The Whale in Darkness

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R. F. Brissenden

The Whale in Darkness

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By the Shore

This world-order did none of gods or men make, but it always was and is and shall be: an ever-living fire, kindling in measures and going out in measures.

*     *     *     *     *

Immortal mortals, mortal immortals, living their death and dying their life.

Heraclitus
Life burns toward the light—or is it light
That draws all living things? It is the world
We know that turns: but our blood feels the sun
Still lift at dawn with each new day that springs;
Our hearts move with the moon and stars that wheel
Above our heads; our bones stir with their tides.

At night we lie and listen to the tides
Brimming and ebbing in the full moonlight;
And as we watch that spoke of the great wheel,
The moon's path, trembling to the edge of the world,
Liquid and brilliant, from some dark well-springs
Deep in us love bursts upward like the sun.

We touch and sleep and waken to the sun—
And smile to feel still shaken by those tides
That take us in our joy. Desire springs
Refreshed and crescent with the dawning light
That breaks across the long beach of the world
And bears us on. Now tern and gannet wheel,

Plunge, strike and kill—all part of the one wheel
On which we turn and burn together. Sunlight gleams on the fish that yield their dying world
Up to the harrying birds. The same strong tides
In blood, sea, air and the flooding light
Draw fish and bird and lover as day springs

Out of the brightening sea. And when the spring's shock-wave of flower and leaf begins to wheel
Into the flank of winter it is light
That calls it forward: under the warming sun
Each cell in seed and bud swells with the tides
Of hungering life that green across the world.
And yet the fire in a darkened world
Burns brightest: seeds crack and the leaf-blade springs
Skyward in pre-dawn shade: the tides
Race swelling to their peak. Only the wheel
Holds stillness at its centre: to the living sun
We all must turn in the end for love and light.

In choirs of light the great hymn of the world
Rises to meet the sun as each dawn springs
And seabirds wheel above the fish-bright tides.
By the Shore

I walked today along that grassy shelf
Above the beach where once we made our camp
And lay together listening to the sea.

The shelf is now a narrowing ledge: the wind,
The rain, the surf and man with his vagrant wheels
Have broken down the bank that looked so firm.

Our tent-floor now would hang four feet in the air
Above the sand, and where our camp-fire burned
There falls a tumbled scree of shell and bone:

The kitchen litter of a thousand years—
Bleached abalone, turban-shell and triton
Slowly commingling with grey earth and sand.

The weekend rubbish of our dirty tribe
Lies on the grass—cans, plastic, shattered glass:
At least I bashed and burned and buried ours.

But still we left our black unlovely spoor
Beneath the soil—my mattock and my spade
Loosened the roots, our wheels helped gouge the ruts

That with each storm scour deeper. All life marks
The earth it moves on—but the mess we make
Seems filthier than most: we’ve fouled the nest.

And though the black man’s midden stank, his dung
Bred flies, his fire-stick razed the bush—the grass
Where his bare feet passed sprang back green and fresh.
For Alexander: twelve Weeks old

Not much of a world, old son, it isn’t much
Of a mortgaged planet your laughing mother and dad
Have brought you onto—though it’s not so bad
You’re thinking now as you learn to see, taste, touch
And smell and hear it while love flows with each
Warm jet of Janet’s milk in the autumn sun
Under the leaves in Dick your father’s garden.
Gently tug at her breast and smile and stretch:
You’ll find out soon enough just how much stronger
And wiser you will need to be to keep
Alive this ravaged piece of real estate
Than we who’ll leave it to you—or, too late,
Like your great namesake you may come to weep
That there are no worlds left for man to conquer.
Wet Afternoon

No fixed point
Under this shifting sky
Of torn clouds
Drifting walls of rain:

Grey hills and greyer cliffs
Recede and merge
Into the one dark ink-wash blur
Of sea and sky and land.

Our feet slip on black rocks
Streaming with wetness,
Sink suddenly in crumbling sand
Where the swelling creek

Turbid with yellow silt
Cuts through the bar
And courses down the beach.
The sea is never still:

The climbing breakers,
Heavy with churned sand
And sea-weed, surge
And fall, surge and fall

Under a driving wind
That feathers out long skeins
Of flying spray
Across their flattened crests.
Only the solitary gannet
Masters this random world
Of moving air and water:
Banking low

Over the big broken waves
And soaring
Into a momentary shaft
Of pallid light

He turns
Folds in his slender wings
And strikes
Into the sea.
Zoology AO1

I
Toad

Spreadeagled in the attitude
In which St Andrew was crucified
The toad lies on his back, neat
Pins driven through his hands and feet.

His chest is cut open, white flaps
Of flesh folded back. Slow drops
Of water fall on the unquiet
Lungs, the arteries, the labouring heart.

The heart glistens. It is dark
Red, soft but tough. Look,
You can touch it, lift it, turn
It over, it will still beat on.

This is the ventricle and these
The atria. Does the heart bruise?
It circulates the blood. When we
Know how, the yellow toad can die.
II

The Mating of Snails

The snail has blood—not much—
But prick him, he will bleed.
The eyes we know
Are delicate.

The blood looks colourless:
A heavy, transparent drop.
Set it in the right light it will gleam
An opalescent blue.

When snails mate
Coldly coupling under the damp leaves
They rub the backs of their heads together
In ecstasy.

They eject darts from their dart sacs
(See Fig. 12)
Into each other's body
To heighten excitement.

Then they move away
Leaving slow glistening trails
Across the stones,
Each one to lay its eggs.

When the young hatch out
They emerge entire
As tiny snails: blue-blooded, tender, moist,
Perfect in each small part.
This is a photograph of ‘Martha’
Who died in 1914.
She was the last of the Passenger Pigeons,
Ectopistes migratorii
That once darkened the skies of North America.
In 1869
Hunters shot seven point five
Million
Passenger Pigeons from a single nesting site.

When he was a boy,
The senior author of this text
Cleveland P. Hickman
Saw ‘Martha’
Some years before she died
In the Cincinnati Zoo.
Clear autumn day: outside no wind disturbs
The flame of dying leaves. The distant noise
Of traffic boiling round the campus edge
Ripples against our walls. Inside the new
Life Sciences Laboratory we watch
The silent busy protozoan world.
Three hundred years ago van Leeuwenhoek
Inside his water drop saw little men,
Then ground another lens. Under high power
And brilliant light the Paramecia
Caudata swim and feed and die: blind guts
That move like strange translucent fish
Across the glowing field. No sound. Somewhere
A hand turns off the light and wipes the slide.
Hospital

for Bruce Beaver

Yes, it is life we praise—and on this morning
When sun, air, water bless us with their bright
And lucid presences such praise seems easy.

The sun's flame burns in each green blade and leaf;
The swallows, leaving my high windows, skim
The lake; the water trembles and is still.

Yet down the corridor a man lies dying;
While in my veins the poison dies that living
Made my flesh ache and sweat: we live through death

And die through life—the virus, if it lives,
Must live in us. We suffer—and we praise
And wonder: there is nothing smaller nothing

Older that can move and make itself
Again: it was a viral spark that flickered
Out of nowhere, caught and flared against

The primal dark. And though the crumpling earth
Has tilted and the stars in slow explosion
Have crossed the sky that ancient flame still burns

Through everything that lives: we glow and praise
The fire we fuel. And even more we praise
'The second flame that kindles from the first:

That unconsuming fire which blazes in us
'Like a lamp's flame, using the body as a wick,'
And burns the bush but leaves it green with light.
The Whale in Darkness

Fishing at night under a rising moon
We have felt your great hulk like an island move
Beneath our boat; and riding the quiet swell
At dawn before the winds begin to stir
We've watched your cousin the sleek dolphin break
Clear of the grey Pacific in a rainbowed
Ecstasy of killing. Everything
In the murderous sea is eating everything else
Continually and nothing wants to die:
The plankton fight for one last eternal moment
As they snag on your mesh of teeth and the mullet shudders
As its back snaps in the dolphin's smiling mouth.
Hungry intelligent and beautiful you show
No mercy and expect none—yet we must
Learn to be merciful to you: the barbed
Grenades that burst and tear your flesh begin
To shake our hearts—for in your belly you
Still bear us and the world as once you bore
The weeping angry man. Will there be time
Before the sky rains blood for us to speak
With love and spare what we would kill? We wait
For the hot squall to lift, the harpoon guns
To cease: perhaps we yet may hear together
The lost boy singing as he rides once more
The dolphin's arching back across the sea.
Between Two Worlds

Kulihat bansa yang terumbang-ambing
antara due dunia:
Bagaikan tercermin diriku sendiri di sana.

* * * * *

I see a people adrift between two worlds:
And I see myself reflected there.

Ayip Rosidi
Walking down Jalan Thamrin

Jalan Thamrin in Denpasar
Was made by feet—
The feet of men, horses, dogs, pigs, cattle.
Now we walk a narrow dusty strip
Between the open ditch
And the petrol-stinking bitumen
Roaring with motorbikes, bemos, cars.

An old woman
Delicately erect
Balancing a pink rolled mattress
On her head
Threads her way towards us through the traffic.

On her left hand, in the ditch,
Two pigs
Root and snuffle through a heap of garbage.
On her right
A boy
White shirt fresh as a photograph from *Vogue*
Pedals a gleaming bicycle:
On his handlebars
A flower.
Under Mount Agung

Shrines everywhere:
Niches in gate posts, on piles of bricks;
Holes in the walls
Of cramped, filthy streets; and in the walls
Of quiet gardens;
Shrines in trees;
And on raised bamboo platforms
Under the sky
In the green and water-gleaming paddies:
Each with its small square basket
Of woven palm-fronds
Holding the offering
Of fruit and flowers
Like the one set down this morning
On the swept bare earth
Outside our door;
Or the one we saw at noon
Withered and dry
On the black moss covering the worn stone head
Of the sacred tiger guarding Siwa
In the highest courtyard
Of the Mother Temple
Under Mount Agung at Besakih.
Mr Oka,
Once Vice-Governor of Bali,
Gave us tea, saying,
'Since we last met
We have become vegetarian.
My wife translates Gandhi
And works with the women
In our villages.

There is too much abundance,
Too many people;
The young men in our island
All want motorbikes.'

'World peace,' said Mrs Oka,
'Can come only through religion.
My students learn their English
By reading the great poets:
Wordsworth, William Blake and Shelley.'
Outside the Military Police Komando
In Denpasar
The grass is cut
The ditches are freshly dug
The road is clean.

The trucks and jeeps are parked in ranks,
Their dark-green duco shines;
Their tyres are painted black.
The police wear polished boots
And crisp uniforms;
The heavy pistols
That hang beside their thighs
Are buttoned neatly
In large white leather holsters.

Each morning
On the shrine by the Komando gate
Hands place
Fresh fruit, flowers,
A little rice,
A burning incense stick.
Barong Dance

In the courtyard of the temple
Formed up in a hollow square
The sweating tourists
Fondle their cameras.

Enter the Barong—
Wonderful golden tiger with the scarlet head
White teeth and clapping jaws:
A hundred eyes take aim.

Then to the music of gong, flute and drum
Two girls,
Supple beneath their jewelled bracelets, their flowered crowns,
Sway through the narrow gate.

Trapped in the view-finder
The fanged and hairy Rangda,
Ancient nightmare from the dream jungle,
Falls on Sadewa, the slender prince.

A shower of blossoms: Siwa the god appears.
Blood stains the earthen floor:
The chicken and the Rangda die,
The golden Barong shakes his flashing head.

Precise, delicate, heavy,
Sterile as surgical instruments,
The black and silver cameras
Are buttoned back into their vinyl cases.
On the Beach

At Legian and Kuta
On the hot sticky sand
Peddlers knot like flies around pale tourists.

The fruit-juice bars
And Happy Restaurants
Offer exotic Apple Crumble
And Vegemite Jaffles
At bargain prices.
Around the tables
Buddha Sticks come cheap.

The Balinese boy
Beautiful as Sadewa in the Barong Dance
Rides a flame-red Honda.
On his number-plate, carefully painted,
Are the words: ‘I love you’.

The blonde girl on his pillion
Comes from Curl Curl.

He wears a yellow T-shirt.
Across his back, in faded blue, it says
‘Stoned Crow’.
Old Court and Parliament Building, Klungkung

To see them,
To touch the carved posts,
Feel the grey stone and the soft orange brick,
To climb the steep steps
Hollowed by innumerable feet
And stand beneath the airy ceilings,
Costs less than a Cold Gold
In the Bottle Shop at Bondi.

Light reflected from the water-lilied moat
Shimmers under the gilded roof
Where small birds perch on the rafters
By the painted wood Garuda.
'This', says Raka,
'Is where the eight kings of Bali
Met in council.
This is where the highest judges sat.'

Across the dull gold ceilings
In faded colour,
Formal groups of heroes, gods and men
Pursue their crowded lives.
Dark moss and lichen
Soften the bared fangs of the stone serpent
Guarding the stairs.
At the entrance
Where the mangy town dogs lift their legs
We are asked to sign our names.

Two visitors from Sydney
Have left their mark across the page before us:
'So, what's new?' and
'Just another rip off'.
Surabaya

Arrival

Darkness, heat, rain;
The driver circling,
Lost,
Through miles of sodden streets

Then lamps
Red gold and blue of neon signs
Wet umbrellas, black bechak hoods
Empty eyes of headlights
Streaming past the fogged bus windows

Surabaya

The rooms were cramped
Hot
Feverish with mosquitoes.

‘If everyone,’
Said the serious Australian
Scooping padang chicken off his palm-leaf,
‘Squashed fifty a day like me
There’d be no problem.’
His Indonesian wife
Laughed softly, eating the rice.
'Cheh-cheh,' said the lizard
Upside down on the ceiling
'Cheh-cheh, cheh-cheh-cheh,'
Flicking his tongue
And not falling.

ii
Sleep

Exhausted
In the sweating dark
There were friends all night beside me:

Bruce, kind, funny, smiling, dead,
Whose voice I could not hear;

Peter, helpful as ever,
Trying to mend a shattered floorboard
In our house by the sea

Over a black and empty hole.

iii
Mount Bromo

It was cold and quiet
Riding over the sand sea
In white mist
Under a fading moon.

Our hair was damp; our ponies
Cast no shadows;
Their unshod hooves whispered
In the grey sand.
Blowing of horses,
Creak of leather,
Voices
Were muffled, lost.

We could have been miles high
Floating through cloud
But for the dim line of stones
Marking the way.

It will come back in dreams:
The crumbling path
Along the knife-edge
Inner crater rim.

Trying not to look
Into the great steaming hole
On the one side, or on the other
Down the long fall of fissured lava

We followed the old guide
At a trot
To catch
The sun.

When, far off, it floated free
Over the high dark outer wall,
Pulsing, bright,
Pure fire,

We had to look,
Had to lock
Our eyes for a moment
Onto the unbearable eye of day.
The old man, squatting on the rim,
Tossed his kretek butt into the crater.
'Bagus!' he said,
'It is good'.

Coming back
Through skeins of mist, pale sun,
We galloped
Over the sand.

The pony's neck
Beneath its short, coarse mane
Was firm, sweating, warm
Under my hand.

'Sterk paard!'  
Strong horse!
Laughed the guide
Running beside me.

iv

City of Heroes

'Looks jazzy,' we said,
Seeing the bright lights and the dirt;
Feeling the fast pulse of other people's money
On Tunjungan.

And though we didn't get to visit
Puchetcherie, island of easy whores,
We could believe
That it was there.
Next morning by the roadside
‘17.8.1945’ and ‘Panca Sila’
Loomed in fading paint
On village gateposts;

And in the town
The usual memorials
Stared rigidly in bronze
And grimy stone.

Nothing else to show the casual eye
That this was where
The men fought the tanks, shouting
‘Merdeka atau mati! Freedom or death!’

Someone remembered 1965,
But nobody talked
About the packed truck-loads of the PKI
Hacked to pieces by the crowd.
Leaving Jakarta

Cramped into the narrow no-man's land
Between the railway
And the great Istiqlal Mosque
Lies the long suburb of the poor:

A thin continuous line of shacks
Like children's cubby-houses
Put together from the gutter rubbish of the city,
The grey detritus of Jakarta.

It all slides smoothly past:
Corrugated iron, cardboard, plastic,
Palm-leaf matting, newspaper,
Animals and people.

From the windows
Of the slowly moving Bandung train
We look at them
And they look back at us.

We cannot hear
What the young men are saying;
We cannot smell the excrement and filth
Rotting in the clogged canal,
Or the stench
Of oil and money
Hanging over
The Pertamina gardens.

Eyes lock and flick away,
The train gathers speed.
The white and empty bubble of the dome
Floats above us all.
Yogyakarta: Practice Session at the Kraton

The Dancing Master in the Kraton, the Royal Palace, Is old. His long face is fine-boned, gentle, Strong. He moves like a boy. In his waist-band He wears a warrior's kris.

Under the peaked roof in the wide pavilion The lines of dancers, men and women, sway And poise to the flowing music of the gamelan. Their supple feet are bare.

The women watch the way their selendangs, Their trailing sashes, fall. Sweat trickles down The still faces of the men. These are the sons And daughters of the Sultan,

His wives and servants. Under the Master's eye They shape their bodies to an ancient grace. Tourists crowd the shallow steps to watch Them at their royal work.

The Kraton wall crumbles but still stands. Almost thirty years ago, as the bombs Fell in the city and the tanks squatted before His palace gate, the Sultan,

Speaking no doubt the Dutch he'd learned in Holland, Politely asked the enemy to lift Their siege. The tanks turned back. The kris slept In its sheath; the dance went on.
Yogya Morning

Half-past three.
In the street outside
To the steady, quiet music of their bells
Two ox-carts slowly pass.
Over the wall, under the dim street-light
Their long towering loads of empty baskets
Loom like the high sterns
Of Chinese junks.

The earliest muadzin begins,
His clear drawn-out wavering cry
As confident as the first crow
Of the family rooster
Calling the sun up from beneath the world
To warm our garden.

Easy in this cool pre-dawn darkness
Not to notice
The PA system on the distant mosque;
To forget that within the hour
The street walls will be shaking
With the mad noise of morning traffic.

An early motor-cycle
Dopplers past our gates and dies away
Into the waking city.
A World of Sense and Use

I. M. James McAuley

Two long-horned buffalo up to their silky knees
In coffee-coloured mud strain at the plough.
The wet bodies of the men who urge them on
Gleam in the light rain.

All about them lie flat brilliant sheets
Of water interspersed with fields of rice:
Under the shafting sun the young crops glow
With the green fire of new life.

A group of reapers moves across a field
Of standing grain; threshers beat the sheaves;
Stooping girls in conical straw hats
Set fresh plants in the mud.

In every flooded terrace busy ducks
Paddle and dive; boys with long sticks herd
Their geese into the crops; while further off
Tall white herons stand

And gaze at their reflections. It is a world
Of living images: palm-trees, clouds, the faint
Blue cone of Merapi, Fire Mountain—all
Swim upside down in water
And waver in the ripples from the plough.
The husk breaks on the grain. Behind us now
Dancing Prambanan’s carved and spiring flame
Burns in the morning sun;

While Buddha, motionless beneath his bell,
Looks out across the plain where that great wheel
Of stone, Borobudur, forever turns
And is forever still.
Revenants

*Mais le vert paradis des amours enfantines...*

Charles Baudelaire
Verandahs

for Monique Delamotte

They don’t build houses like that any more—not
With verandahs the way they used to: wide verandahs
Running round three sides of the place, with vines
Growing up the posts and along the eaves—passion-fruit, grape, wistaria—and maiden-hair fern in pots,
And a waterbag slung from the roof in the shade with the water
Always cool and clean and tasting of canvas.

Comfortable worn cane chairs and shabby lounges,
Beds for the kids to sleep in, a ping-pong table,
A cage for the cockatoo the boys had caught
Twenty years ago by the creek, a box for the cat
And a blanket for the old blind dog to doze on—
There was room for everything and everybody,
And you lived out on the verandah through the summer.

That’s where the talking happened—over a cup
Of tea with fresh sponge cake and scones, or a drink
(A beer for the men and a shandy for the girls)
On Sunday afternoons or warm dry evenings:
Do you remember, it always began, do you
Remember?—How it was Grandpa who forged the hook
They used to catch the biggest cod in the Lachlan—

And didn’t we laugh when Nell in her English voice
Said: ‘Hark at the rain’—And who was the bloke that married
Great-aunt Edith and drove the coach from Burke?
And weren’t they working up Queensland way in that pub
Frank Gardiner ran, and nobody twigged who he was
Even though they called him the Darkie—and they never
Found it, did they, the gold: nobody found it.
And they never will—just like that reef at Wyalong:
Nothing but quartz and mullock. But the fishing
Was good in those days, Tom, they'd say: remember
The ducks, the way we'd watch them in their hundreds
Flying along the billabong at sunset?
You won't see that anymore—they're all fished out,
The waterholes, and the mallee-fowl have gone.

And in the dusk and under a rising moon
The yarning voices would drift and pause like a river
Eddying past the ears of the drowsing children
As they settled down in their beds and watched the possums
Playing high in the branches—and when they opened
Their eyes it would somehow always be morning with sunlight
Flooding level and bright along the verandah.
She remembers the first Aeroplane to fly from the North to the South of Britain

There were white violets in the grass, and in the hedgerows
Wild strawberries; and going through the wood
—In the dingle—there was a bank, such a bank,
Covered with primroses: we picked all the flowers
For Aunt Betty, who made them into wine.
And the first thing you saw, going to the cottage,
Was the pig-pen—with the pig waiting to be killed
For Christmas. And when the aeroplane came at last,
Flying low along the river, over Quatt
And Danesford, Grandfather Baker shook his fist
At it, saying: 'Mark my words: no good
Will come of such things.' And I remember the woods
And the scent of white violets in the grass:
Nothing in all my life has smelled so sweet.
Marshmallow Summer

‘Hare, hare, God send thee care’—Old Charm

i
It was a green world, that summer
When I was six and the tall
Marshmallows like a jungle filled
The bottom of our yard.

Bending and breaking the tough stems
I made tunnels, secret paths and clearings
Shaded by the broad umbrellas
Of strong-smelling leaves.

From the back step my mother called
Called and called again
Shading her eyes
Against the lunch-time sun.

Hidden beneath the leaves I watched
Until she turned inside
Then ran up shouting: ‘Here I am!
Look! I was here all the time.’

ii
Outside the grey paling fence
There were other grasses—
Spear-grass, with the corkscrew seeds
Like hair-fine springs of coppery wire,
Shivery-grass, crow’s-foot,
Parrot-grass, with the flat heads
Of bearded seeds like feathers,
And sour-grass, with the yellow flowers,
Bright green spotted clover leaves
And long stems that we crunched between our teeth
To taste the salty juice.

Our bare feet
Wore paths between the pale tussocks
And the slender swaying clumps
Of sunbleached grass.
The red baked earth was smooth
And the fine dust silky
Between our toes.

In the hot mid-afternoon
We dawdled quietly, not talking
Half-asleep until
The big hare
Burst up right beside us
Out of his form
Almost knocking us off our feet.

Hearts thudding
We shouted, waved sticks,
Ran impotently behind him
As with great zig-zag darting leaps
He raced away across the open paddock.

In the form
The flattened grass beneath our hands
Was still warm, still kept the shape
Of the sleeping hare.
Held up by the front paws
With his back toes
Just scraping the floor
The hare seemed to be as long
As I was tall.

Dark blood showed between his teeth
And filled his nostrils.
There were red holes in his flanks and shoulders
Where my father's seven bullets
Had struck home.

Patches of fur moved the wrong way
As I ran my fingers
Over the cool stiffening body.

Only the ears—
Large, firm, smooth,
And on the inside velvety and dark—
Still seemed alive:
Ready to spring up
Tall and quivering
At the faintest sound.
When the brown snake
Six feet long if it was an inch
And thick as a man's wrist
Rippled over the path near the wood-heap
My father killed it with the axe
And draped the body
Like a length of heavy rope
Over the paling fence.

Then he took the scythe
And levelled all the marshmallows.
The Death of Damiens

or

l'Après-midi des Lumières

Place de Grève, Paris, 28 March 1757

The man's left leg
Is torn away at last.
It drags behind the stallion
Over the cobbles.

The waiting crowd
Packed like cattle into the square
Clap, roar and stamp their feet.
The man kisses the crucifix.

From a high window
Casanova and his friend,
Six-times-a-night Tiretta,
Watch with their women.

Immaculate in white,
Henri Sanson with glowing pincers
Plucks out a lump of flesh
From the man's bared chest.

His five assistant executioners
Moving like priests
Pour in the boiling oil,
The molten lead.

The stench fills the square.
The lathered horses,
Jerking under the whip,
Strain at the heavy cables.
Tiretta, unbuttoned,
Lifts from behind the long silk skirt
Of the Pope’s niece.
The other leg comes off.

Robert Damiens screams.
Casanova, cupping the warm young breast
Of Mademoiselle de la Meure,
Turns her virginal head away.

‘Animals, animals!’ he mutters
Smiling. ‘Look, my dear:
The dying madman’s hair
Has all gone white.’
Letter from the South

*Der Einsame im Herbst*


i

Midnight.
The dripping pinoaks and the claret ash
Burn with the first fires of autumn.

Alone I drink
And listen to the voices
Singing of the bright wine
Blue mist above the lake
Absence and farewell.

Where are you now
*Erdgeist, Kobold,*
Black Welsh troll with the big head
And serious laughing mouth
*Klein Beethoven*
Smelling of flagon red and garlic?

The house is warm and quiet.
My children sleep upstairs
And yours now wake perhaps
In some lost Alpine village
Or deep Swiss valley
Choked with snow and rectitude
Where you still drink and teach
‘Saying *Yes* to life’.
Always the teacher.
‘They had to turn him round,’
You said,
Your pale face sweaty with alcohol,
In the silence after the music,
‘So that he could see them standing,
Clapping and cheering—
The poor deaf bastard
Couldn’t hear a thing.’
Your eyes, half-blind without your glasses,
Shone with tears

Three o’clock in the morning

The Canberra frost made us shudder to the bone
When we went outside.

Jetzt nehmt den Wein!
Too long
Since we drained our glasses
Shouting with the trumpets
That life was dark
And death

Or drank our beer
Talking all day of Joyce and Prince Kropotkin
Order love and chaos
Nietzsche staring into his own abyss
In the pale sunlight
On the Zürich See.
Lasst mich betrunken sein!
The Zürich-Kilchberg ferry
Costs one franc
Each way.

iv
On windless days
After the first frost
The limitless blue sky still shines
Ewig... ewig...
And the cold air
Tastes sweet in the lungs.

Against the dark hills
The poplars stand like yellow flames
Smokeless under the clear sun
Burning but unconsumed.
Lonely old scrubber, dreaming in your empty house
Through the long hot Alexandrian nights
Of the gaudy past and its ineffectual heroes—
Antony wrecked at Actium, young Caesarion
Condemned unheard, forgotten gamblers, kings,
Poets, athletes, all on the dog-eared margins
Of history—and carefully bringing out like silk
Scarves wrapped in tissue your handful of memories:
The back-alley encounters of your youth, all your casual
Lost boys—with what wry dignity you looked
Back over that desert remembering its rare oases!
But they were unfailing wells: it was their water
That gave you life, moistened your throat and kept
You singing on your endless voyage to Ithaca.
On the Zattere ai Gesuati

for Ann Berriman and Robert Owen

This limpid morning air
Is pure prosecco: rains
And the big tides
Have flushed the city clean.

We tell ourselves
That we see Venice for the first time now
As Canaletto saw it,
Shimmering and translucent.

This is a day to savour
And to squander:
A day that is somehow loose and floating free
Like a bubble on the cold stream at Treviso,

Or like the rapt and dreaming Virgin
And her ecstatic bearded saints
Drifting up and through the infinite blue
Of Tiepolo’s great ceiling.

So let us sit and order our gelati
Knowing that even if we eat them slowly
They will not melt. Today
Is ours—today we’ll close our eyes

To all the sad graffiti
Calling for Death to this and Death to that:
We’ll read instead
The one that says: ‘Viva!’
Viva una sessualità
Libera e diversa!
And shout it to the sad-eyed ghosts
Of Henry James and Ruskin.

It's true of course that we shall never be
As once we were
And that the stones of Venice
Are sinking, slowly sinking.

But today we celebrate
The long-awaited news
That Minimalism, that miraculous bird,
Has disappeared at last up its own orifice:

The Subject,
Naked on a shell like Venus,
Has been reborn, and Art
Has rediscovered Nature.

The bubbles in our glasses
Rise and burst.
Let's have the other bottle: there'll be time
For us to take the boat and cross the water

And in the small church of Santa Maria
Del Giglio listen to Vivaldi's oboe
Soar free above the strings
And float forever.
Free Fall

It is the moment
When the child lifts his face
Frail as a flower
Inevitable as an avalanche
To the stooping stranger,

Or when she turns
Lightly toward you in your arms
Like a fish turning
In a wave
Shaking her hair free
Smiling,

Or when, kicking the 'plane
Away,
He steps forward into the air,
Turns his face toward the earth
And slowly
Spreading his arms like wings
Floats
Into man's oldest dream.
Dream Poems

I

Snow

Coming awake to snow on a dark road,
A creaking saddle, the swaying steaming horse,
Huddled shapes of the two guards behind him.

Swirl and flurry of light wet snow, luminous
Against the dark. Smothered thud of hooves.
Voices half-heard. Where are we? Why am I here?

Then on the looming shoulder of the mountain
Above him the grunting stagger, slip and fall
Of one guard’s horse, down with a whinnying scream.

Get down get down get down under the rifles
Gleaming black in the thickening snow. Then running
Falling running again and stumbling almost

Floating down the hillside, shots, dim cries
Fading into the freezing dark. And then
Moonlight and on the valley floor a house

Standing alone among its familiar trees
With the remembered river running beside it
Under the humped stone bridge. He walks to the door.

Is he coming home? Is she waiting warm in the big
White bed? There are no lights. Has she gone at last?
He wakes as he puts his cold hand to the latch.
II

Mornings

In the Greek islands the summer morning sun
Wakes us through our shutters; our supple skin
Beads with sweat as we play across the bed.

Sweet coffee, bread, grapes, love and poetry
For breakfast. We read Sappho and the ageing young
Poet, knowing we are luckier than they.

The village walls are white, the flashing sea
Deep blue and wine-dark—yes, wine-dark at last—
Beneath the cliffs. This is where love was born.

It begins to rain: the scent of lemon blossoms
Is everywhere. We forget the woman who died
Of cholera; Byron's brain bursting his skull;

The locked, burning church. Last night we danced
In the square. The moon slid west, the Pleiades
Glittered and sank; but we were not alone.

Alive, exhausted, satisfied we turn
Now to each other with a tender fierceness saying:
'What is your name? I love you. When

Did we meet? Where is your hand? In the dark
I drift into different sunlight awake and dreaming
That I am lost with you in the Greek islands.
Revenants

They came to me at night
With forgiving hands:
Those I had betrayed
And those who had betrayed me.

You were among them
Moving towards me
Through the living and the dead
Offering me a book.

The name on the cover meant nothing
The picture of the author
Like a painting by Magritte
Showed no face.

In the gathering darkness
I could not see
The pages—but I knew
They held your poems

The poems you have never written.
In the silence
Our lips touched cool and soft
As the mouths of sleeping children.
'It’s no use, Medea,’ she said to herself, ‘it’s just
No use trying to fight it: one of the gods—
I’d like to know which—must have it in for you.
This must be what they mean when they talk about love,
—This, or something like it. Why else should everything
My father tells me to do seem so impossible?
(And Daddy is impossible!) Why should I feel
Frightened sick at the thought of things going wrong
For him—this fellow I’ve barely seen? Yes, why
Do I suddenly shake with fear? There’s a fire in your heart,
Poor kid, that you can’t put out—and it’s no good saying
You don’t want to be like this. I’ve never known
Anything like this force that’s pinning me down.
What I long for is crazy: I can see
What I ought to do—and I’m doing just the reverse.
Look, you’re a king’s daughter for godsake! How
Could you ever let yourself get hooked like this—
By a total stranger? And as for marriage... this
Is your country, princess, this is where you should find
Your love. And it’s up to the gods, whether he lives
Or dies. But, oh god, let him live! For this
At least I can pray without even being in love...'}
The Island

Always the falling water from the four 
Springs bubbling in the deep vaults of the cave; 
The fire glowing upon the hearth; and from outside 
The never-ending sound of wind and wave

Beating around the island's rocky coast: 
This he remembers—and the drifting smell 
Of wood-smoke, pine and cedar, and her voice 
Murmuring like the sea-sound in a shell

Beside him in the darkness on their bed, 
Or singing with her women as the sun 
Streamed each morning through the vines that wreathed 
The cavern mouth, making the leaves burn green

Against the vacant blue of sea and sky. 
The day was his—and each day was the same: 
He'd pace the cliffs and look with hungry eyes 
Across the water to the east where home

And wife lay somewhere, and half-blind with tears 
He'd scan the world's edge for the passing sail 
That never came. But if the day was his 
The night was hers: and as the evening fell

He'd turn with hastening feet back to the cave. 
First they would eat and drink, then by the fire 
She'd strip and bathe him: at her kindling touch 
The years dropped from him, and as pure desire
Flooded his being 'Sailor,' she would cry,
'This island is the navel of the world,
This cave its centre; and upon this bed
Lies love's own vessel waiting to be filled.

Give me your rising mast that towers now
Tall as a tree, and let me step it here;
Unfurl your sail, and let this mounting wave
Launch us into that sea without a shore

Where we may ride forever through the night
The long ground-swell of love, together borne
Across the fragrant darkness till we find
Our island waiting for us in the dawn.'
From the Temenos

Temenos: A piece of ground surrounding or adjacent to a temple; a sacred enclosure or precinct.

OED

Some sothly teachyth to lye, but historye representynge the thynges lyke unto the wordes embraceth al utylyte and prouffite.

William Caxton
Apollo on Delos

Sun, rock, sea, the weathering stones
Of your dead city where the mule and goat
Scrabble among the dust and thistles—there
Is little more on this

Small island. From its plinth a phallus rears
A broken stump at nothing. Lions crouch
And snarl in toothless silence as they gaze
Towards your sacred lake.

The lake is dry—the meat stripped from the bones:
The dancing men, the singing girls, the gold,
The ivory, the groaning beasts that bled
And smoked upon your altars,

The full ships crowding the harbour—all are gone:
Vanished like that serene archaic head
Whose jewelled eyes threw back the sunset light
Over the temple rooftops.

The torso and the pelvis still remain.
Sunburnt and dazzled through dark glasses now
We stare up at the huge blocks rising white
Against blue sea and sky.

Someone has hacked away your root of love
And generation. A bare girl in a pink
Bikini lightly touches the ravaged groin:
It is your island still.
From the Temenos of Artemidoros at Thera

This limestone rock-face falls a thousand feet
To where the glass-green clear Aegean washes
The beach—that long hot ribbon of black
   Volcanic sand and pebbles.

Small sounds float up—the wasp buzz of a bike,
A car-horn's distant bugling. Towels, boats,
Umbrellas, tiny figures brilliant as in
   A postcard dot the shore

With flecks of colour. No one from this height
Can see the grey scurf of plastic, paper,
Tin and glass that litters the sea's edge.
   It is our world and yet

Another: here the sun-warmed lichened stone
Is rough beneath our fingers as we trace
The letters cut two thousand years ago
   Beside the bird the leaping

Dolphin and the lion that guard the bones
   Of Admiral Artemidoros, servant
To Poseidon, god of wind and ocean, shaker
   Of the earth. Today

The earth is still. A bronze lizard flickers
Across the path and through the yellow grass.
The faint sharp scent of thyme and oregano
   Fills the summer air.
The Dorian soldiers and their naked boys
Who danced before Apollo must have smelled
This too—with sweat, oil, perfume and the musky
Odour of spent love:

Something to think of on the day their iron
Failed them and the enemy spears drove home.
An incised phallus points the way to where
The officers were quartered.

Below this temple-platform swallows dart
And swoop—impossibly high above the bars
And discos where the suntanned kids will drink
And dance tonight and later

Make their easy love beside the sea.
Beyond them in the vast blue crater-bay
A wisp of smoke drifts from a sleeping cone
Of burned and blackened lava.
Sketches from Herodotus

I

Amasis

A crude bastard, Amasis—fond of a joke,
The grog and the girls—but he was the one to show
The Pharaoh that we meant business. And we knew
We'd picked the right man for the job when he took
The helmet from us, grinned, and wore it like
A crown. Nothing could stop him after the day
That smarmy courtier tried to tell him to go
Back home, and Amasis rose in his saddle, broke
Wind, and said: 'Take that message back to the King,'
We won and we made him King, but he stayed the same:
Worked hard, played hard—took life as a game.
'The bow will break,' he said, 'if it's not unstrung.
Drink up, my friends. The Nile will flood again,'
He died in his bed. Nobody starved in his reign.
Feasting, songs, debating, games: the whole
Extravaganza was staged by Cleisthenes
To choose his daughter a husband. In those days
When time meant nothing great men did things in style.
It went on for twelve months. To try their skill
And luck the wealthiest young men in Greece
Gathered at glittering Sicyon. The prize
Was won by Hippocleides—and, with a smile,
Lost in the same night. Drunk with wine and joy
At the last grand feast he danced—first on the floor,
Then on the table and then with legs in the air.
‘Stop,’ shouted his host, ‘or you’ll dance your wife away.’
‘I couldn’t care less. When you’re upside down,’ he cried,
‘The world looks fine. Old man, you can keep your bride.’
Pythius, richest man in the empire, must have thought
He had it made when Xerxes, the great king,
Enlisting money and men for war came calling
With his army. Even kings can be bought,
And Pythius knew the price. 'My Lord, I find
I'm worth about four million in gold. It's yours,'
He said, 'with my five warrior sons, to use
As you see fit.' Said Xerxes: 'Be my friend.'
'Then there is one request I wish to make.'
'I grant it.' 'Let me send with you only four
Boys.' Xerxes smiled: 'Your son shall miss the war.
Soldiers: split him from crotch to head and take
Each half and bury it by the road.' His army
Through that hot gate marched for Thermopylae.
IV

The Three Hundred

Somehow we always think of them as young—
Naked in the dawn light outside their wall
Before that colossal army, tossing the ball,
Wrestling, laughing and loving, combing their long
Bright, fresh-washed hair—but the picture may be wrong.
The three hundred Leonidas picked were all
Middle-aged men with sons—so, when they fell,
Tearing with teeth and hands at the Persians long
After spear and sword were broken, each man knew
His name and blood would live. From his high throne
Xerxes for three days watched the distant show—
Shaking with rage and terror as his ten
Thousand Immortals charged, faltered and broke
Like water as they thundered on that rock.
The Cups from Vapheio

for Richard St. Clair Johnson

All that gold
Buried so long
Under the dark earth
With the dead:

Masks to cover
The shrivelled face,
Bracelets and rings
For withered wrists and fingers,

And for the stiff
Grasping hands the hilts
Of swords, the curved
Handles of the wine cups.

How could the dead man greet us
As we break through
To the beehive tomb
Letting in air and sunlight?

Under the fine wire, the beaten leaf,
Pommel and hilt have crumbled;
Time has eaten into the bronze:
His blades are useless.

But his twin cups
Covered with bulls and leaping men
And cattle grazing in the fields
Would not fail him:
They stand now, bright and perfect,
Waiting to be filled with wine
As they were filled
And emptied in the high-roofed tomb

When his people sent their king
Into the long night with his gold
And the living
Took their last drink with the dead.
Archaeology: A Triptych

I

Troy

Burned earth on Hector’s bones and on the gold
Cup moulded to the shape of Helen’s breast:
They wait in vain for Schliemann’s loving spade.
II

From the Valley of the Tigris
for Hermann Eihlers

An inch-long piece of stone broom-handle: hard
Cold, polished, with figures deeply cut
Into its surface; you rolled it on the green
Modelling clay and small lions and a god
Stood sharply out—crisp as the monarch’s head
Upon a coin hot from the mint. ‘A man
Used this,’ you said, ‘four thousand years ago—
Some magistrate or governor.’ You dropped
The stone seal in my hand: it felt compact,
Heavy, business-like. My fingers traced—
As each day his had done—the clean carved marks
Of power. The pulse of history burned my skin.
Ill

South Coast Work-site

Two bent trees and a grassy cliff-top frame
Blue air and brilliant sea, thunder-purple
And green beyond the rock shelf where it breaks.
Between the trees my son and daughter squat,
Searching the grass for chips and flakes of stone,
Their fair hair lifting in the wind. Just so,
I think, the craftsmen must have crouched and held
Scraper and axe, and shaped the cutting edge.
This collection of recent poetry by R. F. Brissenden confirms him as one of the foremost Australian poets of his generation. The poems are strikingly and unmistakably Australian, yet their mood is never parochial. It is a compelling and haunting collection, put together with an assured and accurate hand.

As well as three previous books of poems, Winter Matins, Elegies and Building a Terrace, R. F. Brissenden has published a critical study of the eighteenth-century novel, Virtue in Distress, and a number of other monographs. He is joint editor of the series, Studies in the Eighteenth Century, and has also written on American and Australian literature. He is Reader in English at The Australian National University.