," said grandmother. "Nothing at all. For ten years he's gone there every day and made the same old joke. 'One cup of coffee' he says, 'and a piece of pastry—but don't give me none from yesterday.' And always they've laughed at him, but yesterday a new man was there, new owner. 'What's with you, mister,' he says to Billy. 'Our bread is always fresh. We don't sell old pastry, see?' So Billy laughs to show he's only joking, and the man comes at him. 'Wise guy,' he says. 'You got complaints about anything, go somewhere else. We don't want troublemakers here.' And Billy came home like a whipped dog."

"For heaven's sake," said mother.

"It's blood," said I.

"I don't care what it is," said mother. "Go and wash your face."

I went and studied the wound in the mirror. The blood had caked and looked like dirt. I washed it gingerly, put my head to the side and whispered: "I worry, always I worry." Slowly I drew closer and kissed my own cold lips in the mirror which misted like grandmother's glasses.

Through the open window came the sound of music. I climbed the lavatory and peered through the window at the clouded sky. But the music came from below. At the bottom of the street stood an organ grinder with his face turned up. I sneaked down the backway and followed him for several blocks. A small brown puppy was following him too, but when I left the organ grinder, the puppy came up and circled me. At last, helplessly he flopped on his back and looked at me sadly. Like a whipped dog, I thought and poked him with the toe of my shoe.

"Get up," I said.

"A little old lady paused to watch me. "You shouldn't kick your dog," she chided gently.

"It's not my dog."

"You still shouldn't kick it"

"I wasn't kicking it."

"But you were. I saw it myself," she cried indignantly and appealed to two other ladies who had paused to look. "I saw her kicking it."

I backed away from their disapproval. "He keeps following me," I said. "Just watch." I started to walk off, but the dog remained on his back waving his paws at the ladies who bent over, cooing, to pet him.

I crossed the street to the pier. A girl sat on the bench and waited for a boy who worked in the factory. The boy was tall and thin and wore a dark brown jumper. I always recognised him coming through the gate.

The girl was reading. When the boy sat down beside her on the bench, she closed the book and put her head on his shoulder.

"They couldn't have," she said after a while. "Not like we do. Never."

"Who knows?" said the boy and touched her hair with his fingertips. Once he wound a strand around one finger where it shone like a band of gold. He showed it to her and laughed.

"Let's walk," he said. "I'm cold."

They rose and the girl hooked her arm through his and looked up in his face. "Always," she said, solemnly and sadly. "Always."

The bench was still warm, where they had been sitting. The sun hung like a big balloon above the ocean. I watched it drown and went home.

"I haven't had a chance to talk to you," shouted grandmother, when I came back. "Where have you been?"

"Out . . . Playing," I shouted back.

"Won't you stay for tea?" asked mother.

"I can't," said grandmother. "Billy's expecting me. He's so upset."

"If you won't, you won't. Say goodbye to grandmother."

"Goodbye grandmother."

"Goodbye child."

After tea I looked at the clock.

"Now what do you see?" asked mother.

"Nothing."

"Well, hurry up. Don't just stand there. It's late. Go to bed."

From my bed I could see the stars, small and distant like the organ grinder. Mother came in to kiss me goodnight.

"You won't tell stories any more, will you?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"That's the trouble with Uncle Billy," she said. "He always tells stories—things that could not possibly happen. And he always gets into trouble. That's God's way of punishing him for lying. You wouldn't want that to happen to you, would you?"

I shook my head again. She kissed my forehead, turned off the light and left. In the dark I stared at the stars and wondered what mother had done since she had not been able to see the Virgin Mary.

HALF-PERCEPTION BY THE POOL

I think I said
I heard a voice,
I saw a fish in a pool
in the sunlight.

I love the pool,
its red goldfish & cold sunny water,
I pool the love,
its cold redfish & gold sunny water,

The crowds chant shut-up & go home
and my lover whispers nothing
very loudly; terrified by
I never know what I mean to say
I never know what
I never know what home is;
besides, I cannot say.

REGINALD GRIFFITHS

SINCE DECEMBER, 1948

Licorice-stains, red & green
& purple all appeal;
everywhere
a strand of hair out of place,
the walls have no corners
& the ground is cool
where they fall
in a shadow,
pregnant with tales
of kings & Queens & tons of leaves,
I stand trial
in all the scenes of my past,
occasionally clawing the air
and scratching some door
for a sign of approval,
sometimes meeting my mind
(or some other part)
over the fence
& hoping I've been good to it
all these years
since December, nineteen forty-eight.

REGINALD GRIFFITHS

SOMETHING IN COMMON

“VISITORS FROM AS FAR AFIELD as Geraldton and Albany,” reported the Kondulin Echo, “attended the wedding of Sally Jane, elder daughter of Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Evans of Perth and Rodney L., only son of Mrs. and the late Mr. Bert Williams of Kondulin. Members of the Ladies’ Guild had tastefully decorated St. Margaret’s Church of England for the afternoon of October 12th . . . The bride who entered the church on the arm of her father made a charming picture . . . After the customary toasts had been honoured the younger set danced to the music of Miss Keynes . . . For her going-away outfit the bride chose a light-weight wool costume and a head-hugging hat in powder blue with black accessories. Her necklace and ear-rings were a gift from the groom. After a honeymoon spent motoring in the Southwest the happy couple will return to Rosebank which Rod has been managing since the death of his father early this year.”

A motionless mid-December afternoon. Ever since the evening southerly had failed three nights ago, stale tepid air had been accumulating in the house, settling like dust on skin and mind. Sally, lying on the sitting-room floor, the coolest place in the four-roomed house, had fallen asleep but only for a few minutes. She woke with a parched throat which swallowing would not moisten. Standing up slowly, for her head, as if still weighted with the trivialities of yesterday’s conversation, felt heavy and a quick movement would set it throbbing, she went to the window and raised the holland blind.

The view had not changed. Trees, bushes, the formal flower of the windmill stood as still as if anaesthetized. Only the horizon beyond the dry creek bed and the stubble paddock moved, pulsating in long quivering lines along the edge of the bleached blue sky. The horizon outside, and inside, in the upper part of the window, a blowfly buzzing noisily and senselessly up and down the pane.

Sally lowered the blind and turned from the surfeit of light. For a moment she was blind and she shut her eyes as she groped towards the kitchen. There where three of the walls were weatherboard it was hotter still. She read the thermometer on the wall—92°. Thank God, she needn’t light the wood stove till evening. Should she stay here and do something—sweep the floor?—just for the sake of enjoying the illusion of coolness when she returned to the front room? Rod said it was ten degrees cooler in the front in summer. “That’s why you want to remember to keep this door shut.” Hearing the words in her mind she closed the door.

There wasn't much point to sweeping the floor. At home in Perth it was different but no one was likely to drop in here, not on a Saturday afternoon as hot as this. What she should do was bake some more cake. Rod would be across from the shed presently wanting afternoon tea. He eats so much cake, she thought; of everything that he likes—why isn't he fat? But he eats fruit cake especially. I can't possibly. Not today. Bake for three hours, the recipe says. Some biscuits then—they wouldn't take long. Because he *is* nice, isn't he. And she smiled a little to herself.

The thought drew her to the bedroom which opened off the kitchen. She buried her face in Rod's pillow, then smoothed it out and with the smell of it still in her nostrils went to the dressing-table and looked at herself in the mirror. She made a grimace but was not dissatisfied with the reflection of a small round face, dark eyes and dark curling hair.

It's really too hot, she continued as she combed her hair, too hot to bake anything. What else can I do? She thought of the tomato plants which she had bought in Kondulin a month ago and planted at the side of the house. The fruit was forming but something had been taking it.

"Bobtails probably. Or birds," Rod had said.

"What are bobtails?"

"*You* know. Surely. Lizards. You must have seen them sometimes in Perth."

Opening the kitchen door she stepped out onto the back verandah. The sun had moved off it hours ago but the board floor was still soaked with warmth. She returned to the bedroom for a pair of sandals and then, screwing up her eyes, went to the tomato patch. She put her hands to her face to ward off the fierce heat which flowed in molten waves over her. Each breath she took dried out her body.

She squatted down and peered under the bag shelter she had erected over the plants. They were standing up well—she had watered them generously both that morning and the previous evening in secret defiance of Rod's injunction to go easy on the water. She peered in, looking for yellow flowers and smelling the strange scent of the leaves. If only they would ripen by Christmas! Where was the big one she'd noticed yesterday? It was changing colour. Round this side. She lifted a plant and the yellowish-orange tomato came into view. It was half-eaten.

She saw the remains of another, still green, on the ground beside the next plant. She picked it up and tears came to her eyes. The work she'd put into the little patch took volume and settled like a weight inside her. Her digging of the beds, the loads of manure she'd trundled from the fowlyard, Rod's annoyance when she'd bought twenty-four plants ("Too many. We can't afford the water. Wait till harvest's over and I've put down another bore. You've got to realize Sal, you can't waste water here.")—"But I *want* them for Christmas. And don't call me Sal."), the daily carrying of water, the weeding, the hunt for straight, strong sticks on which to hang the bagging.

There was a strong rustling among the plants and Sally stood up quickly and backed away. Snake! Silence except for the ridiculous pounding of blood in her ears. It must be a lizard, she thought, and with determination overcoming fear, squatted cautiously again. The rustling, as rough as if brown paper were being crumpled, arrested her hand above the plants and set her heart throwing

itself against her ribs. She parted two plants and saw a shape, a foot or so in length, scaly, blunt-nosed and blunt-tailed, lying in the recess of the trench.

Carefully she withdrew her hand and stood up, this time slowly to avoid the dizziness which the heat caused. Then she walked across the yard, head lowered, eyes half-closed against the glinting dazzle of minute quartz fragments, to the shed. Rod was working on the truck and she had to wait while he finished screwing in a part.

"It'll be gone if you don't hurry."

"He'll stay there all day. Just the place in weather like this. He won't go anywhere till he's finished off your tomatoes."

"Then do hurry!" She was on the edge of anger.

He came out leisurely, feet first, from under the truck. "O.K. Let's go."

She lifted the hessian. "It was just down here . . . I told you it'd be gone."

Rod parted the plants further down the row. "Now look here, Sal," he sounded annoyed, "did you water these damn plants again this morning?"

"Yes I did. No one but a—but a fool would expect them to live through a day like this without water."

"I am not fool enough," he straightened up and his face tightened, "to expect them to live without water. And I am not fool enough either to expect my sheep to live without water. I said a bucket a day for these plants and I bloody well mean it."

Sally's face burned. "Don't swear at me. You don't want me to have a garden. There's no comparison between the water five hundred sheep drink and twenty-four little tomato plants."

"That's not the point. You waste water in other ways too. The hand bowl—I saw you yesterday emptying it in the yard again. Put that on the tomatoes if you must water them."

"It's soapy. It would kill them. And don't bully me."

"I'm not. I'm perfectly reasonable about the whole thing. This is serious, Sal" (she put her fingers in her ears at the sound of the nickname) "and if you give them more than a bucketful again" (he raised his voice and stepped towards her) "I'll pull them out."

Sally opened her mouth, then shut it firmly, determined to pretend she hadn't heard. But the look of fury on her face gave her away.

"Now where's this blanky bobtail?" He turned and bent over the plants and came up holding the lizard by the back of its neck. The stubby tail twisted to one side as it squirmed in Rod's grasp. The clusters of little toes jutted out helplessly on each side of its pale glossy underside.

"Soon get rid of this one. Though there are sure to be others to take its place." He made off towards the woodheap.

"What are you going to do with it?" Sally called in a sudden premonition.

"What do you think?" His anger had passed with the finding of the lizard. She ran after him and stood in his way. "You're not going to kill it?"

"What else?" he asked. "You don't want," banteringly, "to keep it as a pet?"

"You could take it away."

"You take it," he teased and held it out to her.

She stepped back and with her fear her anger flared again. "I didn't think you'd be so callous," she said coldly, "so inhuman."

The hardness of her tone and expression made him now as furious as she.

For a moment he considered leaving it there in the yard. Let it go back to her tomatoes and eat the lot. That would settle it. But to do that would be a sign of weakness. He strode over to the woodheap, picked up the axe, dropped the lizard and with a quick blow severed the head. Flinging the axe aside he returned to the shed.

The thud of the blow echoed in Sally's ears and released a pain that swelled and turned in her head. She went despite herself to the woodheap. The small triangular head lay upside down; the first flies had begun to settle on the sticky red mess at the neck. The body had turned over from the force of the blow and its involuntary writhing after death. Pieces of green tomato stuck out from the throat. The double pairs of little three-toed feet were unharmed. Seen from underneath they were vulnerable, pale and innocent, almost like tiny hands. Trembling and nauseated, Sally ran through the relentless heat to the house.

Sally woke easily from a deep sleep. The night was dark and country-quiet but she could just distinguish the curtains billowing into the room. Sometime after Rod had gone off to Kondulin alone and she had fallen asleep in spite of her throbbing head, the southerly must have swept in from the coast over a hundred miles away. Cool air, holding the faintest scent of rain, moved gently over her face. She wondered why she had woken to this moment of peace. Then she heard the door of the utility slam and Rod's steps approaching across the yard. She pictured him clearly and as tenderness surged through her she thought, I'll pretend to wake up just as he comes in. No, I'll wait till he's in bed. Then I'll turn over so I'll be touching him and I'll say, "Rod." And then he'll—

But thrusting sharply in between the tactual image of Rod's arms and hands and her acquiescence came like a sheet of ice the flattened memory of the afternoon: Rod's body bent as his arms brought down the axe. There was a window between her and Rod on which was superimposed Rod in the act of angry destruction, Rod striding away from her to the shed and, everywhere now, the little upturned feet that looked like hands. The noise of the blow thudded again in her head. He killed it. And feeling not anger but an involuntary revulsion she sat up, tucked in her pyjama jacket and, pulling the sheet up to her chin, moved to the further side of the bed.

She woke late in a still house, Rod's place in the bed vacant. She listened for sounds and heard only a fly buzzing in the window, the kitchen clock ticking through the closed door and the occasional creak of the iron roof as it expanded in the heat of a new day. She slipped out of bed and crossing the luke-warm floor quietly opened the door. The kitchen was empty, but someone had breakfasted earlier. Beside a greasy plate there was a note: "Jimmy Roberts said last night the mill in the far east paddock's broken. Don't know how long it will take to fix. I may be away all day. Rod."

She ate a lonely breakfast and then went to the tomato patch. The earth was moist: Rod had watered it for her that morning. Tears came to her eyes.

She went back to the house and, ignoring the rising temperature, built up the stove and mixed a fruit-cake. She swept the kitchen floor, dusted through the house, tidied drawers. And all the time watched the expressionless face of the clock. By four o'clock the cake was baked, the house spotless and stifling and Rod had not returned.

When she heard the utility she felt suddenly shy, hid the cake in a tin and returned the cups and saucers to the cupboard. As Rod came in she glanced at him quickly, said, "Hello," and turned to the kettle.

"Hello," he returned, and stood uncertainly in the doorway.

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Won't say no. It's a bit late. I s'pose you've had yours."

"No, I waited."

"That's nice." He sounded a little wary but he sat down and began to tell her, as she took out the cups and saucers and made the tea, about the trouble with the mill.

"Would you like some cake?"

"No thanks . . . 'Samatter of fact, I ate the last of it a couple of days ago."

"I've made some more. It's a fruit cake."

"Today?" He sounded interested. "You must have been busy."

"It's been cooler. I can work better when it's not so hot. The hot weather upsets me."

"It gets me that way too."

After the evening meal Rod went outside again. Sally could see him from the kitchen window moving from one shed to another, his shadow and the dog's elongated behind him. She crossed the yard to the building which contained the store-room, lavatory and laundry, and sorted clothes for the next morning's wash. When she had finished she stood a moment at the door. The air was cooler, the hard light of the day replaced by a fading softness. One, two stars shone. "Where's Rod?" she wondered, and listened. Only silence from the heavy sheds which seemed to be gathering into the stained thatch of their roofs all the black shadows of day. A magpie sailed strongly through the air and alighted on a straggly gum. The gentle, steady click, click of the turning mill sounded like knitting needles. She thought of her mother, patient and round and comfortable, knitting up the evenings of her life and making soothing replies to her father's angry analysis of the evening paper.

"Where can he be?" she wondered again and then heard his step. She went to the side of the house and saw him bent over the tomato patch, pouring a bucket of water along the channels. He straightened and saw her.

"Rod—you—". He had dropped the bucket and was holding her. She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "You watered them this morning too."

"A bucket of water won't go far among five hundred sheep."

"I'm sorry."

"So'm I."

There was a rustling like paper being screwed up among the tomato plants. Sally started.

"I'll bet that's another bobtail." The dog, tail curled alertly over his back, poked his nose into the sides of the plot. "Come out of it, Blue." Rod bent, leaves rustled and he straightened up holding a lizard by the back of its neck. Sally was silent but he could make out her troubled face in the gloom.

"Can you spare this bucket from washing tomorrow?" She nodded. "I'll leave this fellow in it overnight and take him along with me tomorrow. I can drop him off at the soak beyond the reserve." He stood the bucket on the back verandah. "Remind me to take it in the morning."

It was not until half an hour after Rod had gone and the copper was begin-

ning to boil that Sally, looking for a second bucket and seeing it on the verandah, realized that the lizard had been forgotten. "I'll remind him about it this afternoon," she promised herself and went back to the washing. The weather was working up to another heat wave. Sally, finding water the coolest element, stayed to sweep out the store-room and lavatory and scrub the three floors. By that time the light breeze of morning had dwindled and the clothes were dry. She took them from the line, closing her eyes against the glare of the white linen which, in the absence of a wind, had dried stiffly and in tiny wrinkles.

As she approached the back verandah with her arms full of clothes she caught a breath of something foul. She paused and looked around—Bluey must have dragged the remains of something into the yard. The stench was overwhelming, nauseating—but she could see nothing to explain it. For all its foulness it was somehow a fresh smell; not of decay, but of what? Holding the clothes to her face to escape it she reached the verandah.

There was a scraping noise. She looked down into the bucket at her feet. The lizard was scuttling round its small circular base. Its body was smeared with its own excreta and as it moved through it again, another wave of stench rose into the air. Sally retched. The lizard stopped in a half curve, unable to straighten out in the confined space. Its mouth was open as it panted, its sides heaved.

With a sheet trailing, a towel dropped and trodden underfoot, Sally threw open the wire door and fumbled desperately at the knob of the inner, wooden door. She threw the clothes on the table and ran back to the verandah. The lizard slithered feebly round the bucket and stopped exhausted. Sally touched the side of the bucket as she reached for the handle and recoiled in pain. It was blisteringly hot.

"It's been here all the morning," she thought in horror. Snatching up a duster she wrapped it round the handle and started running witlessly down the sandy track. "Take it to the creek," a voice separate from her body decided for her. She ran in the blazing heat down the slope where the tyre marks of Rod's passage earlier were still imprinted on the sand, and across the dry, white-stoned ford. "Leave it under the bridge," the voice continued. The lizard slipped to and fro across its narrow circle as she ran and the stench stirred up by its movements clung to her body. The heat pressed down as though an iron was being passed over her cotton dress.

Past the motionless mill, down the shadeless creek she ran gasping. Half a mile away the track crossed the creek by a narrow wooden bridge. She scrambled and slid down the bank and tipped the lizard out in the shade of the bridge. It lay on the ground, too exhausted to move. She realized there was no water for it there. The sand under the bridge was as dry and crumbled as at the ford. "There's no water," she whispered. And as the bucket brushed her leg and she recoiled, "I brought it all this way in the hot bucket. What have I done?"

And now the memory of the dead lizard returned to accuse not Rod but her. "What am I going to do?" To this question there was no answer but to pick up the bucket and, with its stench soaking into her hair and the pores of her skin and her soul, to return to the house and prepare lunch for Rod and herself.

“AND I REMEMBER SPAIN”

Louis MacNeice: *Autumn Journal*, VI.

“And I remember Spain”:
The slow iambic click
Like broken clockwork ticks
Along the Ages, through
The contrapuntal maze
Of less accomplished men
Whose fugal subjects are
Not truly counterfelt,
But memories, therefore
Exercises only, not
The complex song which sings us now
The tired joy of being man.

ANTHONY RUTHERFORD

PETER FREEMAN IN THE BANK

Full morning: crowded on the floor, desks,
counters, machines, clerks in uniforms,
papers and tokens, clever indifferent gains.
The sun leans in at windows and scatters sums
and coins too vast to be contained on forms.

Here in the queue I wait, resigned to my turn
(What can you do?—the whole town is routine),
and drum on my deposit book, look round,
noting my neighbours' faces one by one:
girls with set features, indifferent men;

an unsmiling city. We are ourselves, waiting.
I gauge these faces, and assess them all.
But the stranger looking at me with his eyes
quick and brittle catches me out. I feel
my own instant defence. What could he tell,

myself in the mirror? Though my nerves have answered,
I look to my papers, pose for myself, quickly.
The door opens; blatantly, unhindered,
the sun comes in and pushes ahead of me.
I fumble with change. Full morning. undefended,
the teller lifts his face enquiringly.

THOMAS W. SHAPCOTT

THE CAT

THAT EVENING on the way home from university the weather was bad when he left the bus. The rain swept down in long tearing gusts against the back of his raincoat and trouser legs. Down the street before him the lights glowed feebly yellow in a disappearing straight line to the bottom of the hill. All around on the asphalt road and cement footpath the rain fell in a steadily rising hiss. He hunched and moved his shoulders inside his clothes to reassure himself that he was still dry. He felt a creeping chill in his skull as the cold water drove into his hair and trickled down the back of his neck.

When it rained he didn't much mind living in the city because then the sky and air were the same and the houses and streets all around were unimportant. The ground was only a ring of shapes robbed and blurred of colour, a backdrop of broken swaying and static areas behind the half light and sleet.

Reaching the house he crossed the wet street lawn and jumped over a gate between that building and the neighbouring houseyard. Yellow light streamed through the rain streaked kitchen window, inside he heard voices and the clinking of eating utensils being washed.

Out of the rain on the back verandah, he set down the brown briefcase in which he carried his books and shook the water off his coat. His mother unlocked the door.

"Put your wet coat in the wash house over the clothes horse and don't bring that dripping bag into the house." She sounded irritated, for a moment he felt angry. "And make sure you don't let that stinken old cat in if it's there."

She stood behind the fly wire door watching as he went into the laundry off the side of the verandah. He pulled off his shoes and hung up his coat.

"Bring those shoes inside," she called. "I hope your clothes aren't wet underneath because we haven't got a fire to dry them by now, and I'm not going to waste money running electric heaters, you should have stayed at the bus shelter until the rain stopped."

"They're not," he said coming out of the laundry. "Where is the cat anyway?"

Back on the verandah he looked around in the dim light coming from the kitchen door and saw the animal huddled in an old grocery box on some newspapers. Out in the yard the rain was still falling. He walked over and laid his hand on its rough fur. The cat was thin and cold to touch.

"Did you give her anything to eat?" he asked.

"No I didn't," she answered sharply, without feeling in her voice. "If you want to feed it you can buy food for it with your own money. I don't know

why you had to bring it with you when we moved up here, your father told you then it would only be a nuisance. You should see the holes the stinken thing digs in the garden, if I ever catch it I'll belt it with a lump of wood."

For a moment he paused looking down at the softly purring cat.

"I'll get her something now, but it wouldn't do you any harm to give her a bit now and then." He wiped his feet on the door mat and walked past the woman into the kitchen. His father turned around from the sink where he was wiping dishes,

"Don't muck around with the cat now, get your own tea first. We want to get cleaned up and look at the television, you're late already."

"I had a late lecture," he said annoyed, "Mum, what can I give the cat?"

"Your father told you to get your own tea first, the electric oven's been running half an hour already just for you." His mother faced him, she was much shorter than he was, he turned away,

"I don't give a damn, I'm giving the cat something to eat, no one else bothers to."

Both parents watched him, saying nothing. He found two slices of stale bread, rubbed them in the gravy at the bottom of an unwashed pot and carried them in his hands out to the cat.

He stood in the cold for a while watching the animal eat greedily, licking its nose and smelling around on the verandah floor when the bread was gone. Inside he heard his father saying:

"He couldn't give a damn about anybody but himself, I'll wake him up one of these days, he'll do what he's told for a change." He stopped and came to the door, standing silhouetted in the light, "Come in here and get your tea and hurry up about it, I'm sick of waiting around. You can wash your own plates too when you're finally finished." His voice was loud and angry but Bill knew that beneath it he was strained and unsure. He could answer back easily and hurt with sarcasm but he held back his words.

"Alright, don't panic, I'm coming."

Removing a plate of curry and rice from the oven and turning off the power, he took it into the dining room and sitting at the table began to eat.

LEGEND OF THE GREEN COUNTRY

I

September is the spring month bringing tides, swilling green in the harbour
mouth,

Turnabout Dolphins rolling-backed in the rip and run, the king waves
Swinging the coast, snatching at fishermen from Leeuwin to Norah's Head;
A dangerous month: but I count on an abacus as befits a shopkeeper's daughter.
I never could keep count by modern methods, the ring of the till
Is profit and loss, the ledger, hasped with gold, sits in its heavy dust
On the counter, out front the shopkeeper's sign comes loose and bangs in the
wind,

The name is obliterated, the dog swells and stinks in the gutter,
The golden smell of the beer does not run in the one street, like water,
The windmill head hangs, broken-necked, flapping like a great plain turkey
As the wind rises . . . this was my country, here I go back for nurture
To the dry soaks, to the creeks running salt through the timber,
To the ghosts of the sandalwood cutters, and the blue breath of their fires,
To the navvies in dark blue singlets laying rails in the scrub.

My grandfather rode out, sawing at a hard-mouthed ginger horse,
And a hard heart in him, a dray full of rum and beer, bully-beef and treacle,
Flour and tea, workboots and wideawakes with the corks bobbing for flies;
Counting the campfires in the dusk, counting the men, counting the money,
Counting the sheep from the goats, and the rack rented railway houses.
No wonder I cannot count for the sound of the money-changers,
The sweat and the clink, the land falling into the cash register,
Raped and eroded, thin and black as a myall girl on a railway siding.
He came back, roaring and singing up from the gullies, his beard
Smelt of rum, his money-bag plump as a wild duck under his saddle.
The old horse stumbled in the creek-bed but brought him home,
The dray rattled; as they took him down in the yard he cursed and swore
At the dream, and blubbered for it: next Saturday night he rode his horse
Up the turkey red carpet into the bar, smashing the bottles and glasses,
Tipping the counter, sending the barmaid screaming, her breasts tilting with joy.
The great horse reared and he sang and swore and flung his hat at the sky,
And won his bets, and rode home, satisfied, to a nagging wife and daughter,
Having buried his pain and his lust under the broken bottles.
The publican swept them up in the cold light next morning,
And that was the end of it, they thought, but it wasn't so easy,
There is no end to it and I stand at the mole watching the sea run out,
Or hang over the rails at the Horseshoe Bridge and listen to the tide,
Listen to the earth that pleased my grandfather with his flocks and acres
Drowned under salt, his orange trees forked bare as unbreeched boys.
Only the apples, little and hard, bitten green and bitter as salt,
They come up in the Spring, in the dead orchard they are the fruit
Of our knowledge, and I am Eve, spitting the pips in the eye of the myth-makers.

This is my legend; an old man on a ginger horse who filled his till
And died content with a desert, or so they said: his stone angel
Cost a pretty penny, but the workmanship was faulty, its wings curve
In a great arc over the graveyard, it grows mildewed and dirty,
Its nose is syphilitic, its feet splay like a peasant, its hands
Clasp over its breast like the barmaid who screamed in the pub,
And kissed him, for love, not money, but only once.

II

My grandmother had a bite like a sour green apple,
Little and pitiless she kept the till,
Counted the profits, and stacked the bills of sale.
She bought the shops and the farms, the deeds were hers,
In the locked iron safe with a shower of golden sovereigns.
She never trusted the banks, they failed in the nineties,
She kept her bank notes rolled in the top of her stocking,
Caressingly, while her prices soared and dropped,
Her barometer; crops and wool and railway lines.
Each night she read the news by the hurricane lantern,
While the only child wept for love in the washing-up water.
She could argue like a man, politics, finance, banking.
In her rocking chair with her little dangling feet,
Her eyes glittered like broken beer bottle glass.
She kept one eye out for a farmer to spend his money
And a sharp tongue for a borrowing mate of my grandfather's.

Once, long ago, in Swanston Street she "made"
For fashionable ladies, their breasts half bared
And their ankles covered, pads in their hair,
Bustles, bugle beads and jett, dyed ostrich feathers,
You could see their shadows waving from hansom cabs,
And the ghostly wheels turning into Swanston Street.
She had her miracles and quoted them . . .
"Science and Health" by Mary Baker Eddy,
She read "The Monitor" while the dust storms whirled,
And marvelled that God was love; it was all clear profit.
She wet the bagging to filter the westerlies,
Planted geraniums and snowdrops under the tank,
And squashed black caterpillars on moonlit forays.
She balanced the ledger and murmured, "God is love",
Feeling like God, she foreclosed on another farm.

She never read for pleasure, or danced or sang,
Or listened with love, slowly life smote her dumb,
Till she lay in the best bedroom, pleating the quilt,
In a fantasy of ball dresses for Melbourne ladies.
Her eyes were remote as pennies, her sheets stank,
She cackled and counted a mythical till all her days.

III

My Father was a black-browed man who rode like an abo.
The neighbours gossiped, "A touch of the tarbrush there".
He built the farm with his sweat, it lay in the elbow
Of two creeks, thick with wattle and white ti-tree.
At night he blew on the cornet; once, long ago, he'd played
On the pleasure cruises that went up the Yarra on Saturday nights;
The lights bobbed in the muddy water, girls in white muslin sang "Tipperary".
Now he played in the lonely sleepout, looking out over the flat,
With the smell of creekwater, and a curlew crying like a murdered gin,
Crying all night, till he went out with a shotgun and finished its screaming,
But not his own . . . he, the mendicant, who married the storekeeper's daughter.

My mother was a dark round girl in a country town,
With down on her lip, her white cambric blouse
Smelt of roses and starch, she was beautiful,
Warm, and frigid in a world of dried-up women,
Aborting themselves with knitting needles on farms.
She wept in the tin humpy at the back of the store,
For the mother who hated, the father who drank
And loved her; then, sadly, she fell in love
And kissed the young accountant who kept the books,
Behind the ledgers, the summer dust on the counters.
He was on the booze, broke all his promises,
Went off to the city and sang in an old spring cart,
"Bottle-oh, Bottle-oh" till his liver gave out
And he died; she married in arum lilies, satin, tulle,
Under the bell that tolled for the storekeeper's daughter.
Men shot themselves in the scrub on her wedding day.
My father brought her wildflowers, rode forty miles,
But he never kissed like the beautiful bottle-oh,
Boozing in the pub like a fly caught in its amber.

The roof of the hospital cracked like purgatory,
At sunset the birth blood dried on the sheets,
Nobody came to change them, the sun went down,
The pain fell on her body like a beast and mauled it.

She hated the farm, hated the line of wattles
Smudging the creek, kept her hands full of scones,
Boiled the copper, washing out sins in creek water,
Kept sex at bay like the black snake coiled in the garden,
Burning under the African daisies and bridal creeper,
Took her children to bed, he lay alone in the sleep-out,
With a headache and "The Seven Pillars of Wisdom".
The girls in their picture hats came giggling and singing,
Trailing their hands like willows from the Yarra launches,
Till the dream was nightmare and all his life a regret,
Bought and gelded in an old grey house by a creek-bed.

IV

My grandfather rode round the sheep in leggings, and fed the calves,
He mended the gates, once a month he drove into town to his "lodge",
A white carnation picked at dusk from my grandmother's garden,
A dress suit with a gold watch, a chain looped over his belly,
Magnificent! . . . but my father only grinned sourly and read Remarque's
"All Quiet on the Western Front", while my mother polished his medals
For Anzac Day. They never understood him, none of the shopkeepers' breed,
Christ! how could they? They only had a copy of the Bible,
My grandmother quoted it (mostly wrong), and Tennyson bound in morocco,
"The Stag at Bay" on the sitting room wall, two elephants from Bombay,
Spoil from the trip they took "home" . . . was it a century ago?
The piano where, once a year, we sang hymns, when the minister came.
They had no religion, they believed in themselves, no other,
Self-made men and women who sat round their groaning table,
While all the no-hopers were taken over by the banks,
Or walked off, and took up dead-end jobs in the city;
The farms lay at their boundaries breeding dust and rabbits.
They breasted it all, the waves of drought and depression,
Of flood and fire, sown in sparks from the black steam trains
Roaring through wheat and the dead white grass by the sidings.
Their haystacks burnt as gold as their money bags, their till
Was full of horses drooling on oats and rock salt, of cows
With udders streaming white milk in the frosty mornings,
Of roosters crowing their triumph from the stable roof, and orchards,
Green as their hopes, tangy with peach, cradled with quail and oranges.
Only the sheep bleating their thin cry on the winter evenings,
Echoed the crows, the scavengers that were our kinsmen.
The woolly ghosts cropped the grass to its roots, the hard hoofs
Beat a track to the end of a world where the creeks ran dry,
The lambs lay blind while the crows ate their eyes in the salmon gums,
And the timberless paddocks blew in dust as far as the sea.

V

Only the man with the cornet, who rode with Remarque
Across his saddle bows, only he loved the soil,
Running it through his fingers he sensed its dying,
Its blowing away on the winds of time and cut timber,
He saw the salt of its death rising.
He said, "I have a plan", and rode with it into the cities,
A plan for trees, acres of trees blowing by creekbeds,
Forests marching in long green lines to save a country,
Picking up their roots and digging them into the earth,
Holding it fast against the salt and the wind tides.
But the laughter rose in gales from the men in cities,
Their desks shook, their papers scattered like almond blossom in storm,
"Visionary" . . . "Dreamer . . . go back to the bend in two creeks,
Thick with wattle and ti-tree you have grown to love,

Go back and wait for the trees to wither, the creek to run,
Drowned in salt, for this is your heritage . . ."
"Years from now we will not be sitting here, we will be gone",
And where will you go, man the great Dreamer . . . dead and the land dead,
Only your ghost will ride like an abo, crying "Trees" through the corrugated iron
Of the sidings, where the rails buckle with heat and men sit smoking
And brooding on a green world, as you once dreamed of Gippsland,
Under the fern-choked water, falling, falling: you tried to give us
A vision of greenness and water, who were bred out of desert and scrub
And sheep crying and crow . . . our father whispered "Trees" as he blew
"Tipperary".

VI

The women were strong and they destroyed the men,
Lying locked and cold in their sexless beds,
Putting greed in their men's fingers instead of love.
They drove them from the earth, left them derelict,
Dead mutton hanging on hooks on the verandahs.
For them the curlew wailed, the old horse lay
Trapped in the paddock all night with rheumatically haunches.
My grandfather wept, "Whoa back there Ginger, whoa back,"
Till the glasses winked in the bar like barmaids' eyes,
The virgins in muslin, the pretty French girls from Marseilles,
And a little whore in the rain on Princess Bridge.
Where would they go, rich, gelded and blind,
Tugging these old mad women with them to their graves?

VII

This land is not mine to give or trade,
I have no lien on these sad acres,
Where the crow flies home,
A solitary reaper.
The milky creek runs death,
The wattle and the ti-tree are all gone.
My father went, exiled himself in cities,
Sour as a green apple, his tap-root broken.

The orchard lies like a nameless graveyard
Behind the farm, stripped of its flowers and fruit,
Its trees, its birds, its bees murmuring.
Only the skull of a sheep dropped at the cross-roads,
And the rattling dray in the scrub on the empty skyline,
My grandfather yelling, "Whoa back there Ginger, Whoa back,
While I carry my money bags home through the heart of this country".
The wheels of the old dray turning, bring us full circle,
Death whirls in the wind, the old house hunches in on itself
And sleeps like the blind, "The Stag at Bay" hangs skewed
On the wall, the elephants from Bombay are chipped by the children,

Nobody plays "Rock of Ages" on the untuned piano now.
But the crows cry over my salty acres, scavengers come home
To roost and foul their nests in the creaking gum trees.

VIII

Who rises from the dead each Spring must pay the cost.
How shall I pay living at the Harbour's mouth
Where my father's ghost sits mumbling over breakfast,
Nodding at headlines, full of strikes and wool boards,
Tariffs to sink his teeth into, wars for his grandsons,
Where's Remarque now! His medals on the wall blink
Their derision, his heart's grown crooked, out of season.
He forgets how to sink a well or plant a tree.
His back's like sandalwood, his smell is sweet with death.
He crumbles where he sits, the tide rises to his lips.
Mother to daughter the curse drops like a stone.
My mother sits silent with nothing to remember.

Yet sometimes in the dark I come upon him in his chair,
A book lying open on his knee, his eye turned inward,
And then he sings old songs of Bendigo and windlasses,
And tells me tales of Newport railway workers, Nellie Melba
Singing High Mass, and how he read all night in Collingwood,
Voted for Labor and fell in love with Nellie Stewart.
But never a word of that far green country of his spirit,
Where the trees grow greener than the Gippsland grass.
All that is locked away in grief and salt.
Maybe, in death, his lips will whisper it,
And the green vision that gave sap to all his days
Will rise again and give him back his country.

IX

This is my truth, a grandfather boozed with guilt
And gold, who got free kisses from a barmaid for his gift,
And a great horse that swung its rump and tilted the world down.
A man rides through the windmill country like an abo,
Blowing his cornet in a wail of "Trees", bewitched
By Gippsland fern and luminous girls mirrored in the Yarra.
I will pay this debt, go back and find my place,
Pick windfalls out of the grass like a mendicant.
The little sour apples still grow in my heart's orchard,
Bitten with grief, coming up out of the dead country.
Here I will eat their salt and speak my truth.

DOROTHY HEWETT

This poem was awarded First Prize in the 1965 A.B.C. Competition for a long poem suitable for broadcasting.

REVIEWS

Once Around The Sun: An Anthology of Poetry by Australian Children, edited by Brian Thompson, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1966, \$1.95.

The title of this collection of 118 poems by children is actually the first line of the first poem in "Spring", Section One of the anthology, which is divided according to the seasons. For the adult reader, 'Once Around The Sun' is an appropriate title, since it suggests the freshness and vigour of the child's view of a world which he has not experienced to the point of engorgement, as well as indicating the organization of the poems within the anthology.

Although the seventy or so child poets represented in *Once Around The Sun* are from all States of Australia, the majority attended the Hartwell State School in Victoria where Brian Thompson, who collected and edited this anthology, has been a teacher. The poetry contained in this volume is, therefore, striking evidence in support of encouraging poetry writing from the earliest opportunity in the primary school. It is rather remarkable, as Judith Wright suggests in her excellent preface to *Once Around The Sun*, that so little attention has been given to the encouragement of poetry writing by young children, and yet poetry has long been a compulsory part of the child's studies at school. While Child Drama has had its Peter Slade, Child Music has been accepted as an important area of creativity through the work of educationists such as Karl Orff, and Child Art has been popularised by such advocates as Sir Herbert Read, children's verse writing appears to have excited very little interest hitherto.¹ The most impressive quality of *Once Around The Sun* is that it is an intensely interesting collection of modern verse, much of which has admirable form, sensitivity, inventiveness, striking power of observation and comment, freshness and the embodiment of 'the thing seen and isolated in its brief timelessness'—which is, as Judith Wright remarks, where poetry begins.

Peter Kelso, one of the most prolific of the child poets represented, wrote the following lines at the age of eleven years:

Without poetry our world would be a
barren ball
Caged forever without the poet's
Songs.

¹ The Froebel School in England has published an anthology of children's verse, and Michael Baldwin included many examples in his *Poetry Without Tears*. See also Nina Walter's *Let Them Write Poetry*.

Unfortunately, the child artist runs a greater risk even than the adult artist in having his work or himself exhibited as a caged phenomenon, plucked out of the living process of creation and nailed down for goggling contemplation. Child poets have largely escaped this fate, and so the appearance of *Once Around The Sun* prompts questions about the motives of the publishers and the purpose served by this collection of poems.

Where this anthology succeeds in allaying such suspicions as hinted at above is in the power of the children's writing to resist comparison with adult poetry. Such would be a likely cause of either prodigy worship or pointless complaints about banality and poor workmanship, in comparison with competent adult versifying. In fact, the poems are so closely related to the life experiences of the children that the adult's reaction may well be envy.

Judith Wright says:

Often they make this grown-up poet
ache with jealousy. Many of them hit
the nail so exactly on the head, whereas
the adult poet is faced by so many
complications and qualifications and
possible choices flooding in the moment
he tries to see something clearly and
express it exactly.

This impressiveness may well be a product of the selective eye of the editor, Brian Thompson, but there is no escaping the fact that these poems were written by children of six to thirteen years from a comparatively restricted locality and in the space of only a few years. The variety of subject matter, form, technique and style does not suggest that there has been much 'assistance' from adult sources. Poems such as "John Horne's ABC" and Dawn Dejtei's "The Tuba" support the claim made by fellow poet, Ross Falconer (aged eleven),

No one can get in
our world.
It has a wall twenty feet high
and adults
have only ten feet ladders.

Presumably then, we might regard child verse as missives tossed over from that walled garden.

It has been for some time a tenet of Child Art and Child Drama that critical assessment, especially by adults, should be discouraged. I feel that this question is still to be decided in regard to children's poetry. However, the publication of selections of children's work such as *Once Around The Sun* obviously involves the application of some critical standards. There is no suggestion in Brian Thompson's introduction

to the above anthology that he avoids the exercising of normal criteria of poetic evaluation. It is clear that Thompson values immediacy, sensitivity, inventiveness, and freshness of response rather more than formal qualities such as rhyme, quantitative metre and discipline of form. These latter qualities are not absent, though perhaps most successful in the very short poems. In this respect, the use of the haiku as a poetic model for children's verse writing is well demonstrated by such efforts as,

Dew wet on the grass.
Children on their way to school
Filled their hearts with sun.
Eve Recht (12 years).

Thompson does comment on the need to discourage children from attempting to strain after controlled effort. This does not mean that children cannot attempt verse of simple repetitive forms, as illustrated particularly well by the work of the youngest poets in the anthology. Alliterative rhyme seems a workable basis for some of the more confident writers, as exemplified in Peter Kelso's "Light".

Amongst the more eye-catching poems, Anthony Beardall's "Fog" shows acute powers of observation and a remarkable feeling for words in such lines as:

Stray dogs are walking half-pace
across the pebbled road.
The mist falls like grains of sand
and people are hurrying home.

The ability of some children to use figurative language without self-consciousness or triteness is notable in Linda Driver's "... the sea was making a sound like a silk dress", and in Eve Recht's

I forgot the wet weather
as I watched the fire-fingers
play a long-piano.
They played a wily, windy
willow tune
of fire.

There are some poems which are obviously too derivative for adult tastes, such as Peter Kelso's "Colours", but the influences do not seem on the whole to be baleful ones.

Once Around The Sun is a unique contribution to collections of child art in Australia, and a pleasant proof of the practical success which is possible in the classroom if the teacher is prepared to pull out some stops in the area of creative writing. I cannot see why this area of creativity should be neglected when others have made significant advances in education rethinking for more than fifty years. Most of the young

poets whose work appeared in this anthology seem to have discovered in the poetic uses of language satisfactions which could make them proof against boredom and antagonism when faced with the poetry of mature writers. Unfortunately, such depressing reactions are more the rule than the exception in literature courses throughout our educational system; and, no doubt, a strong effort will be made to drive this creative nonsense out of even the young poets represented in *Once Around The Sun*. As a Director General of Education once said to a teacher who spoke of fostering a wider interest in poetry writing in this state's schools, "Teach them to express themselves properly in prose; then you can start worrying about poetry." The right concluding note seems to be Judith Wright's comment in the preface to *Once Around The Sun*, "May many educationists read this book!"

GLEN PHILLIPS

An Afternoon of Time, D. E. Charlwood, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1966, \$2.50.

Dark Stranger, John Iggulden, MacDonald, London, 1966, \$3.15.

The Watch Tower, Elizabeth Harrower, MacMillan, London, 1966, \$3.15.

The three books grouped for review are indeed a *mélange*, containing a mixture of styles that shows both individuality and freedom of expression. Yet the three styles combined form a *mélange* in the other sense of the word, a strong material that represents by the various components of its texture Australian literature. One story is a straight-forward narrative, while another is written in what is often referred to as "the real Australian style"—colloquial, humorous, descriptive rather than narrative, recalling the past history of Australian country towns and the style of Henry Lawson. The third has closer affinities with the European literary tradition, being written in an intellectual, philosophical style, that is gaining increasing popularity among the "academic" writers of Australia.

D. E. Charlwood's book of ten short stories, *An Afternoon of Time*, is unified to such an extent that it might almost be seen as a short novel with ten chapters. The book traces the experiences of a young boy growing up in the Upper Chetwynd, from his pilgrimage over ground steeped in family history to his enlistment in the Air Force during the Second World War.

Yet the complete selection cannot be regarded as a *Bildungsroman*, showing the emergence of the character of the young narrator, for he remains completely nameless, and his impressions for the most part are aloof and impersonal—objective reports of the people, places and incidents around him rather than reflections of his own feelings and development.

The whole book is a story about a district as well as a boy, and its unity is reinforced by the static landscape of the Chetwynd, "a land ready to enmesh the spirit of any whose resistance to tranquillity was weak". The characters who appear at random through the pages are indigenous to the country town—Jenny, the freckled girl at the switchboard; the garrulous gossip, Mrs. Maloney; Percy Blay the rabbitier; the rascally but lovable Pat O'Hehir. The atmosphere is one of the typical Australian country town, from the huge woolshed barn dance to the finer details of the motherless lamb wrapped in a sack on the hearth, and the fly-blown meat "sang-widges" Percy is given for lunch.

Another reason for the ease with which the stories merge into a coherent whole is that each lacks a clearly defined dramatic unity, a beginning, a middle and an end. There is some narrative interest in most of them but the stories are not unities in themselves. They are apt to trail off, or drop to an anti-climax, as for example in "Wotan's Day", in which the relationship between the young boy and the young cook, Katherine, is built up as they walk across the fields at night to see the dying Angus. Angus is buried on Cup Day, amid great excitement as to which horse will win. The first past the post is Wotan, an outsider at one hundred to one, on which no one in the town had had a bet. Katherine is not mentioned again. The loose ends are not tucked up nor the rough edges smoothed, and the stories have an unfinished quality, melting into one another the more easily because of this. It is this apparent artlessness, this lack of sophistication, that lends the book some of its uniqueness and charm. The stories, because of this absence of applied order, have the impact of direct experience. The atmosphere seems natural, too, because, although many of the incidents are fictional, the stories are grounded in the details of the author's own adolescence at Nareen in the far west of Victoria.

This lack of sophistication and polish does not imply that the stories are not well-written. There is a variety of mood and tone that keeps the book lively. Three selections, almost at random, from the one story illustrate the range of style. The boy describes the long drive to the woolshed dance:

Ahead in our lights, the road was arched by red gums, their trunks twisted, their immobility a contrast with headlong flight. The lights shone down aisles of them, leaves indistinctive shadows, trunks and branches boldly lighted against the back drop of night. Briefly we saw massive torsos, each motionless, like dancers struck motionless long ago, then they were gone, their leaves stirred by our passing, their neighbours in our lights.

The constant swishing of trees and ferns and fallen logs became hypnotic so that we began to stare unseeingly down the swathe of light, roused only by the sight of a fox, head towards us, paw raised, or by an owl passing with slow wing beats across the windscreen.

This description of a night drive through the country is quite accurate and forceful, and unusually long (it continues for two more paragraphs) for a short story. On the same page, the carload arrives at Triabunna, and a characteristically interesting but brief historical sketch is given of the background.

It was said that great-grandmother McKenzie had been instrumental in deciding where the original homestead would be built. With her husband and two young children she had laboured for days through the bush, coming up from Portland with bullocks. At this place she had seen the Glenelg lying ahead of them, presenting one more obstacle. Her reputed words were: "No further, Hugh".

So there Hugh McKenzie had squatted and had built a mud house. The mud walls still stand, roofless now, but behind them rose the modern house.

The colloquial humour and atmosphere of the bush are presented with the singing and dancing. Miss Maggie Parks sings *Mother Macree*, and, for an encore, *Comin' Through the Rye*, accompanied by Tom Webster on his violin.

Mr. Webster looked down confusedly, but Maggie stared with protuberant eyes until silence fell. She nodded then to Mr. Webster who lifted his bow. Though they came through the rye, they were by no means together. The applause was less vigorous. After all, no one wanted three songs from Maggie Parks.

The variety and warmth of these three quotation is typical of the rest of the book. It is

successful in evoking something of the country's unique quality and history, and occasionally gives a hint of true artistic vision. The last ride of the boy before he leaves for Melbourne reveals the timelessness of the country around him. The trees and rocks are still immersed in the Dreamtime of the country's first people. While the settlers have come and died, their tracks and carvings on the trees recall their history. The people who spring to life in this book, their laughter and tragedies, will vanish as the settlers did, but the country remains unchangeable, shaping each generation as it comes. What is recorded in this book is not only the impression of ten years of a young man's life, but an afternoon of time in the country's eternity.

Dark Stranger, too, is set in Australian landscape. It is John Iggulden's fourth published novel and shows the same firm grasp of technique as his previous work, the same ability to capture even a minor person's character in dialogue.

I find the book more satisfying than *The Clouded Sky*, Iggulden's previous novel, because in the earlier book the women tended to be magazine stereotypes. This novel is more concerned with the changing relationship between two men, James Duncan, aging publicity man, and Peter Jirapon, the aboriginal lawyer, the "dark stranger". Women and sex, before presented glamorously and unrealistically, are now only seen indirectly through dreams and memories, and their distortion is effective against the harsh reality of the deserted ocean.

The conflict between the two men is often finely done. For the first section of the book, Duncan is suffering from amnesia and reliving moments of insecurity and frustration from the past; in this case an effective way of presenting his earlier life, because it emphasises ironically his helplessness and dependence on the young aboriginal to whom he has always felt superior.

During their experiences, some of Duncan's cynicism and disillusionment rubs off onto the highly idealistic young Peter, who is led to realize that he is not God's instrument in the cause of truth and goodness and that he cannot save the whole of civilization from corruption and materialism. James' close encounters with death and his contact with Peter give him enough faith to believe in miracles, although his unwillingness to "make the leap" is shown in this passage:

Rain is not a miracle, James Duncan decided. Rain is a natural event. Seeming now a miracle only because it has countered death. Death, that most awesome of natural events. Thus rain is greater than death. Rain is a miracle.

Both men gain sufficient self-knowledge and insight during their experiences to be content with the task of helping the outback natives at Bengingin mission, and making the desert bloom again. This is one of the faults of the novel—that its message is often made too overt, and the conversion of the cynic and would-be saint to the task of reforming the outback is a little too unrealistic and contrived.

Yet, while *The Clouded Sky* was a straightforward narrative told in the first person, *Dark Stranger* gains intensity by a more intricate presentation, more complex in its interesting themes and actions. It is an exciting adventure story, the struggle of the two men as they are cast adrift on the ocean north of Australia. It gradually unfolds a detective story. The two men have been brought together by their search for the missing witness in a rape and murder case, from whom they hope to obtain the evidence that will save Lucky Jimmy from being—as they believe—unjustifiably hanged.

The book has some fine passages, with a neat touch of irony at its climactic point, when Duncan destroys the evidence of Lucky Jimmy's guilt, but in protecting Peter's ideals, and fulfilling his promises, also destroys the truth. One remembers the vividly described shark attacks which last for three days, as sharks ram the boat at the slightest movement or sound. There is a fine scene when the huge grey leviathan shark is wounded by Peter and devoured alive by a writhing school of sharks. When James Duncan, weak and alone, kills an octopus for food, the creature seems to take on a symbolic dimension, reflecting Duncan's own fear, a twisting evil mass, terrifying until it is killed, when its eyes assume a strange and fascinating beauty.

On the whole, the novel has good moments, and although it is not very thought-provoking, it is good entertainment, lively and readable.

Less easy to read, but none the less interesting, is Elizabeth Harrower's fourth novel *The Watch Tower*. The story, set in Sydney, concerns two sisters, Clare and Laura Vaizey, and their differing reactions to the same situations. Their widowed mother, spoilt but attractive, leaves them for the comforts of London's society life, and Laura drifts into a marriage with Felix Shaw, the owner of the box factory in which she works. She, Clare and Felix live in a sumptuous ouse at Neutral Bay. Her negative attitude towards the marriage is typical of her emotional habit—"Not to have to worry and plan for three seemed so glorious a collection of negatives that Laura supposed she must be terrifically happy." After the rude shock of the wedding night, she reminds

herself that against all her "silly invisible fancies, she had to set the very real white house". For both Felix and Laura, it is simply a marriage of convenience. The only time they see each other as human beings is at the height of a fierce electrical storm.

Clare, unlike Laura, is interested in people and things for their own sake, and is not overcome by the material value and lacy charm of the house. She is a dreamer, and her longing for human feeling and understanding is frustrated until Felix brings home from the factory Bernard, who is suffering badly from malnutrition. Elizabeth Harrower describes Clare's transformation in terms reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence:

As if a river diverted for decades by man-made dams and channels had violently returned to its own course in the space of a single storm and had raced on its way with an energy and power not to be over-borne . . . she was electric, electrifying like a fiery avenger or angel, like someone alive twice over, and that had nothing to do with the colour of her dress.

But she is in no way sexually attracted to or in love with Bernard. The change comes about simply because she is being treated as an individual.

Clare is, if you will forgive the pun, the only person to bring light into the novel, the voice of common sense in an insane world. Bernard never really comes alive, but remains a pale, rather insipid catalyst. Apart from Clare's gaining of wisdom and freedom, the book is dismally grey and lifeless. Partly this is due to the static quality of Laura, the principal character, who having always borne responsibility, accepts each calamity with a tremendous inertia, the passivity of a completely submerged will. Her feelings as she enters Shaw's Box Factory for the first time are the same "feelings" she experiences in worse situations:

She was like someone who, having gone bravely through preparations for an operation that would almost certainly truncate her life, realized with a terrible twisting of her heart just as the anaesthetist's mask descended, that this shocking thing was truly happening, inevitable: shrieking resistance was of no avail.

The impossible nightmare is a continuous one, and for the rest of the novel she remains anaesthetized by fear and by her own personality.

The theme of passive suffering is the same

as that of Elizabeth Harrower's last novel, *The Catherine Wheel*, and is based on the philosophy of *Satyagraha*, the name Ghandi gave to non-violent resistance. Laura is, in fact, well-placed to be the tragic heroine, enmeshed through no fault of her own in terrifying circumstances, and willing time and time again to forgive her aggressor. But while we feel admiration for the cheerful and brave acceptance of wrong, for the honest attempt to reach the heart of the opponent in an attempt to convert him rather than defeat him, we can feel no such admiration for Laura. Laura knows Felix's unhappy past backwards, but she cannot pretend that the facts of his life in any way reveal him to her. He is a monster, and the third alternative, of leaving him alone, seems the only way out. It is Clare, with her independence and integrity, who gains sympathy, and Laura is either too stupid or simply too optimistic when she continues to forgive him.

One of the difficulties of the novel is that Laura, Felix and Stella Vaizey are unrecognizable characters. They are distorted in a Gothic, horrifying way. The style of the novel is well enough controlled to make them realistic in their own setting, but the reader cannot identify them as plausible in real life. They are as grotesque, though in a subtler and more quietly menacing way, as the characters in an Iris Murdoch novel, moved by unfathomable motives to perpetrate their obscure actions. Felix's symbol is the statue of Bluebeard, a wedding present, whose "dark brilliant eyes looked out from under the curving satanic brow, the malicious smile never tired". There is no love or unselfishness in him—as Clare remarks, "There is only death at the back of his mind".

The description of the mother, Stella, as she farewells her daughters for the last time, shows the mordant neatness and understatement of the satire against materialistic unfeeling:

Her creamy face, her large amber eyes, were impenetrable. She was like a park that had never once removed its *Don't Walk on the Grass* signs. The black veil of her little hat pricked her daughters' cheeks in turn and their clothes brushed together.

These characters remain unreal, but fascinating visions of human hell. The novel is an intellectual one, and occasionally the monotony of the torture, which is never ending, leaves nothing but a bad taste in the mouth. While I would not recommend it for a light bedtime story, it is for me the most interesting book of the trio here, and an experience I would not have missed.

FELICITY HAYNES.

Kenneth Slessor, Clement Semmler, *Writers and their Work*: No. 194, Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1966.

The British Council and the National Book League have sponsored over the years a series of useful and often brilliant monographs on writers and their work. This, the first on an Australian poet, should be something of an important occasion. Unfortunately, Mr. Semmler has written a dull, inadequate, and *irrelevant*, little book.

The first six pages briefly summarize (with examples from the ballads, Paterson, Gilmore, Neilson and Brennan) the history of Australian poetry before Slessor. The relevance of all this is never made clear, although I suppose it is useful for overseas readers to know of "the traditions inherited by Slessor when he began writing in the 1920s." It is, however, depressing to be told that station-hands and large landholders were known as 'jackeroos' and 'squatters'; and rather startling to find that Banjo Paterson was Australia's most famous bush balladist in 1864.

Of the remaining thirty pages of text, about eighteen are taken up by quotations, leaving twelve for Mr. Semmler's examination of Slessor's background, life, ideas, development, images, technique, etc. It is readily apparent that he has no time for any detailed analyses of Slessor's poems (indeed, he has a passing sneer at such efforts on page 36), and, considering the fulsome praise he lavishes on the verse, this is probably just as well. What Mr. Semmler does instead is to 'present' a poem, with an introductory comment: but so enthusiastic is his approach, so impressionistic his style, and so brief the space available, that the remarks are seldom helpful; in fact, they are often trite, and, sometimes, breath-takingly nonsensical. Two examples should suffice.

From a discussion of Slessor's love for Sydney Harbour: "But most of all at night, and every atom of inspiration Slessor has found in this sweep of water and watercraft, from his high window the focus of his constant observation, is gathered into the nucleus of his art; he carves his phrases in air with an elegance and sensitivity that transmutes Sydney Harbour into every harbour that every poet has loved:

Darkness comes down. The Harbour
shakes its mane,
Glazed with a leaf of amber; lights
appear
Like thieves too early, dropping their
swag by night,
Red, gold and green, down trap-doors
glassy-clear,

And lanterns over Pinchgut float with
light
Where they so long have lain."

From a comparison with Yeats: "Like Yeats, Slessor wrote line after line of quotable verse best described as the 'pure poetry' James Stephens was so fond of talking about; lines in which an unimaginable and inexpressible meaning has been drawn as closely to us as can be contrived, lines of Yeats like

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement
flit
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel
has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of
flame

and of Slessor's like

That street washed with violet
Writes like a tablet
Of living here; that pavement
Is the metal embodiment
Of living here."

With the longer poems Mr. Semmler's critical method is just as inadequate. In the three pages devoted to 'Five Visions of Captain Cook', for instance, we are given ten quotations from the poem interspersed with bits of prose paraphrase, helpful 'interpretations' ("We have a delightful piece of whimsy about two chronometers. The rhythm is metronomically fitted to the mood, but Slessor hints at the minatory intrusion of the enemy Time:"), and occasional oddities ("Slessor's verse in the final part scales the heights of poetry, as indeed it must . . .").

This is shallow criticism indeed. And it doesn't get any better. Even when Mr. Semmler wanders in to a discussion of those issues which are central to any understanding (let alone evaluation) of Slessor's achievement, his response is so oversimplified as to be, at times, simple-minded.

On the superiority of Slessor's second period over his first: "Brains were being added to emotion."

On Slessor's craftsmanship: "Slessor worked hard at his poetry (probably harder than any Australian poet before him), always experimenting, always obsessed with poetry as a craft. Perhaps his continual association with the printed word had something to do with this." (Slessor, we remember, was a journalist.)

And, another problem solved: "It is this combination, imagery, experiment, technique, with an unusual capacity for self-criticism (a quality which is quite simply the answer to the so-called riddle of his abrupt decision twenty years ago

not to go on writing poetry) which makes for Slessor's individuality as a poet."

Now, I suppose there's not much harm in this kind of criticism, but there's not much point in it either. It certainly isn't *useful* criticism: even at its best it does not reveal anything the reader doesn't already know or couldn't discover for himself; and at its worst, it is hopeless. It never helps the reader to get closer to the poetry. And it never assists the reader to find the value Mr. Semmler believes the work to have.¹

One reason for its failure is obvious: the poetry, usually, just doesn't possess the qualities Mr. Semmler believes it to have. At any event Mr. Semmler makes no attempt to discover, to *uncover*, them for us. As when, after admitting the validity of A. D. Hope's damning catalogue of Slessor's borrowings from the romantic past-that-never-was (all the painted-cardboard stage properties, the archaic expressions, the lime-lit characters), he can blandly assert: "But Slessor in his early verse turned all this into something arresting real If in retrospect there were signs of a forced whimsy and raffishness about some of it, there was equally an ecstasy of feeling and wisps of new meaning blowing across existing poetic traditions that suddenly delighted and excited a jaded palate." He then quotes two verses from 'Earth Visitors' and three from 'Pan at Lane Cove' without attempting to show us the arresting reality of the poetry, or the wisps of new meaning (not to be confused, I imagine, with the "inexpressible meaning" he spoke of earlier) which he thinks it contains.

And when he follows the verses with the comment: "Here was a novel experience piquant to an ordinary appetite; a poetic essence distilled from a romantic mash," the other reason for his critical failure is clear: he has only the haziest idea of what poetry is or can be. One only has to look at the images he selects as being "exquisitely formed" ('kisses like warm guineas of love'; maidens like winds of lace, Tease the dark passages'), or to read his remarks on 'Waters' (quoted above) to see how easily he is beguiled by a picturesque image or two and a lovely cadence, into accepting a few charmingly-turned (if quaint) lines of verse as poetry.

For Slessor is (usually) a far worse poet than Mr. Semmler imagines. It is true that he has tremendous gifts, but they are seldom used poetically. He appears to believe that to describe a thing precisely and well is to say something important. He is attracted by mere surfaces. He is seldom seriously involved with his subject. Far too often he is merely a trivial poet, a performer.

At five I wake, rise, rub on the smoking
pane
A port to see — water breathing in the
air,
Boughs broken. The sun comes up in a
golden stain,
Floats like a glassy sea-fruit. There is
mist everywhere,
White and humid, and the Harbour is
like plated stone,
Dull bakes of ice. One light drips out
alone,
One bead of winter-red, smouldering in
the steam,
Quietly over the roof-tops—another
window
Touched with a crystal fire in the sun's
gullies,
One lonely star of the morning, where
no stars gleam.

Far away on the rim of this great misty
cup,
The sun gilds the dead suburbs as he
rises up,
Diamonds the wind-cocks, makes glitter
the crusted spikes
On moss-drowned gables. Now the tiles
drip scarlet-wet,
Swim like birds' paving-stones, and sun-
light strikes
Their watery mirrors with a moister
rivulet,
Acid and cold. Here lie those mummied
Kings,
Men sleeping in houses, embalmed in
stony coffins,
Till the Last Trumpet calls their galler-
ies up,
And the suburbs rise with distant mur-
muring.

So begins the first poem ('Winter Dawn') of Kenneth Slessor's first book (*Earth-Visitors*, 1926).

A man at a window, looking. It was to become a favourite pose of Slessor's, and one which could perhaps—it's a sad thought—serve as an emblem of his creative life: the poet, cut off, by panes of glass, from the world outside, looking.

And what does he see?

Well—and I had better come out with it straight away; ungenerous as it sounds—very little. Very little, that is, which is meaningful. He sees, and sees well, ("with the accurate eye of a trained journalist," Mr. Semmler tells us), all the colours and the fascinating objects, and the bright and shimmering facets, and (often) quaint details, that the scene affords. And everything that he sees goes into the poems, especially those

written during the 1920's. Slessor, it seems, was unable to resist a dazzling image, regardless of whether it contributed to the intended effect (let alone meaning) of the poem or not; so much so that many of his early poems appear to be composed merely of glittering surfaces, like the be-sequinned dresses of the period.

The effect is irritating and depressing. However brilliant and clever the individual lines may be, the poems tend to become meaningless catalogues of pretty details and flashy impressions, uninformed by any imaginative truth or moral purpose, bereft indeed of any relevance to any human values. Even worse, when Slessor's only concern is to dazzle and impress the reader with a display of scintillating images and verbal pyrotechnics then he can only lie, to the reader and to himself (in the Blakean sense of lying, ". . . when you see with, not thro', the eye"). I don't think it is an exaggeration to claim that this central failing of Slessor's has ruined (to a greater or lesser degree: it doesn't really matter) all but a handful of his hundred and three collected poems.

To return to 'Winter Dawn'. Although it is retained in his collection *Poems* (Sydney, 1957 and 1963) it is not one of the more important or ambitious of Slessor's early poems: it suffers from failings to be expected of a young and inexperienced poet (gaucheries of rhyme and rhythm, mainly). Nevertheless, it is good enough in parts, and bad enough in others, to illustrate the criticisms I have made. It is five o'clock on a cold winter morning, and the poet is looking out from his bedroom window on to Sydney Harbour and the city. It is reasonable to assume that the first two stanzas (quoted above) are to set the scene, establish the tone and atmosphere, and imply the values and attitudes by which the poet's later reactions are to be justified. And at first sight it appears that this is what the wealth of detail is doing: the window pane is clouded; there is a mist, frost, ice; and "white", "cold", "dull", "glassy", "stone", "dead", "crystal", "diamonds", "watery", "glitter", "moister", "coffins". But so intent is Slessor on painting his picture, on creating his beautiful and vivid images, that he loses sight of the whole. The atmosphere of cold and death is destroyed before it is established by images of warmth and life: "breathing", "golden", "fruit", "humid", "smouldering", "steam", "fire", "red", "gilds", "sleeping".

It is all very bewildering. Perhaps Slessor wants us to open our eyes and see beauty all around us. Or perhaps he is intent on showing us how a poet can transmute base reality into beautiful art. (In 1931, in an address to the Australian branch of the English Association, he

was to say: "The only test we can devise (for a good poem) is the ultimate success of the poem itself in transferring its beauty without loss to the reader's mind; and when this is accomplished, the poem is a good one . . .")² Certainly whatever his intentions, 'Winter Dawn' does contain images which are beautifully and delicately realized:

One light drips out alone,
One bead of winter-red, smouldering
in the steam . . .

And:

Now the tiles drip scarlet-wet,
Swim like birds' paving stones, and sun-
light strikes
Their watery mirrors with a moister riv-
ulet,
Acid and cold.

They are lines which show (remembering that he is twenty years old, in Australia, in the 1920's) that he "is already making of his diction a fine and flexible instrument which will be capable of transforming all manner of material into poetry"³ But, unassimilated into any significant pattern of meaning, they remain, as often in Slessor's work, isolated images: attractive, clever, and poetically meaningless.

The reader's bewilderment is increased when, lulled (possibly) by the accumulation of charming details into a vague impression that something beautiful is happening, he finds the poet arbitrarily rejecting the scene.

O buried dolls, O men sleeping invisible
there,
I stare above your mounds of stone, lean
down,
Marooned and lonely in this bitter air,
And in one moment deny your frozen
town,
Renounce your bodies—

Why? It is impossible, from what has been given us, to say. The poet goes on, his lack of conviction and the immaturity of his attitude being betrayed by the slackness and conventionality of the language, to make a vague gesture towards Nature—"daisies round-eyed and tart . . . stirs (*sic*) more my heart . . . than mortal towers . . ."—and an invocation to the sun to keep him awake. Even apart from its general absurdity, this reponse is unconvincing: it is too explicit. It has not been prepared for, being neither implied nor inherent in the given situation. It has not been arrived at by poetic thinking. We have the uncharitable feeling that some kind of confidence trick is being attempted. It is as though Slessor, after beguiling the reader with his eloquence and skill, tries to give significance

to his poem by adding an explicit (and poetically unjustified) interpretation or response.

This may be, as I say, uncharitable (because I'm not sure to what extent Slessor is himself deceived by his method) but time and again in his work he evokes a picturesque scene on to which he tags an arbitrary statement — arbitrary in the sense that it has not developed imaginatively and inevitably from the inner logic of the poem.

But if his reaction to the scene is poetically unconvincing in 'Winter Dawn', it is nevertheless an expression of a genuine attitude. An attitude in fact which is to dominate his whole poetic career, shaping the course of his development, and finally reducing him to silence. The rejection of the world.

The poet behind his window, "marooned and lonely", looking, only to reject, to "deny your frozen town, Renounce your bodies".

Slessor turns his back on life.

"I'm sick of modern men . . ." ('Marco Polo')

It is surprising, really, how little of real life gets into his poetry. On the few occasions when he does get a glimpse of people, it seems he can't understand what they are; they seem to be creatures living meaningless or, at the best, unintelligible lives in that world on the other side of the glass. They are seen as:

Black, sinister travellers, lumbering up
the station.

One moment in the window, hooked
over bags;

Hurrying, unknown faces—boxes with
strange labels—

All groping clumsily to mysterious ends,
(*The Night-Ride*)

. . . . buried dolls . . . (*Winter Dawn*)

. . . those who chafe here, limed on the
iron twigs,

No greater seem than sparrows, all their
cries,

Their clockwork and their merchandise,
Frolic of painted dolls. I pass unheed-
ing. (*City Nightfall*)

Stars of a film without a plot,
Snippings of idiot celluloid.

(*Last Trams II*)

But these appearances are rare. Usually Slessor keeps people at a distance in his poems by sending them back in time, by dressing them up — usually in period clothes — by turning them into gods, by taking them from literary or artistic sources, and by treating them with a kind of wry whimsy (all distancing devices, like the window, to prevent him from getting too close to his subject).

It is odd that Slessor should describe life in metaphors drawn from the theatre—a "frolic of painted dolls" (*City Nightfall*); "a film without a plot, Snippings of idiot celluloid" (*Last Trams II*); "a variety show" (*Next Turn*); "a boring and absurd dance watched by Gods" (*The Old Play*)—because his presentations of people, or of those manifestations of human activities which appear in his poems, always strike me as being theatrical, even melodramatic. It is as though, not being genuinely interested in people, he has to insist, to give an air of reality to his creation, too heavily on one aspect of his character he is interested in. His characters become distorted, exaggerated. They are seen only by lime-light; their main feature or attribute being seen only too clearly, the rest hidden in the shadows: the senseless cruelty of Marsden (*Vesper-Song of the Reverend Samuel Marsden*); the elegance of William Hickey (*The Nabob*); the quaint old age of Captain Dobbin (*Captain Dobbin*); the sensuality of Rubens (*Rubens' Hell*). They are not realized as human beings because their particular characteristics are isolated and too explicitly stated; rather than being implied or gradually revealed in meaningful relation to the rest of the character or to normal human values. They remain unreal; they are "painted dolls".

Or tend to be. I may have overstated the case a little, for in the later poems there is an occasional fine touch of irony which tends to control our reactions, 'Toilet of a Dandy', 'Country Towns', 'To myself', 'Five Visions of Captain Cook', but on the whole I would say not: they remain unreal. And because they're unreal, and because he is not interested in normal human activities and experiences, finding them meaningless, there is little of value or interest in the vast majority of his poems.

By turning his back on life, Slessor retreated into a world of day-dreams, of unfelt experience: adolescent sex-in-the-head fantasies,

When to those Venusbergs, thy breasts,
By wars of love and moonlight batteries,
My lips have stormed—
(*A Surrender*)

arch man-of-the-world attitudes,

I know thee, Joan, and by the beard of
God,
I'll prove tonight thy mortal parts again!
(*Thieves Kitchen*)

de la Mare-ish evocations of a fabulous past,

I saw tall gilded Tartars pass
Behind their marble balustrades,
(*Marco Polo*)

18th century *camaraderie*,

Come in your painted coaches, friends of
mine,
We'll keep the stars night-company with
wine . . .

(‘Music XI’)

embarrassing pointless melodrama,

LAURENCE: O, Catherine!

CATHERINE: No more. I’ve done.
Find other fools to
dream of,
And I’ll find other lips
more hot
Who’ll clip me for a
month, perhaps, or less,
And leave me — and
forget . . .

LAURENCE: O, Catherine!

CATHERINE: Weep, little man!

LAURENCE: O Kit of the Garden!
Kit . . .

(‘The Man of Sentiment’)

A modern poet forsooth!

On the other hand there are moments in these
poems of great beauty, of finely-realized details,
and, especially in the later poems, some delicate
irony:

Scaly with poison, bright with flame,
Great fungi steam beside the gate,
Run tentacles through flagstone cracks,
Or claw beyond, where meditate
Wet poplars on a pitchy lawn.

(‘Pan at Lane Cove’)

Post-boys would run, lanterns hang
frostily, horses fume,
The strangers wake the Inn.

(‘Earth-Visitors’)

. . . to the dead grove
Where we had kissed, to the Tristania
tree
Where we had kissed so awkwardly,
Noted by swans with damp, accusing
eyes,

All gone today; only the leaves remain,
Gaunt paddles ribbed with herringbones
Of watermelon pink

(‘Elegy in a Botanic Garden’)

And farmers bouncing on barrel mares
(‘Country Towns’)

Once Mermaids mocked your ships
With wet and scarlet lips
And fish-dark difficult hips, Conquista-
dor (‘The Atlas’ IV)

But such moments are too few; and are insuffi-
cient, being usually overwhelmed by the gaudi-
ness and glitter, the noise and bluster of the
rest of the lines, to be able to impart any
meaning to the poem. They remain isolated
images. (It is a significant feature of Slessor’s
poetry, I think, that when one tries to remember
a poem, one can only recall odd lines and
phrases.) The rest is noise.

Why? Charles Higham has put it well, I think,
when he says, “And what, in these poems, can
hide the encroaching chasm, shut off death and
its terrors? Only the shower of gems, the wild
laugh, the cavorting lutanist and his tune; the
prancing Tritons of ‘Realities’, when “no dark
remains. Nor silence, but there is laughter like
bells in air”. Violent sounds—the galloping of
the earth-visitors, the voice calling in ‘Music’,
and the carnival cacophony in the same poem—
all are contrived to blot the dread of silence
which, for Slessor, has been the sound of death.”⁴

The same could be said about Slessor’s insis-
tence upon surface glitter: that it is there to hide
the darkness beyond.

No wonder these poems fail; the poet is being
false to himself; he is, as I noted earlier, telling
lies. The poems are vain attempts to hide the
truth from himself, to beguile his innermost fears.
The poems are full of noise, when he can only
hear silence; full of lights and glitter where he can
only see darkness; full of jollity, when he is in
despair; about “people” when he is “marooned
and lonely”; about “Life” when he is only aware
of the inevitability of death. They are escapist
poems by a man who knows there is no escape.
The strain is everywhere, constantly betraying the
falsity of the themes. They are very sad poems.

And yet when he attempts to come to grips
with his perplexities and fears, when he allows
himself to voice his despair, his sense of the
futility of things, he becomes a true poet. He
writes with precision, strength and conviction.
And in the best of such poems (some are marred
by weaknesses) everything contributes—sound,
rhythm, images, feeling—to create poetry of great
beauty, intensity and, I feel, lasting worth. For
Slessor is (often) a far better poet than Mr.
Semmler has been able to show.

The first notable attempt to give expression
to genuine feeling is ‘The Night-Ride’, by far the
best (because, ultimately, the most genuine) poem
in *Earth-Visitors*. For the first time Slessor is
able to imbue a scene with considerable
emotional force and meaning. Abandoning his
‘brilliant’ style (and rhyme), he slowly builds up
a scene with spare, ordinary, yet vivid details
which gradually accumulate an underlying wealth
of meaning. So much so that when we reach

The dark train shakes and plunges;
 Bells cry out: the night-ride starts again.
 Soon I shall look out into nothing but
 blackness,
 Pale windy fields

and the train travels on into the darkness and sleep, the poet has fused his sense-perceptions, his emotion and his thought into an image of tremendous intensity. And all without telling us what he is doing, without being explicit. The whole meaning of this poem is conveyed by, and felt through, the arrangement of images. It is an impressive poem (even taking into account the melodramatic "Black, sinister travellers . . . dragged by private Fates").

Unfortunately Slessor never worked this vein enough. But when he did, when he expressed intense feelings through the concrete and vivid presentation of a scene or situation, then he wrote his most successful poems. They are: "The Night-Ride", "Gulliver", "Five Bells", "South Country", "Sleep", "Beach Burial", (I have some reservations about these last two), and "Crow Country".

This last poem is a remarkable achievement.

Cutted of station, noise alone,
 The crow's voice trembles down the sky
 As if this nitrous flange of stone
 Wept suddenly with such a cry;
 As if the rock found lips to sigh,
 The riven earth a mouth to moan;
 But we that hear them, stumbling by,
 Confuse their torments with our own.

Over the huge abraded rind,
 Crow-countries graped with dung, we
 go,
 Past gullies that no longer flow
 And wells that nobody can find,
 Lashed by the screaming of the crow,
 Stabbed by the needles of the mind.

The experience, men stumbling through a desert, hearing the forlorn heart-heaving cry of a crow, is vividly realized: the crow's cry is conveyed by stark simple words which suggest the sound—notice the preponderance of long vowels, and the loud open rhymes: lone, sky, stone, cry, sigh, moan, by own (notice too how each rhyme word reinforces what is being said, finishing with considerable emphasis on "mind")—and also suggest the feelings of the crow the landscape and the men: trembles, wept, cry, sigh, riven, moan, stumbling, torments, abraded, lashed, screaming, stabbed, needles. It is vigorous, imaginative and deeply felt. The cry first expresses the crow's torments, then the landscape's and then the men's,

just as the drought-stricken landscape is first a real desert and then, through the torments of the men's minds and the emotional pressure of the poetry, a horrifying desert "symbol of the modern mind".⁵ Slessor's bitter and disillusioned attitude towards the world has found convincing expression.

Slessor was always over-fond of patterns of sound in his poetry. In "Crow Country" the sound reinforces the sense. But this is not always so; and, as his technical ability increased, he often ruined a good poem for the sake of a musical effect, forgetting that in poetry technique must be subordinate to (ironic word) vision. The rhythmical and aural qualities of "Sleep" have been praised by many critics and yet I have always found them too insistent:

And you shall cling and clamber there
 And slumber there, in that dumb
 chamber,
 Beat with my blood's beat, hear my
 heart move
 Blindly in bones that ride above you,
 Delve in my flesh, dissolved and
 bedded,
 Through viewless valves embodied so—

R. G. Howarth praises these lines for their "rapidly shifting assonance and consonance".⁶ But to my mind, and I hope I am not being carping, they are too musical. They attract (as so often in Slessor's "fine writing") too much attention to themselves. The poet's mind seems to be on the sound and not the sense. If we concentrate on what is being said we find that instead of expressing a feeling of sleep and dissolution, the lines are full of bustle. Notice the verbs of action: cling, clamber, beat, ride, delve, move. But perhaps I have misread the poem: Mr. Semmler may well be right when he says that the lines "convey unforgettably Slessor's central idea of the prisoner, whether foetus, sleeper, or human being, beating against the walls of his dungeon."

Generally though, in the two later books, *Cuckooz Contrey* (1932) and *Five Bells* (1939), Slessor's verse improved: his control tightened, his mastery of poetic technique achieved, at times, remarkable heights, and the worst of his poetic excesses disappeared. But his development has been, in some ways, curiously disappointing. In spite of his increase in skill, he allows good poems to be ruined by strokes of bravura and dazzling description. He remains to the last content "to render the visible" rather than "to render visible".

And this is probably because he is appalled by what he does see: Nothing. His sense of

despair increases in the 1930s, pervading his poetry. Occasionally he attempts to come to grips with his problem, and although he never finds any solution to the meaninglessness of life, he does write some interesting poems.

But it is 'Five Bells', the poem which ends the collection *One Hundred Poems*, which most clearly and poignantly explores the poet's despair. It is a remarkably honest and (at times) powerful monologue on time and death and Slessor's sense of the meaninglessness of life. The poet at his window staring out at the night over Sydney Harbour, hears time passing—a ship's five bells—and thinks of a friend who drowned in the harbour. In a series of natural, yet almost inconsequential memories he thinks of his friend and broods about this death, "The Nothing that was neither long nor short". He tries to find a meaning:

If I could find an answer, could only
find
Your meaning, or could say why you
were here
Who now are gone, what purpose gave
you breath
Or seized it back

But he fails. There is nothing. Beauty, life, love, adventure, the fabulous heroic past mean nothing, are nothing, in the face of inevitable silence and darkness and death.

One of the most impressive things about this poem is that it seems to work in spite of (almost, in a curious way, because of) some obviously weak and incoherent lines.⁷ It is as though the poem itself were acting out the frustration and agonizing bewilderment of Slessor's search for an explanation: and we see his nihilism, his despair, and his utter inability to find any meaning or purpose in life, finally overwhelm him.

Looking back over what I have written I find that I have given a disproportionate amount of space to Slessor's failings. I am sorry for this because Slessor is, quite clearly, one of Australia's finest and most interesting poets, a man with enviable gifts. But when I look again at Mr. Semmler's encomium and re-read some of his more fatuous oversimplifications—on Slessor's 'pure poetry', for instance, or his "explanation" for the many window and sea images in the poetry (Slessor often looked at Sydney Harbour through a window!)—I would maintain that some attempt at a balance was necessary.

WILLIAM GRONO

1. That Mr Semmler does know better can be seen from the final sentence of his essay 'Some Aspects of Australian Literary Criticism', in Clement Semmler and Derek Whitelock (ed.) *Literary Australia*, (Melbourne, 1966) p. 68: "But above all they have each and everyone observed what I maintain to be the critic's cardinal function—at all times and under all circumstances (and I quote again and finally from Helen Gardner) 'to assist his readers to find the value he believes the work to have'."
2. 'Modern English Poetry', *The Union Recorder*, 1 October 1931; reprinted as Australian English Association Offprint No. 9. The sentence was quoted by Charles Higham, 'The Poetry of Kenneth Slessor' in Grahame Johnston (ed.) *Australian Literary Criticism*, (Melbourne, 1962) p. 85.
3. Chris Wallace-Crabbe, 'Kenneth Slessor and the Powers of Language', in Geoffrey Dutton (ed.) *The Literature of Australia*, (Adelaide, 1964) p. 343.
4. Charles Higham, *op. cit.* p. 83.
5. Judith Wright, 'Kenneth Slessor—Romantic and Modern', in her *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (London, 1965) p. 145.
6. R. G. Howarth, 'Sound in Slessor's Poetry', in *Southerly*, 1955, no. 4, p. 193.
7. I would like to spend more time on this remarkable poem, but will have to be content with recommending, as a useful antidote to Mr. Semmler's eulogistic appraisal, the very detailed analysis of it in T. J. Kelly's *The Focal Word* (Brisbane, 1966) p. 281.

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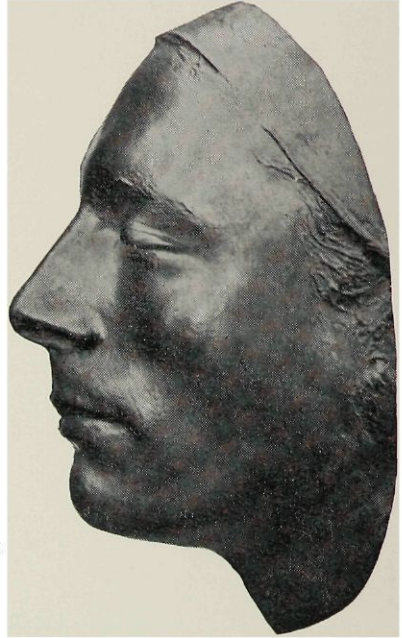
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Bronze cast from a life mask

. a heap
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

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