THE LAW OF KARMA

Rodney Hall
The Law of Karma is a Hindu doctrine of the transmigration of souls. In this work each reincarnation of the original soul is carefully placed in a historical and geographical context. It is really one long poem comprising a 'progression' of sixty-six parts through eleven life cycles. This structure allows the images to interact directly, free from connective links — discursive or didactic.

The basic theme of the poem is that each betrayal of human responsibility opens the way to another more degenerate betrayal. It begins with the saint's complacent distaste for people and ends, some five hundred years later, with complacent genocide. The poem is a tightly-worked unit of cross-references in verse and narrative forms, echoed images, and frequent recurrence of whole lines.

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THE LAW OF KARMA
a progression of poems

Rodney Hall

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For Satinder K. Gupta-Chaudhary
and Robert Graves
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The Law of Karma is the Hindu doctrine of transmigration of souls. In outline, it teaches that each life is rewarded, or punished, in the next. An evil life leads to rebirth as an inferior person or animal and sets back the progress of the soul. The ultimate aim of every good man is to escape this cycle, to become a saint who, after living righteously, may be received into the Divine Essence.

In this progression of poems a variant on the Law of Karma is presented: without ever becoming animal, the original soul degenerates from one stage of dehumanisation to another, through eleven life cycles.
THE EXPOSITION

Holy Man 1344-1435

India
The temple climbs from life
to other lives as we do
— the monk explained in silence —
every tier a growth
from that which stands beneath,
born of the same patterns
deep in its resemblance
strange in its departures.
Ah, that we could float
upward from the soil
to read our destiny.
Disciples gathered round him.

‘All I shall say’, he said,  
‘is written in the holy books.  
I’m privileged to see my fellow man  
with pity. I haven’t long  
before my ultimate acceptance  
in the Paradise of Fathers.  
For such a life of dedication  
the Gods will grant a time of rapture  
then they’ll take me to the moon  
from there through all  
the emptiness beyond.’

‘What of your body, Master?’

‘By then I’ll be no more  
substantial than the air.  
After, when perfect grace  
has entered me, I’ll fall —  
faltering filter in the soil,  
my thousand selves a thousand  
individuals of rain; reach down  
to sprout from earth as food;  
be reaped for offerings  
“in that sacrificial flame called man  
and born afresh in woman’s fire”.’

His eyes were wandering.
Simply to leave
is a long journey,
simply to turn my back,
shake loose the folds
of my robe,
without a sermon.

Not looking back.

The weight in my mind
burdens even the merest
change of scene.
And when I have arrived,
I'll find long journeys yet,
that stretch ahead.
At every village there were hands, suppliants in a wordless rustling frenzy struggling to touch his robe, his skin. And he, stopping from time to time, smiled with beneficent humility, while his shuddering flesh received their tribute.

At every village there were hands they flickered round him like a hundred cobras' tongues. Worse: it was as if the hands were animals themselves could see and hear (not only feel) even as if they tasted him.
At eighty-three the saint
achieved his final pilgrimage,
became a holy shrine himself
that other pilgrims visited;
so like a statue now he shocked
their hearts with revelation.
His shoulders almost narrow as his head,
the dry stick limbs meshed
with ivy-roots of arteries,
and dust in every joint.
He leaned upon his bamboo staff,
a swathe of fraying cotton
round his hips and pulled across
his shoulders, just a corner left
to coif the head — and such a head!
heavier than his body
wrinkled as a brain, yet hard
beneath the powdering of beard
and the gentle white
of hair more human than his skin.
At length the time of his reward
drew close
with his placid body's inward raging
for release.
They set his stretcher by the cave
of sacred cool,
crouched on their hams for his oracular
farewell.

He gaped the dryness of his mouth;
began
to slip away behind his eyes.
    That was when
his Favourite spoke: 'You've played the part
of God, brave
with promising yourself divine
reprieve,

'but you rejected people — such
a sin
the Law of Karma punishes
by birth again.'
The saint's arm raised in fear reached
for paradise,
death in spasms flared across
his face.
THE FIRST DECLINE

Prince 1435-1465

Persia
The dying Shah lay semi-conscious, weaving words, remembering eighteen years before . . . 

In the courtyard dancers jangled. 
Guests came sauntering in. 
Music — like the utterance of God unending — unending: 
players polished brown with perspiration. A swirl of cloth a diamond’s colours. 
And, faint from the street beyond, the starving classes shouted prayers for the firstborn prince profane with joy. 

The baby had seemed foreign to his pride, wrinkled like a brain; the whine of dotage; eyes hidden, not from the birth but a moment of crushing age. 

The young man took his father’s hand and slowly gently eased the rings from every finger.
The Prince then turned his back, addressed himself to heaven as yet so intimate he felt no need to raise his voice above a whisper: ‘I pledge my life to principle

‘Let me prove a pattern for mankind, a ruler to be sung in anthems, held as paragon by coming generations. I pray my destiny, divinely authorised, atones for all my father’s lewdness.’

Gripping the insignia of power, he faced the night and hurried out, trembling with the weight of his resolve. The body on the couch disturbed, its mouth gaped open, voiceless, trembling.

By the lake the Prince called out to his betrothed. A darkness peeled from the empty dark to float across the turf toward him. They sat in a royal skiff while oarsmen winged the easy craft away.

He crowned her head with jewels of love, an ornament of pearls countless as the moons in all their phases that glimmer, dancing through the nights of any man.
In the rocking boat and close upon her rocking heart 
the Prince confided:
Don't be hurt at my attempts to understand, 
blundering in the dark of urgency to reach you. 
Accidents are bound to happen, 
accidents at least with meaning. 
If you slip away 
you leave me ignorant 
of how alone 
I am.
Pearls for hair! in brittle sequences
in stiff progressions, on wires,
in oriental curls
fantastic for their independence,
graded gems that taper finely
as arabesques of incense.

The young girl's face in that whorl
that frame of destiny,
clings at her bridegroom's heart
as she suffocates in coldness,
sinks with the weight
of her hopeless eyes.

And still the cruel pearls play on,
developing a dance from every quiver —
tusks of the fabulous Medusa
the skeletons of snakes for hair —
chill as lights from static water
blinding the man transfix in air.
'The moon is my hope',
she took defence behind that charm.

'The moon', she murmured, gazing shyly,
seeking comfort in his smile,
'shall be a sign
of every tenderness you offer me'.

And fountain streaks upon her face
played with her moon-dark eyes.
The fountain shaft like a crane’s neck
and the fountain’s falling plumage
might one day wing from the insect earth
to freedom. Past the pavilion’s embroidery
where Prince and Princess thrash
on golden carpets for their child,
there the new palace rises, overtopping trees,
too high for snakes and too exposed for birds.
They say the dome will be completed soon.
But cranes are leaving; to their plumbline sight
the artisans are lice in festival
upon the surface of a shattered moon.
THE SECOND DECLINE

Janissary 1465-1565
Turkey
I'm now so old. When all the court were children
I was just as old. And yet I feel the ghost of beauty
in me. I, who was an Ajam-oghlan, 'foreign youth',
star of the Ottoman Empire; and more than human.

Who knows but I'm a hundred?
And last made love eight years ago. The woman
trembled at my violence and groaned beneath my weight.
I told her: Once upon a time

I broke a man in two. And she believed
because she was afraid. I did no wrong,
he was an infidel; almost like love itself, that was,
so sweet the blood-flow round my bones. I laugh.

Now, clerk, let me look at what you've written.
Is it there? . . . all I said?
Clerk, I trust you, you are such an insect
how would you have courage to betray me! Write,
my little insect. I was born
to the south a hundred marching days from here.
At fourteen came the time to be divinely chosen:

the soldiers lined us up and felt our arms and thighs;
the weak were left to wail and rot in villages at home.
The strong among us loped away
proud of the leather thongs about our necks;
leaping, like randy horses, at the sting of whips.
'Let the body be your God!' the Captain told us and that has been our faith. I've lived to know the truth of it, for how can there be Gods outside ourselves if we have strength to conquer any man? For thirty years the Sultan, even, prayed to me in secret.

Put down your tools, come here. After a hundred years you still may feel the eagle wings folded flat beneath my shoulderblades.
The lads were close, we worked and trained together; with loyal oaths we sealed our union of destiny.

Often at night a gang of us would havoc through the town. Why not? our will was law. You, the weakling,

you and your kind could never understand the comradeship of Gods who watch the happening of each other’s victories.
Among ourselves our trust was absolute.  
But someone had to be the Sultan's eyes and ears 
to help him understand our private ways.  
I loved the squad and taught them  
my two commandments — loyalty and trust.  
Why should they have hidden anything from me?

None but the best of men deserve the privilege 
of leadership. And who are these?  
A fair decision can't be made in ignorance.  
I take some pride there never were mistakes,  
promotions went to those most pure in loyalty;  
this I can vouch for, during all my years.
You praise this jewel I wear,
this gift from Suleiman.
He gave it, speaking to me strangely
lisping my native dialect.
The words became a talisman,
I treasure every one:

'This is the price I set upon your soul.
This is your reward, this my thanks
for all your confidential information.
And I shall prophesy that when your body
one day stumbles in the final crevice,
as you claw your way toward the lip
back to the life you know, this jewel of mine
will weigh you down, so vast my gift will grow,
too vast for you with all your strength to bear.
And into the sweetest depths of that abandon
down you'll sink forever down. Rewarded.'

This must be written secretly and buried in my tomb
in place of me; for I shall never die,
I know that now. Finish writing
make it neat. Men will remember you by this.
Then come to me. You'll hardly feel a thing;
just the moment of my hands about your neck.
THE THIRD DECLINE

Lady 1565-1581

Malta
I walked beside her, senses stretched alert, our sandals crunched against the arid ground (dried skin of beasts on a dried beast earth) — the soil was hard as knuckles of dead Turks gripping rim of graves.

We did not speak.

Drought was pulling up the olive copses by the hair. They clung to rocks until the tendons of their hands were wrenched and knotted. Still the plain air seemed to suck at them with speechless mouth. They held to their precarious independence.

And we did not speak.

We did not touch each other's hand, and yet we were familiares of every curve and pulse. Round the waterfront we'd come, by crumbling farms with iron cannonballs embedded in their land like seeds about to germinate. I helped her climb the rampart.

She smiled. She spoke:

'During the siege my uncle held this fort, Don Francisco de Sanoguera most beloved of all the Red Cross Knights.'
Oh my most beloved! How I cherished her, even admired her family pride. There on the wall a tiny flower trembled; I broke it short and dropped it, light as breath, inside her bodice.
She chose to climb no further
so I went on alone,
waved from the highest bastion.
But she no longer looked my way, stood
attentive to the well-known
hills and settlements around;
seeing, I am certain,
with de Sanoguera’s eyes.

Across the inlet, houses,
a church with its Venetian tower:
so little worth the sacrifice
of sixteen years before — the bloody siege,
the knights all holding out
against bombardment, cut to pieces
by the Turkish hordes, striking back
long after any effort seemed impossible.

The church breathed out a tiny crowd that paused
as fragile as a bubble. Distant.
Yet their voices tinkled clearly
from across the water, splashed
like a many-crested ripple
bright against the wall. Quite suddenly
they drifted off, and left the square
empty with echoes of their Christian pride.
We swam, her black hair
streaming out across her shoulders
spread like veins beneath transparent skin;
her bobbing head a small wet animal.

And when she cried exhaustion,
hung about my neck
gulping air and laughing with her fear,
I felt her naked breasts.

That first awareness,
contact desperate and innocent,
she could not bear, lashed out,
fiercely conscious of her virgin’s knowledge.

And yet I held her, soothed her struggles.
One of us must speak.
I said, jerking phrases from my swollen throat:
‘Think — of the Turkish fleet —
‘Keels in this very water —
thousand galleys — crowded in the harbour —
waiting for a signal —
from Admiral Piali Pasha —
‘sense fool — rotten with disease — and lice —
mad with jealousy against his equals —
who gave no signal.’
Her grateful glance was questioning.

So I explained: ‘A relative of mine
was in that fleet.’ Stop. I had no power to stop.
‘My blood is Saracen.’ I saw
the words had plunged their anchors in her mind.
She showed me to an empty house she knew,
coaxed me down upon a bed of dust,
eased my clothes apart
and stroked my lust.

There in the stippled day, tenderly
we joined our needs and danced their savage jig:
the powdered years our halo
and our myrtle sprig.
We did not speak until we left the ruin,
our bodies burnished, love complete. Already
night had rolled the moon on black saliva.
Down below St Michael’s parapet
we strolled, down the maw of that ravine
depths ahead and granite teeth above.

‘On the day when I was born,’ her words
bit sharply at my brain, ‘the giant died,
the Master Janissary. Of all the Turks
our people feared that giant most. By morning
Don Garcia’s galleys rowed in sight
flocking round the headland — Christ had won!’

We stopped and did not kiss. The sky clamped shut
above us. When she spoke again, it gaped,
the whole abysmal throat uttering
her words, rolled them round its tongue and shouted
whispers to the world: ‘I’ve paid my love.
I’ll never be the bride of any Turk.’
I crouch and wait
in the sudden quiet.

Morning has come
she screams my name.
The crowds are alive with hate.
Knights in their clumsy plate
drag me here
to their Christian square
my arms they lash
and stab my flesh
they club my head
and where I bleed
they crawl about to lick,
and KILL is the love they shriek
KILL KILL
KILL
THE FOURTH DECLINE

Envoy 1581-1618

Venice
I write this confession of treason, humble in remorse and shame; my heart is charged with grief by the full knowledge of my guilt: I, Gonzalez Martello, of noble birth, son of a Spanish Knight of St John, trusted envoy of Spain to the lustrous court of Venice. May the Lord God Almighty show me mercy.

These were the words I watched Martello write, his chestnut curls were brushing on the page; his eyes, when he looked up, ran blind with grief; exquisite marble cloisters were his cage.

He said: 'I dreamt I'd lived another life — as a girl so great in bravery and pride she watched her lover die, then like a man faced the crowd and committed suicide.'
A week before, we'd met him at the quay.
He leapt from the deck, so light and large his action,
took my hand, 'Rejoice!' was all he said.
And then we turned to watch the gondolier
wing his easy craft away, curving,
out towards Giudecca. The morning fog,
still rubbing lines to haze, had bled the pink
of dawn to every corner of the town.
St Mark's own lion, high upon its plinth,
glistening wet as a creature newly born,
shook off the tunneled chrysalis of night
and spread its wings — yet feared the joy of flight.
Blind in his soul, he waits his execution,  
still incapable of grief for those  
who've died already by his treachery.  
How his comrades must have honoured him,  
entrusting every secret of their treason.  
While he, accepted lately in the plot,  
chafed it seems at being less than leader.

He was not moved to tell of their design  
by tales of mutilation, children's cries,  
mothers butchered in some dark canal,  
nor fear of chaos if the empire fell.  
He was a Spaniard in a Spanish plot  
little worse, he claimed, than open war.  
The crowds were gathering, alive with hate.

'Kill.' was the love he preached, 'Kill. Kill.  
Somebody must die by my command  
(if not the enemy, why then the friend)  
now you're afraid: a pleasure due to me.  
My words like kestrels hover at your head  
terror ravishes the virgin blood,  
tugs at the scalp, the face in a grip of skin.'
Blind in his soul, he waits his execution,
riding again some bygone battlefield,
safe in the thick of fighting — *that was clean* —
as weapon for weapon he forced his man to yield.

Suddenly he cries *'She never faltered,
showed no fear. How could I do less?’*
catches my cloak and pulls me near, *'Free me
to twist my fate and prove my worthiness.’*
Blind in his soul, he waits his execution:
once blind with arrogance, now blind with fear.
We watch to guard against his suicide
for he cries 'I dared to do it when a girl.'
At times the large pale hands of hope appear,
tremble about the room for some release,
fllicker at night against the candle flame,
touch on the streaming face, the blank white cheek,
the arch of nose and brow — and then remember.
He weeps with bitterness but not with shame,
for still he thinks himself a soldier, still
a man of principle — although by words
he has whispered twelve of his companions' necks
upon the block. Outside: public terror
spreads like instinct through a flock of birds.
The bell resounds across the watercourse bounding back with multiplied concussions: clang, and its clangour builds a dome of sound more dense and massive than a funeral mound, stifling, heaped above the whole lagoon; till suddenly, as if it were exploding, the myriad birds of Venice break to air screeching their grief, their triumph and their fear.
THE FIFTH DECLINE

Countess 1618-1710

Trieste
The instant light of a doorway
shuts like the chime of 1 a.m.,
but not too soon for any prowler
to have missed her silhouette
or even, perhaps, to have observed
her face; the blank white cheek,
the arch of nose and brow,
the blank blue eyes. Then
at the very moment he'd decided
to attack, a darkness would peel
from the dark around and float
across the street to join her —
the anonymity of any one of her affairs.
Once she lay awake
stared at the dusty window
while dawn, like an oyster,
pearled each particle of grit
with a glistening secretion.

The housemaid bustled in,
snapped the shutters closed
and dragged the great silk curtains
into place: left them
blood-dark, whispering.
A lover lay asleep beside her,
a small soft man, bald
and ridiculous without his wig.
(Two cats caressed her
with their living fur.)
She let her fingers touch his arm,
scornful of that one brief struggle
before he'd rolled aside
murmuring the fashionable clichés,
even — she gaped a silent laugh —
believing what they meant.
Only the cruel Bosnian
had struck her heart to sudden life.
It seemed he had come so courteously,
the perfect diplomat,
offering the lady cool respects —
till he'd pressed her to the floor
while she ripped and tugged
at his close-cropped skull;
and with gentle unconcern
had raped her —

till at last
she knew the luxury of being helpless.
His terms were absolutely clear: she slept with adventurers and noblemen — whoever he might nominate she had to win. It came to be a craft she patiently developed through the years, that quiet widow hardly anybody knew ... almost a virgin, her lovers each her first ... secretive, unworldly yet intelligent ... the ideal confidante.
So it went on, her bargaining for love, 
night after night the same: 
the candles clustered 
in her rich unfashionable house, 
the visitor at ease, wine 
in moderation, a smile, a touch, 
and the ceremonial of bed.

In the blind of night, caution 
would be edged aside: 
seeking a moment’s rest 
escape from the tensions of deceit 
the strains of power, 
her guest would talk, 
offering before each revelation 
the shibboleth of love.

Into the keeping of her secrecy 
they poured confessions that could earn them 
ruin, exile, death. While she, 
so honoured, lay reliving moments of her passion 
for the man who stood unflinching in the closet, 
his hand on the bones of her farthingale, 
calculating ruin, exile, death 
as he listened to the innocence of love.
THE SIXTH DECLINE

Woodsman 1710-1768
Austria
A watcher hid upon the ridge
flat in a sheltering trench of snow.
Behind were regiments of trees —
invading troops were camped below.

He crouched and heard their guttural talk
their breath rose steaming on the air
no mercy would be shown, they said,
let the least dog they found beware.

He slipped back down and crept away,
struggled and dodged through the shin-deep fall;
was driven hard by desperate fear
and flung against his cottage wall.
Silence rains down thick as snow
to freeze the resin-perfumed light.
Sunbeams jab their icicles
    point engaging point
on timber old as mineral
dense as barricades.
    Each surprises
like a regiment of bayonet blades.
He withered by the house
and laboured to control his fear,
listened to the children
sing and squabble, heard his wife
clattering pans upon the stove.
Warmth came filtering through the wall,
he felt it thaw his icy cheek.

He knew there wasn't long, if once
the patrol should come across the track.
Not long. The only safe escape
was up the cliff, along the gorge
to the mountain range and through the forest —
precarious for the fittest man,
impossible for any child.
A young girl wanders in the field, 
squats to inspect a curious log, 
wipes her nose along her sleeve, 
then hesitates, cocks her head, 
hopes for the feeble sound again. 
Yes — and she searches through the hedge.

There on the ground a fox lies staring, 
a metal bar across its back; 
broken with chains, it heaves, but still 
it cannot reach the rancid bait. 
The girl now stands her distance, puzzled — 
‘What would I want if that was me?

‘Someone to smash my head with rocks 
to put me out of agony? 
Oh no, I’d want to hang on, living; 
just to be here is all I want.’ 
And yet she slaps at the dying fox. 
‘How miserably afraid I’d be.’
Piercing light found chinks
in cast-iron faces: the soldiers
grunted dull acknowledgment of pain.

They were victims of a general strategy,
starved of blood — for what was there to kill
in a place where no one lived?

The savage beast of cold
had gripped their flesh and slowly
sank its talons further in.

Stumbling down through hidden hollows;
nothing was left for them to value
but faith in luxuries of loot.

This, the flickering core of heat
that fused the fibres
of their purpose,

drove them forward, till
the tortured body clenched it round
and knew no other feeling.
The father listens at his cottage wall
to the long-learned sounds of family within.
Now, as return for loving them,
he's forced to wait and share their death.
Yet a swift consuming fire of hope takes hold,
light flame bursts along his dry-wood limbs.

The voice in the burning bush commands —
he rises trembling, strong, as freedom
pulses through his heart; he steals
toward the cliff, mountains, forest track.
Snowflakes pile, then bend the branch,
and slip away with a gentle sigh.

A great age lies before him,
the soft dark thread of years
so long, so long, before him
(in his heart he sings: 'I live!')
at every corner, surely there must be
some hole to hide the fugitive?
THE SEVENTH DECLINE

Doctor 1768-1813

Moscow
Sunday 7th

I write you all the details,
Maxim Maximich, because I know
how interested, how envious, you'll be.

Three weeks after Buonaparte's withdrawal
I visited the chalet (forgive the affectation
but ever since our tour
the name has stuck).

Imagine my astonishment,
having unbarred the door and stamped inside,
to see a soldier crawl away
along the passage! Just imagine!

Happily for me, he had no weapons,
was also weak from hunger, scarcely fit to move.
A Frenchman, officer, full regimentals on.

The bailiff tied him up. I've brought him here —
secretly of course — and keep him
in the upstairs surgery.

Dear Maxim Maximich, do come
before the silly fellow dies.
Tuesday 9th

The neighbourhood is quiet,
today the snow falls heavier than ever.
This can't go on for long
I dare not leave the house,
my practice has begun to suffer.

Lamplight slices underneath his door.
I keep the curtains and the blinds across.
Yet who can tell?
The signs are everywhere,
they know the signs.

I fear they read my house
as easily as you
may read this letter.
Maxim Maximich,
I wait for you to come.
Wednesday 10th

Today I tried the Chinese torture,
beating a gong ten centimetres from his ear.
At every stage you’d see him twitch:
firstly his face
    and then his limbs.

When I had him writhing in his straps
I stopped.

Do you realise what you’re missing?
Thursday 11th

I haven't been myself this morning,  
I finished up the kvass  
your wife so kindly sent me  
all that time ago.

Kvass in winter? do I hear you say?  
Yes, well I felt like something cool;  
and the servants need  
to be kept busy.

Have you ever heard of servants  
being paid to spy?  
I fancy I recall  
a case not long ago.

Just to be safe I've made a rule —  
no one is allowed upstairs but me.  
As long as gossip  
doesn't get around,

as long as no one comes  
with awkward questions  
— how can I tell you? —  
life is heaven, Maxim Maximich.
Dear friend, I sense the strangers crowding all about me — eyes for the smallest action, ears alert to catch my involuntary confessions.

I pray for you to come.

This is no hallucination. I pray for you to come and that our dear Lord keep my soul and body safe from every harm.
Thursday 11th

How foolish of you not to come
and join me in my ecstasy. Tomorrow
is the longest I can keep him.
Shall we live to have another chance?

I didn’t want to spoil his looks
because I know you’d like your pleasure too.
But now I cannot wait,
I’m going to try some surgery.
THE EIGHTH DECLINE

Slave-trader 1813-1881

Guinea
Like a wave that sweeps back down the beach
Napoleon's armies bled away, leaving
among the pools of grief
castles broken as if built of shingles,
brief cross-currents of the helter-skelter mob,
the clash of baffled troops against resurgents;
and somewhere, helpless in the flow, a child.

He passed with his camp-girl mother
from the French to the English lines
till finally the wave of battle dropped him,
jetsam, in a shack near Liverpool.
The waters of the war lay coiling to a standstill
soon to be blotted up by sand and lost
till the magnet moon should spin its giddy course again.
The River Niger rises in the Mountains of the Moon and flows forever: great arcs it slashes in the plain and great arcs in the currents of the sea, slit by the keels of squalid ships, each wake a laceration on the Gulf of Guinea opening and opening again the weals across its back.
The *Moghul*, lately out from Liverpool
rides at anchor in a tranquil bay
pictorially perfect, framed
by Africa's amber beaches
and vivid jungle fringe,
while the whole sky jells to one blue sun
blazing in all directions
nothing can escape

and down from the hills, a chain of slaves
— moving.
   Flamingoes break to air
like human instinct, human panic,
flutter helpless wings
against the bars of light.
On the fifteenth day at sea again
the men are waiting for the skipper's afternoon inspection.
The door bangs open, deckhands carry him upon a stretcher.
Crippled, hollowed out by scurvy,
thus he begins his circuit of the vessel,
leaning over, desperate for his day's enjoyment
he swipes whoever passes near
tearing the seamen's faces with his uncut fingernails.

The day before, he killed a cook who burnt the roast;
today he has the bosun's teeth knocked out
for being found at sunrise licking dew from his private hencoop
('If you're so damn'd starved of water, choke on these!');
tomorrow surely someone will be flogged
tied to the grid of the Captain's iron bedstead
with the Captain's face thrust near
afraid of missing any detail of the pain.
The merchandise, below-decks, packed according to the Captain’s plan, sways with a long lament — no room to stand or move — peace between the tribes in common misery, some from Dahomey, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and others from the Congo.

Week after week they crouch and sway sick with the sea’s upheaval, savaged by the Trader.

‘Black leather covering a bunch of sticks’, is how the Bosun writes of them in a letter to his darling Mary.
An old man remembers while he dies alone in an English slum, remembers, babbles:

   Our brigs were fast.
Those years. Brazil:
would take a thousand slaves
a week. They would.
Who cared for Palmerston!
Times often bad —
one day counted thirty corpses
dragged on deck.
Dysentery. Were mainly women,
long hair tangled with their rags.
Tossed them overboard.
Where else?

   An old man
speaks the numbness of his heart,
unwillingly remembers too
his first impressions as a new recruit:

the markets, a dealer choosing men
yanked them by the arm, leaving
fingermarks upon them (moist
and darker on the dusty skin);
also hands of frightened women
fluttering as if to freedom
opening as vulnerable as flowers.
THE NINTH DECLINE

Cavalry Officer 1881-1915

France
May 4th, 1915. Paris. The people of France heard with deep regret this morning of the death of one of her most gallant soldiers, Captain André Paul Regnard, who led his cavalry squadron in their final, heroic defiance of the enemy last October. He was one of the few survivors of that magnificent engagement in which he and his men won eternal glory. As a celebrated statesman said at the time: If anything of our finer qualities is to be sifted from the debris when this horrifying war ends, surely it will be the cavalry charges in the Battle of Chavannes.

I was Captain Regnard’s aide and therefore speak with some authority. He cared for all his men with fatherly affection, especially when we reached the fighting line — provided they behaved with honour.

He lost his temper with the lads only once: a few that drank too much ran havoc through the town. None but gentlemen were fit for horses, he observed in anger. And drafted them to infantry.
‘We crouch and wait
in the sudden quiet.’

We’d burst from the France of villages and trees
into a mutilated bog: the battleground
of several weeks before. Captain Regnard
swept the panorama with his riding crop
and warned us this would be the chaos
everywhere in Europe if our empire fell.

There he conferred with three Commanding Officers
of units fighting in the district.
They were for caution, he for daring.
How little he could comprehend
the minds of lesser men.
Already they were victims of the strains of power
the tensions of retreat.
That afternoon a Zeppelin floated overhead
ghostly as a fish with greedy eyes
focused on its riverbed.
The Captain laughed: What
could anybody see from such a height!
'The signs are everywhere.  
They know the signs.'

Such were the feeble arguments they brought to make him doubt the wisdom of attack. He gazed at the ravaged fields and then through all the emptiness beyond; his eyes were filled with tears. 'None of you could understand, who watch the happening of each other's cowardice.'

The rival officers were mad with jealousy against their equals. Regnard came from conference, his eyes were chill as lights that glimmer in the rain: 'Tomorrow we advance. First our guns will open fire to clear the way, destroy the wire entanglements and rout the Hun from trenches. Then the rest is up to us.'

The evening wind sprang up, as if to promulgate his words; it hurried in among us blood dark — whispering.
After the smoke had cleared and sleet had drummed the dust back down to earth, he rode along the ranks of troopers assuring them they could not fail. This was the faith by which he’d argued his right to disregard the general strategy. ‘By this I stake my fitness to command, as much as you your claims to immortality. God for St Denis, for France, and all our heritage.’

His sabre reaped a glittering wheel of air, paused for a moment, singular as courage raised against the void, a beacon tracking across the waves of men. Cut. The charge. The Captain spun about to cleave the line of troopers, his horse a rock that breasted up against the racing tide. He roared encouragement as, troop by troop, his squadron thundered past.

They rode, as on some bygone battlefield, toward the rise where trenches slashed the earth, opening and opening again their weals across its back. And wings of the angel Victory who led them thrashed a gale in every face.
Shall I never clear the horror from my mind? Hardly had they gathered speed than here and there began to stumble in the cratered ground; one flank was dragged completely to a halt by mud that socketed the horses’ legs high as the knee and more. I watched a line of comrades fall, crumpled on the wire. The charge was broken in its impetus. This was the moment when the enemy had trained his field artillery upon them: opened fire! The leading troop was blown to pieces, wiped out utterly.

No one thought the Germans could have sunk to tactics as dishonourable as this. Retreat was sounded and the ruins of our cavalry withdrew. The Captain had his men re-form and spoke to them his great emotion: ‘Who are heroes? One — is that soldier in his trench who keeps on fighting long after any effort seems impossible. Two — the man who saves his injured friend when every fibre of his being shouts that this will be his certain death. And three — the hero is that trooper wheeling round to face a faceless enemy pitting the strength of man and mount triumphantly against the treacherous betrayal of our code.
'This is the stamp of hero who defeats the irresistible and he will never be forgotten: sung in anthems, held as example by the histories of coming generations. Now is your chance for glory, a privilege that few men ever know.' Some among them wept, so deeply were they moved by what they heard. The signal flashed. The wave began, undulations of the horses' gathering stride. Machine-guns this time opened fire. The massacre was startlingly brief; and not a single man of ours had reached his enemy or measured him within the swing of sword. The Captain's mare fell early, he — praise God — escaped.
Just before he died (of natural cause) he gave into my trust a letter. 'Call the press', he ordered me, 'to witness what I need to say.' So now, before you all, I break the seal.

Dearest Countrymen,
    How alone I am among you.
My death must offer publicly
the question that has plagued my life.
We live by principle; and can this principle
be modified unless it is betrayed?

No one could have known
the outcome of that first attack.
And yet my second order
meant the death of every man in my command;
I understood that this was so.

Honour did not make allowances
for our defeat. If we had fled the field
there could have been no choice
but to admit myself disgraced,
no longer fit to wear my uniform.

We live by principle.
And this is also how I die,
commending to your hands my reputation.

Regnard, A. P., Captain
THE TENTH DECLINE

Reichs-Kommissar 1915-1944

Poland
'Depopulation is a great and necessary task. We live by principle, such principle shall be our life through all posterity,' the new Reichs-Kommissar had spoken and he knew the interview was going well. 'The Führer says the role of Jews in Europe now has reached its end. Therefore it has reached its end.'
He calculated what impression he would make — I am what every man desires to be — the limousine slid toward the summer evening, pressing upholstery against his spine. He smelt the leather; such a wholesome smell. Leather suits a man, the Kommissar considered, flicked some ash he noticed on his sleeve, attended to his face (how disappointing, average) bright and miniature within the driver's mirror.

He proceeded to the sweetest depths of his abandon through the ruins of a town, junk on the road, gaping cellars either side: 'So many mouths,' he spoke it, 'offering their love. Poland suffers, why had I never understood till now?' Nothing here was standing but chimneys of the dead, dead themselves, not even posing tremulous defiance; and weeds tufted the mounds like hair that stays alive upon a corpse.
Shots! and the car pulled up.
The driver went investigating
climbed a bank beside the road.
He stood for a while
and watched the scene below:

a trench already full of bodies,
its depth could not be judged;
more civilians being marched along,
whistle blasts, the SS guards
forcing everyone to strip.

A senile woman, helped by friends,
climbed in the pit, wrapping
sunshine cold about her,
stumbling, slipping on the heads
of those who'd gone before.

They posed, as if for some grotesque
photography. The rifles crackled.
Spectators from the army billets
stood round smoking,
some in bathing trunks.
Early morning: they arrived at Auschwitz, noted the barricades and towers, the tall chimney gushing fire and soot. A million flies were busy round the car, a pestilential stench floated in the air.

The great man swore and wound his window up, took out a perfumed handkerchief and clapped it to his face, gulping the sweetness of cologne. He flicked some ash that settled on his uniform.
The commandant explained: ‘These are Jews who’ve just arrived — all the ones unfit for work. Some are in the chamber now; we tell them this will be their showering room. We’ve had it built to seem that way — from our humanitarian concern. They never guess. It saves a struggle. Look through the window Herr Reichs-Kommissar, see what beasts they are by nature.’

He saw the bodies tightly packed, their puzzled faces upturned to fixtures in the ceiling. No water yet. Then they felt the gas, recoiled, and came stampeding for the metal door, desperate to reach its tiny window, desperate to reach the eye of god that watched them. Their grey flesh rose in waves, the top ones clawing hideously close upon the naked heap.

Hell was huge with panic. Primeval forest flowered in their eyes; a million years of evolution dropped away. Biting through the gag of language the yawning animal revived. As in some ocean’s belly creatures older than the name of God, ripping out the currents of each other’s life, collapsed to vegetation. And here was not the case of any moon in unrelation to experience: but power like love itself.
Twenty minutes long he watched the dying wrestle with the dead. Then the door banged open and a squad of prisoners arrived in masks and gumboots, bringing hoses. They hooked at corpses, slippery with sweat and urine to clear their unfit kinsmen out. foul with blood and faeces; cursed the family who still embraced in death, tugging angrily to loosen arms and separate the bodies.

‘From here they go to have their teeth knocked out. We need the gold.’ The young Reichs-Kommissar then smiled and visited the furnaces, later was ushered to his limousine and, handkerchief to nose, proceeded (through the gate where man had printed Work is Freedom) into the emptiness beyond. Tired, he wished this new creation of a race were done, longed for the kisses of his wife and children ‘God,’ he muttered, ‘my guts are stuffed and more with purity.’
The land was dead, miles of it on miles,
pulped of growth by tank, bomb, shell.
Not a living person left in sight,
thing there to spoil the peace
except where factory and camp
offered a spout of blood, man aflame,
fountaining smoke that clotted, bunched,
hung like a wrinkled brain above.
This book was designed by Robin Wallace-Crabbe. The text was set in 11/13 Linotype Optima face by Trade Composition Pty Ltd of Melbourne, and printed on 136 gsm matt Velvachrome by The Specialty Press Ltd of North Clayton, Victoria.
Rodney Hall is 33 years old, married, with three daughters. He is poetry editor of the *Australian*, and holds the Creative Arts Fellowship for 1968 at the Australian National University. He has been round the world several times on a starvation budget and, as a result, suffers nostalgia for almost every place except where he happens to be at any given time. Antiquities are enormously important to him; this is balanced by an avid layman’s interest in science and sociology. He believes automation heralds the end of a dark age that began with the Industrial Revolution, and that poetry, as the most highly developed means of using language to cope with new and difficult meanings, is on the verge of a renaissance.