



J. J. Bray
oems
1972-79

J. J. Bray — whose third collection of poetry this is — was born and educated in Adelaide. After a distinguished career at the South Australian Bar he was Chief Justice of South Australia from 1967 to 1978 and in 1968 became Chancellor of the University of Adelaide. He is now retired apart from his University appointment and a post on the Libraries Board of South Australia.

J. J. Bray began to write poetry seriously in the 1950s and acknowledges the important influence of the late C. J. Jury on his work. Bray's long standing affection for the classics is evident in this collection.

His two previous books of poems, *Poems* and *Poems 1961-1971*, were published in 1962 and 1972. He is also the author of three verse plays.

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and Norwalk, Conn., USA 1979

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To Peter Ward and Dimitri Theodoratos
my friends, neighbours and guardians

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Epidaurus 1974

We entered the great semicircle, we ascended vertiginous steps.
We threaded a narrow causeway through tiers of stony slabs.
We found our places and cushions in the fourteen thousand crowd.
For that night the Festival opened and the ancient theatre strained
To accommodate Greeks and tourists and some of the rulers too,
Flanked by guards with tommy-guns, drawn back in the wings of the stage.
For Greece was then ruled by tyrants, as in the days of Pisistratus,
Though far less adroit than he: middle functionary fascism:
Colonels not generals: submanagers not directors: head prefects
not headmasters;
Suburban style, familiar phenomena: callisthenics and concentration camps.
And eternal summer gilded, in selected isles of Greece,
The chains of their detainees. They took as their emblem the phoenix,
Though possessing none of his attributes, save the bent for self-destruction.
So they made their gesture to culture and came to be seen and bored.
Perhaps they should have paid more attention, for the play was
Prometheus Bound.

The play moved on to its climax. To the hero bound on the rock
Comes Hermes, here presenting the eternal pimp of power,
The seducer into submission, the softener-up for the sell-out.
'You can't win. Zeus holds the aces. You were mad to befriend mankind.
Be sensible, do what he bids you, before worse things befall you.
And do it now. Don't compel me to a second tedious journey.'
Then, from the audience, hisses: one hiss at first, then several: the esses
gather force.
And Prometheus replies from his fetters, the great words of defiance ring out.
Then the audience started to cheer. They stood and they shouted Bravo.
And like a horse to the spur, the actor rose to the role,
Waiting the end of each bout of applause before he spoke again,
Like the surf on the Sydney beaches, when each wave crashes and breaks
And then rolls on in silence till the roar of its louder successor:
Such rapport between audience and actor, neither's orbit crossing the other's.
'I will never submit to Zeus. I have seen gods raised up and cast down.
There were rulers in Heaven before him. His reign will have its end.
Though he shatter the world about me, I will not bow to his will.'
And then the lightning struck him and the rock sank down below.

The Greeks stood up on the benches. They were clapping and cheering and shouting.

Some tourists caught the infection and joined in, they hardly knew why.

The guards were looking for orders, but what could the rulers do?

Could they part the goats from the sheep or pluck out the tares from the wheat?

At that audience smacks would be shears for Greece's invisible exports.

So they did nothing and left in a hurry and four weeks later they fell.

But I left with high steps, for the moment convinced of two propositions,

Propositions I had always hoped and sometimes believed to be true,

One concerning the power of the arts, one concerning the nature of man.

The Blue Crane

A bijou garden in a civic park
Hard by the threatening traffic's asphalt track:
Cascades and English shrubs and stepping stones
And rustic seats with willows at their back:

Geraniums, parterres and peonies,
And bridle paths in obese curlicues:
Slow sluggish streams—you cannot call them creeks—
By one of which last week I saw him muse.

Incongruous exile: cloak of indigo,
Piped neck with snowy narrow Norman head,
Spurred feet screwed on thin legs of jointed mail:
The bird is a noble, John Shaw Neilson said.

He watched me near and moved some yards apart,
In wary courtesy but no dismay,
Not as suspecting me till cause was shown,
But rather yielding me the right of way.

Noble: but yet I wished him far from here.
For say Sir Lancelot rode, armed cap-a-pie,
Into a clearway out of Camelot,
How strong his claim to continuity?

Late May

I heard the cricket cry against the frost
His tiny protest, valiantly in vain.
I heard him answered by the klaxon frog,
That harbinger of cold and mud and rain.

I saw the last mosquito's languid flight,
Spent of her shriek for blood and summer rage.
I let her pass unslapped with a salute
To all the toothless malice of old age.

Shuttered against the winter's annual siege,
The earth contracts into her hidden store.
Which of her children's straining eyes will see
The green relieving army semaphore?

Address to Winter: Mid-September

Pack up and go, you odious hag,
And broomstick off to northern skies.
Relieve me of your crown of twigs,
Your frosty breath, your hailstone eyes.

Astride the equinox you drip.
Will you wheeze on till Christmas too?
Your hundred days have gone and passed.
How long before your Waterloo?

Still like a rapist who demands
Breakfast in bed, you sprawl and slack.
Go, drool dry ice in Labrador.
Get your stiff fingers off my back.

September

Winter, farewell, that northward with your chills,
Ungainly snow-goose, flap to freeze the Seine,
Though in take-off you shed some icy quills
That rattle down on us in gale and rain.
And welcome, Spring, you gawky turkey chick,
Skittering and screeching in uncertain race,
Now starring us with mud in backward kick,
Now charming us with turns of clownish grace.
The year is cyclic and its signs rewind
As long as Noah's covenant holds true.
My life is linear, each bird's term defined,
And emu summer, pheasant autumn, too.
Should I by spring or winter be beguiled?
For one unapt, to one unreconciled.

The Dandelions

I greet you, brash and brassy flowers,
Advance publicity of spring
Some cosmic advertiser's pen
Has vulgarly been scattering.

Thousands of small heraldic suns
With sable centres rayed in gold
Stamp on the green Australian shield
Their bright endorsements manifold.

Dent de Lion—tooth of lion—
From thence the dictionary proclaims
Your name derives. What imagist
Was playing mediaeval games?

But then you're suspect, laxative.
Your vulgar name is piss-a-bed.
They say you give the cows bad breath
And so the mower lops your head.

Yet all the same I hear with thanks
You trumpeting with brazen blare
That winter seeks an armistice,
The jets of spring are in the air.

The Pigeons of Paris

Trim, glossy, disputatious when they meet,
Preening for love, or dinner in the street,
Flouting the traffic with a brush of wings,
Defiling laurelled heads of marble kings,
Type of this city in their burnished flight,
Save that they lack the intellectual light.

The Whitebait

A plastic bag encoffins some six score,
Indicting me with mild and mournful eye.
The infant school, demurely finning by,
Draw to the light that lures them from the shore.
Enrolled in mesh, through lethal air they pour,
Scarce learned to live, in gasping stabs they die.
Then, caked in batter, in deep oil they fry.
We crunch and swim them down with cold Carte d'Or.
Suppose some giant galactic gourmet race,
Fishers of men, with huge magnetic nets
Trawled us from earth, exhaling bloody foam
Beyond the air, deep-frozen, shot through space,
By cooks like cliffs, on stoves with oil-well jets,
Deep-fried in pans wide as St Peter's dome.

Amphibian Reflection

Some are who like to wallow or to soar:
Either the cliff-top or the quagmire floor.
But, oh! the mud clots clog the eagle's flight,
And crest and beak provoke the tadpoles' spite.

A Maxim from Sir Walter

*(See Scott's Journal under 21 January 1827 and in several other places.
See also Cervantes, Don Quixote, Book II c. 23)*

A pithy apophthegm my mind bombards.
Scott and Cervantes gave it high regards.
Consult his Journal for the northern bard's.
'Patience, cousin, and shuffle the cards.'

Don Quixote passed the cave's enchanted guards
And heard it underground six hundred yards.
But I think that was one of his canards.
'Patience, cousin, and shuffle the cards.'

The game's pace now advances, now retards.
The hands Life deals, and smoothly interlards,
Palming off slacks and softs for toughs and hards.
'Patience, cousin, and shuffle the cards.'

Our tricks he deftly scoops up and discards,
Then plays, our tubes in sludge, our teeth in shards,
The ace of death. 'Game's over. Kind regards.'
'Patience, cousin, and shuffle the cards.'

A Commination

I have never been greatly enchanted with the automobile.
I knew its archaic era, a high-stepped box on wheels,
Snorting out steam from its front, and smoke from its nether end,
Rattling and roaring and retching, with a murderous crank in its mouth,
And even then as a child I disliked and despised it,
And vastly preferred my pony, with his warm flanks gripped by my thighs,
Or the draft horse, gigantic and gentle, patiently plodding in dray-shafts,
And I cursed the combustion engine for breaking the bronze age bond
First forged somewhere in central Asia, when some primitive horse-taming
Hector

First mounted his shaggy steed and they moved and responded together but
they shall return.

And again I remember the car in its sweeping and splendid Renaissance,
When suave as a seal and sleek as a swan it rode the surf of the bitumen.
And now I behold its baroque, in diverse and exuberant patterns.
And I like it no better. I think I dislike it most
When I stand in the rain at the corner, clamped by four red malevolent lights,
That glare like the eyes of Charon, when he shakes his oar at the shades,
Repelling importunate boarders who lack the fare for the ferry,
And I turn up my collar and crouch in it, dripping and dour,
While the cars swish past me and splash me with dirty rainwater arcs,
And I stand and bear it and wait, but I say as they pass,
'Drench me and stench me and lame me and maim me and slay me. Still
Though you may outlive me, yet my species' chance of survival
Is evens at least, while you are doomed to extinction,
In a few decades to be one with the dinosaur and the dodo.
When the claws of a ravening century have ripped from the thrifty earth
The last of her hidden hoards, you will moulder in malnutrition.
For the gods have hardened their hearts and I think of the book of Isaiah:
Your chassis shall be linings for cow sheds and your gear-levers beaten to
tuning forks,
And your seat-belts be turned into surcingles and your tyres converted
to condoms,
And the bitumen weals on the breast of the earth shall peel off like scabs,
And soursobs shall shoot through the rifts and beetles breed in the crossovers,
And the cornfields shall cover the carparks and the broken trunk of the bowser
be wreathed with the leaves of the vine,

And the screech of the brakes shall be heard no more in the land and the sound
of the siren be still,
Neither shall we know jeeps any more. Amen! Amen! Amen!

Invocation

Terminus, god of the boundaries, keeper of fence and line,
See to my life's compartments, lest their colours cross and combine,
Or the springs and wells of the passions be choked with professional dust,
Or the laurels and vines of the Muses be strangled by tendrils of lust.

Janus, god of beginnings, and so of endings too,
Looking forwards and backwards, holding future and past in review,
Sever my chapters cleanly, clear one's feet from his foregoer's skirt,
Grant penultimate Indian summer, and let the last scene be curt.

Lords of the mete-wand and hour-glass, dealers in fortunes and lucks,
Stamping illusions of pattern on the queasy cosmic flux —,
Time is an endless ladder, space is an endless plain —,
Carve me a gracious portion, cut it along my grain.

To Sappho

There, beginning lyrical verse's roll-call,
You appear, Sappho, at the summit starring,
Coolly demonstrating in Europe's dawn that
 Women can make it.

Shining through fragments of papyrus dredged from
Sands, or curt quotations in dry grammarians,
You reveal girls, flowers and desire and Aphro-
 dite the golden.

Moon and Pleiads set in the sleepless midnight.
Brides depart groomwards in a rage of parting.
You record loves, daughter and girls and brother,
 Husband unmentioned.

Scandalous fablers feign that you jumped to death for
Love of Phaon: worse, the professors etch you
Floridly ruling some Edwardian ladies'
 Finishing college.

Clumsily I grapple with English Sapphics.
Quantity, stress, how to resolve the conflicts?
Pardon me, Sappho, to mishandle thus your
 Delicate metre.

Your serene fame, like to the highest apple
Told of by you, reachable nowhere by men,
Never will be harvested by the gardener,
 Time, in his basket.

The Story of Iphis
After Ovid, Metamorphoses IX 666-797
Some distance after

Part I

Some centuries before the Trojan war,
There dwelt at Cnossus, near the Cretan shore,
Ligdus, a worthy man of humble birth,
But one whose means fell far below his worth.
This good man to his wife, whose time was near,
Spoke thus: 'Two things I pray the gods, my dear,
A safe childbirth and childbirth of a boy.
Sons only fill a father's heart with joy.
Girls are weak, peevish, sly and void of sense,
Idle at home, betrothed a vast expense.
I grieve we can't afford this luxury.
A girl must be exposed. So I decree'.

He said. The tears of both in plenty came.
And Telethusa—thus the matron's name—
In vain implored her husband to relent.
The heart was moved, the manly will unbent.

And then one midnight, near delivery,
She woke from sleep and saw, or seemed to see,
The goddess Isis standing by her bed.
The crescent moon adorned her regal head,
And blazing wheat-ears in a golden band.
The mystic sistrum dangled from her hand.
Around her stood the Egyptian sacred crew,
One god to bark, another one to mew,
The dappled bull, the god with silent breath,
The asp that swells with soporific death.
The goddess spoke: 'Oh, Telethusa mine,
Fear not to baulk your husband's cruel design.
I marvel at men's arrogance and greed
That deem our wombs mere lodgings for their seed
And look with scorn on a potential wife.
Not thus discharge the secret springs of life.
When a new birth is kindled in the dark
We give the fuel, they only strike the spark.

Happy the mothers of the golden age.
 They held supreme the centre of the stage,
 Ere servile women first learned to applaud
 The novel names of husband, father, lord.
 Then theirs alone to say what child to rear.
 No sire in name or person need appear,
 His part as trifling as the spider's mate:
 Happy, if he escape that spider's fate.
 And theirs alone to shape the boy to grow—
 His uncles taught him how to shoot the bow—
 And nurtured thus to youth from infancy,
 He bowed before our just supremacy.
 Though all has changed now from that happy state,
 Another age shall see the wheel rotate.
 Where other stars bespangle southern skies,
 In years to come a prophetess shall rise.
 Her lofty song commands in thrilling strains
 That new-raised woman snap her rusty chains,
 Unring her finger and unbind her breast.
 The peahen's drab shall droop the peacock's crest.
 'Tis true the laws will guard the child from birth.
 But hers alone whether it see the earth.
 If she so wills, potential life is stayed,
 By magic globule or by hired blade,
 And she shall be, as mistress or as wife,
 The only keeper of the keys of life.
 What more lies hidden in the womb of fate
 To exalt our sex, I know but may not state.
 Though now from us fortune averts her smile,
 Yet still we conquer, for she left us guile,
 Sole yet sufficient tool for our defence
 Against man's folly, strength and insolence.
 (The goddess here in her predictive scope
 Adapts two lines from Alexander Pope.)
 Daughter, attend! I bid you without fear,
 Whate'er its sex, your new-born child to rear.
 Succour I bring to all who call on me.
 None trusts in vain to my divinity.'
 She said and vanished from the matron's sight.
 She clasped her hands and hoped things turned out right.
 So, when a girl was born, 'A boy', she cried.

'A boy', the midwife, in the plot, replied.
'I call him Iphis: 'twas my father's name',
Good Ligdus said. This soothed the mother's shame.
For that's a name that either sex conveys,
Like Evelyn, Leslie, Robin, in our days.
She felt her guilt somewhat reduced thereby,
Since she could call her child without a lie.
The babe is clothed and brought up as a boy.
Its beauty fills its father's heart with joy.
Good easy man, he boasts about his child
And never dreams how he has been beguiled.

Part II

By fifteen years we now advance our song.
Ovid says thirteen, but he must be wrong.
To fit the metre, he could not forgo
The extra syllable in tertio.
Some fifteen years had passed, as I have said,
And Ligdus deemed it time his son should wed.
The choice fell on Ianthe, blonde of hair,
Whose beauty rang through Crete without compare,
And she and Iphis had been friends from school;
They learned their letters sitting stool by stool.
She greets the spousal news with joy and pride,
And thinks to wed a groom and not a bride.

Iphis loved too, and loved with greater power,
Because she knew her love could never flower.
'Alas, what end in store for me', she cried,
'What I crave most must ever be denied.
What sin of mine did so the gods enrage,
They bade this monstrous love my heart engage?
What have I done that they should make of me,
Amongst all living things, a prodigy?
Cows will not cows, nor mares will mares pursue,
The stag desires the doe, the ram the ewe.
The birds, too, mate according to their kind.
Nowhere but here is hen to hen inclined.
The Cretan queen, when smitten for the bull,

Was widely blamed, yet was her guilt less full.
When the cow's hide concealed her from his view,
The species differed but the sex was true.
No female part like hers my lusts extol.
Without the means I crave the manly role.
Could all the skills flow in of everything,
Could Daedalus fly back on waxen wing,
Not all those skills or his arts could prevail
To change one of these spouses to a male.

Be strong, my heart, this grotesque love suppress,
Love thrives on hope but dies of hopelessness.
Let that love die which cannot be fulfilled,
And mine would die, if love's death could be willed.
Love pines in absence; but my love must be
For ever whetted by propinquity.
No normal barriers my hopes encage,
The guardian's rigour or the husband's rage.
Each outward circumstance with grace attends,
The girl's affection, parents' smiles and friends'.
Stronger than all these, nature is my foe.
What she forbids, needs must that I forgo.
Mine, yet not mine—by her caprice accurst,
Drenched in the fountain, I must die of thirst.
Juno, be far! You cannot ever bless
A union foredoomed to unfruitfulness.
Hymen, avoid! The wedding pomp derides,
When decked to mask the marriage of two brides.'

Far other thoughts infuse Ianthe's breast.
Impede her work and interrupt her rest.
She dreams yet doubts of dimly guessed delights
And speeds with prayer the longed-for nuptial rites.
But, oh, how Telethusa feared and grieved
For Nemesis and the good man deceived.
In vain she interposes brief delays,
Fictitious sickness or ill-omened days;
With only one night left them to prepare,
Mother and daughter to the shrine repair.

They sink before the altar to the ground,
Their hands extended and their hair unbound,
And Telethusa speaks: 'Great goddess, hear!
In my extremity I saw you near.

Your symbols and your sacred train were there.
This is the child whose life you bade me spare.
Through you the Nile enriches palm and sheaf.
You save the sailor from the hidden reef.
We seek your promised grace, my child and I.
She said and lifted up her arms on high.
The altar seemed to gyrate on its stand.
The sistrum rattled in the statue's hand.
The crescent horns shot off a lunar glare.
The doors banged thrice, although no wind was there.

Half doubtful, half relieved, they gained the street,
And Iphis seemed to walk on firmer feet.
Taller her height, and sharper grew her look,
Her paces lengthened with each step she took.
Her waist contracted and her shoulder spread,
Hair tinged her lip and shortened on her head.
Her breasts were dwindling but she felt a glow
From interesting disturbances below.
At home she stripped and the blest change surveyed.
He is a youth who was just now a maid.

What follows can be guessed. I will not stay
To list the items of the wedding day.
Hymen in saffron robe attends the porch
And Juno holds aloft the nuptial torch.
The neighbours all aver with knowing scan,
How quickly marriage can mature a man.
Iphis with his lanthe dwells in bliss,
And soon adjusts to metamorphosis.
Still in the temple, carved by cunning hands,
The votive tablet Iphis ordered stands.
'What as a girl I vowed', the letters say,
'Now as a boy with grateful heart I pay.'
It speaks for heavenly grace and human trust,
Long after all our characters are dust.

To those in like case at the present day
The moral of this story I convey.
When all else fails to change a loathsome life,
The plastic gadget or the surgeon's knife,
When dark the scene and desperate seem the odds
You could do worse than cultivate the gods.

Lines to Hadrian

In the Athenian midnight I stood by the arch of Hadrian,
By your archway, sir, with its proud but veracious inscription,
On the side towards the Acropolis, 'This is the city of Theseus'
And on the other, 'This is the city of Hadrian and not the city of Theseus',
And not far away, your porch and your library in ruins.
And I thought how omnipresent you were, like the Sun-God, your prototype,
At night in the Flying Scotsman I awoke and you were there,
Where your wall like a broken ribbon threads the grey Northumbrian moor,
And in Rome your mausoleum and your Pantheon splendidly domed,
Though converted to Christian uses, toll out to the tourist your name.
And in lands which I never saw, where the Sahara nudges the cornfields,
Where the Atlantic surges on Portugal, in the fresh-cleared Teutonic forest,
On the teeming Asian myriads, you shone and beneath your beneficent rays
The cities sprang up like fruit-trees and there showered from your
 glowing hands,
Bridges and theatres, temples and aqueducts, libraries and baths and arenas,
And the chains of the slave were padded, and the father's dominion damped,
And the world was an orchard of cities, barred off from barbarian poachers
By your vigilant frontier ramparts, and linked by your plumb-line roads,
And mulched by the law you refurbished to fit an eclectic age.
If they sucked the life from the soil and the herbage withered between them,
If the urbane life they fostered was a copyist's version of Hellenism,
Still the prospect was peaceful and gracious, and the citizens basked in
 your beams.

But suns can both blast and bless: there are those who reject the sun,
And cower in holes like bats, or go swaddled in unwashed serge,
To such your rays could be rodent: your beneficence bite like a laser.
What a reconciling gesture, on the site of the ruined Jerusalem,
To raise a new city and stamp it with your own imperial name,
With an elegant temple of Jupiter, where Jehovah's crude Temple once stood.
But the Jews would not see it that way, and they rated your bounty
 as blasphemous.
So they had to be scorched, your shining white tablet of peace to be smeared
By a nasty, protracted, expensive, life-wasteful guerilla war.

And I thought how unhappy you were in your ceaseless peregrinations,
Clamped to a chattering wife while your heart was consumed in captivity

To a wholly unsuitable passion for a wholly desirable youth,
Whom the green Nile gulped at nineteen—was it accident, murder or suicide?
And all you could do for him then was to raise him amongst the gods,
In whom you did not believe, who if real were bitter to you,
And how after years of versification you became on your death-bed a poet,
And I thought of your terrible sunset, shooting out ominous jets,
Fatal to those who stood nearest and disintegrating to you.

For suns run down in the end, and powerhouses sometimes explode,
And sources which generate energy can also generate death,
And men are not suns and perhaps they should not attempt to be like them,
And the strain to be superhuman can shatter the human in fragments.
But I would like to have written 'Animula, vagula, blandula'.

The Grove of Nemi

... to the left of the way as you go up from Aricia lies the grove of Diana called Nemi ... a barbaric and Scythian element predominates the sacred usages for the people set up as priest merely a runaway slave who has slain with his own hand the man previously consecrated to that office: accordingly the priest is always armed with a sword, looking around for attacks and ready to defend himself. The temple is in a sacred grove and in front of it is a lake which resembles the open sea.

Strabo, Geography, 5:3:12-13

From where the Witch's Fortress
O'erhangs the dark-blue seas;
From the still glassy lake that
 sleeps
Beneath Aricia's trees—
Those trees in whose dim shadow
The ghastly priest doth reign,
The priest who slew the slayer,
And shall himself be slain;

*Macaulay, The Battle of the Lake
Regillus X ll. 17-24*

Yes, comparative religion was budded from the golden bough on this tree
In Frazer's erudite volumes, thousands of pages strong.
Sacrificial kings, sacred marriages: what interests me
Is not how it all began but why it endured so long.

A strange survival, surely in the polite Augustan age:
Each incumbent inducted by killing the one before.
But there it is all set down in Strabo's industrious page:
The sword-girt priest peering out from the grove by the lakeside shore.

See Diana primly presiding at this barbarous pageant too:
That patron of virgins and venison, sung in Horace's decorous hymn,
Like a flagellatrix turned headmistress who cannot entirely eschew
Old habits but keeps up nostalgically a whipping room next to the gym.

No, it was maintained, I conjecture, as an elegant stroke of economy:
The criminal classes self-culling for a very modest reward.
I exclude, of course, those crimes, marked out by judicious taxonomy,
Like malversation, extortion and the higher commercial fraud.

But vagrants and robbers and thugs and such products of social detrition
Could hardly be swept up more cheaply than by causing each other's decease.
No, I cannot recall an adroiter conversion of old superstition.
With a rapid turnover in aspirants, what a saving in gaols and police.

Our political temples of Demos have a system not unlike,
Though the forfeit is loss of office, the vanquished gets off with his life.
But, oh, what uneasy charisma, what backward scowls for the strike,
What fingerings of the waistband, to make sure of the hidden knife.

Commentary on Aeneid, Book XII 791-843

After cross-interventions in small states
The compositions of great powers are bland.
Thus Virgil etches on a neutral cloud
The conference. Juno holds the weaker hand.

So Jupiter leads from strength. 'I grant', he says,
'Wreck, ravage, slaughter, an impressive score,
Torn treaties, thousands dead, and what is worse,
Gross breaches of the Olympian code of war.

But now enough. From this time all our force
We throw behind Aeneas. Yield with grace.'
She knows she's beaten yet hopes by finesse
To win a few more points and save her face.

'We have, it's true, intruded on your sphere,
Grossly provoked by Troy: but I disclaim
Acts of excessive zeal by allied troops
Against my orders. Theirs, not mine, the blame.

As for the rest we are prepared to quit,
If you remain content with victory,
Not triumph. So let the Trojans win,
Aeneas carve out of his family tree

The Latin throne. But let the Trojan dress,
The Trojan speech and name be laid aside,
And let them merge into the Latin mass.
Let no new Troys affront me. Troy has died.

And dead let her remain.' He ponders this.
They have to live together after all,
Immortals both. 'All right. Withdraw', he says
'And as you wish, so let the rest befall.

The Trojan strain in the elite shall pass
Unnamed, unmarked, upon the Roman scene,
An Asian potion from a secret still
To tinge and tang the clear Italian gene.

And furthermore there will be dividends
Of sacrifice and temple, prayer and feast,
In the new world I plan. Appropriate shares
Will be allotted. Yours will not be least.'

It's done. They settle. Joyful, Virgil says,
She quits the scene; but meanwhile on the ground
Turnus, divine aid suddenly switched off,
Beholds the hostile cordons drawing round.

Bereft of arms, beset by novel hurts,
Benumbing rays, Furies in camouflage,
Hate in his heart, despair upon his back,
He hears the screaming missile in discharge.

Struck down, he bends beneath the victor's sword.
He asks for mercy: rightly it's denied.
War guilt demands an expiation from
War criminals upon the losing side.

So his indignant spirit seeks the shades,
A hair caught in the nib of history's pen,
Blurring the elegant scroll that celebrates
The flawed and fleeting peace of gods and men.

On Reading Claudian's De Raptu Proserpinae

What curious urge made you unrein
Your Pegasus to try this strain,
Forsake political lampoons
And string your lyre for epic tunes?
Not subject, symbol, plot: with these
You scarcely make pretence to please.
You misconstrue and half despise
The noble myth you trivialise.
What then? Some rhetoric of worth,
Descriptions, spring, the flowering earth,
Torch light, a girl's embroidery,
A wedding song in purgatory,
And vignettes, such as that absurd
Tigress in her pursuit deferred
Of her cub's thief: while near to win,
She pauses, rapt, mistaking in
The mirror by the robber flung
Her image for her stolen young,
But, chief, the skill that moulds and twines
The smooth electroplated lines,
Hexameters machined and rolled
To pass for Virgil's chords of gold.
So though four centuries in turn
Had swathed with dust the Mantuan's urn,
And though all else meanwhile had changed,
The Augustan calm long since deranged,
Disused the games, the public poll,
The cross surmounts the Capitol,
To Porch and Garden there succeed
Debates of Councils on the Creed,
Caesar a child, enthroned and crowned,
The Vandal wreathed and consul-gowned,
Alone the hexameter still stands,
Perfected from the master's hands,
A noble tool for moderate skill
To use for any end it will.
To lift his style, if not his theme,
Won you contemporary esteem,

And space for fourteen centuries more
Upon the Muses' attic floor,
Alive, a statue in the Forum,
Dead, in the Corpus Latinorum.

Here contrast the expiring powers
Of Roman literature and ours.
They froze, arthritically adept.
We gibber like an epilept.
What guineas, wreaths, or robes of state,
Could modern poets imitate
The right Shakespearian blank verse?
The public yawn, the critic's curse.
We spurn the past in insolence,
Tradition dub irrelevance,
And think verse forms should shift and veer,
Like women's skirts, from year to year.
Our narcissistic oafish pride
Leaves Claudian's tigress far outvied.
We only see in time or space
Our own unkempt distracted face,
The only sound our ears can reach,
Our own jargonish slipshod speech,
And euphony is quite put by,
And craftsmanship turned out to die.
Not bird-brain grace I count enough,
But cannot elegance be tough?
These octosyllables confine,
Or spill the sense beyond the line,
Let looser forms my pen unclog
To make a fitter epilogue.

You, who have nothing to say,
Say it so skilfully.
We, with so much to say,
Mash it so wilfully.

You verse a vapid novelette.
We greet the age of overkill.
You do it on the accordion.
We use the electric drill.

Oh say, what powers decreed this strange divorce
Of form and matter, beauty and discourse?

Hoc Voluerunt

After Caesar had won the battle of Pharsalia, and with it the Civil War, he went round the battlefield and wept at seeing the dead bodies of so many of his friends, relatives, acquaintances and rivals and said, 'Hoc voluerunt'. ('They wanted this.')

'They wanted it this way.'
And, Caesar, so did you.
To make up civil wars
The sides must needs be two.

The Alternative
or
If it had all gone the other way
(see *Paradise Lost*, Book IX, 886 ff.)

But when our general father much aghast
Had heard his hapless consort, seen the fruit,
He stood a little silent, then spake thus:
'Oh Eve, what has thou done? Me I reproach
That fondly suffered thee to roam at large,
Compliant overmuch to thy vain show
Of resolution, prudence, wit and strength,
Doffing to female charm my right to rule,
Aye, and my duty too. Serpent, sayst thou?
Nay, rather say that adversary fell,
Denounced to us by our angelic guest.
How should I eat? Eating, I aid thee not,
Only incur for me and all my seed,
Unnumbered generations, thy just pains.
Refraining, I may help thee. This I grant
Uncertain gain: the other, certain loss.
But think not I forsake thee. Dear thou art
And dear remain, though guilty. I to the throne
For thy remission humbly intercede.'
He said. She much abashed let drop
The proffered fruit. Earth firmed herself and stood.
The lion, that had with speculative eye
Gazed on the lamb, went back to eating grass.
The hawk and finch sang perching side by side.
The shark with raking teeth the seaweed tore,
With the lithe herring and the stolid sole.
So Eden held in poise her primal state,
Save where the guilty Eve, in thicket hid,
Sobbed out her grief nor durst behold her lord.
Meantime the Great Disposer of events,
Viewing what he foreknew but not forewilled,
Thus to the host of heaven from the cloud
Which veiled his glory uttered his high will.
'Sons, ye behold what has just passed on earth.
Ye seem perplexed: not correspondent this,

Ye deem, to that sometime foretold by us.
Or both, ye think, should fall, or both stand fast.
Be of good cheer. Naught from our providence
Was, is, or can be hid. Not yet the end.
As envoys to this pair, one upright still,
One fall'n, Raphael and Michael we dispatch,
That both our love and justice may appear.
Attend their mission. Now to them apart
We will our darker purpose more unfold.'

Meantime on earth Adam knelt still in prayer,
Imploring for his guilty partner grace,
Till in the firmament a blaze of light
Announced th'angelic pair. 'Come forth,' he said,
'And know our fate.' She from the brushes broke
In skirt of leaves and bodice sewn of grass,
New conscious now of shame and coquetry.
Such was th'effect of that forbidden fruit.
But Adam rose in glorious nudity.

Raphael appeared as when he was their guest.
But Michael glittered ominous in arms,
God's justicer, and in his hand he held
That flaming sword whose burnish far outshone
The blades by Spaniards' patient skill annealed
In fam'd Toledo, or those fabled brands,
Durandal, borne in Fontarabian pass
By Roland, or, by dying Arthur quit,
Excalibur, submerged in Cambrian mere.

These our first sire, with ceremonious bow,
Though not obsequious, greeted, while behind
Eve hung her head. Then Raphael thus began:
'Adam, well done: though gently to be blamed
To leave untended, sole, thy weaker spouse,
Yet thou hast passed the test. Thou hast obeyed,
And lack of sin makes light the lack of care.
All promised good to thee I now confirm:
To thee and to thy seed, though not by Eve.
For, know, God will provide another spouse,
As fair as this, as loving. See that thou keepst
O'er her a closer guard. To thee, to her,
And to thy issue by her shall belong,
If thou so wilt, eternal Paradise.

But, oh, rebellious Eve, Michael to thee
Th'Almighty mandates needs must now make known.'

Then spake the warrior angel while his sword
In baleful coruscations flashed alarm,
Like those auroral fires that luminate
The fur-capped Finn and sledded Muscovite,
By which the wizard Lapp casts runic spells
Within his tent of felted reindeer skin.
'What canst thou say? Thou knewst the strict command
And broke it. What remains?' Then timid Eve
With accents faltering said, 'The serpent's words
Beguiled me and I ate'. With frowning brow
Th'archangel made reply: 'Why didst thou heed?
Was he thy God, or husband who to thee
Should be as God to him? In Paradise
As Adam's equal, thou canst not remain,
Sinful with sinless, guilt with innocence.
Yet out of Eden all is waste and void.
How shouldst thou fend in chaos, all alone?'

Then she with lamentation wild cried out
'Oh Adam, let me not be cast aside
To wander through the formlessness alone—
Yet not alone, for I am quick with child,
Adam, thy child.' 'This too,' th'archangel smiled,
'Is known to God. Wouldst thou astonish him?
In vain to Adam, tributary like thee,
Dost thou appeal. This is th'Almighty will.
In Eden thou canst stay, with thee thy child,
But not as Adam's peer. Thou shalt attend
Him and his bride to come, their servitor
And handmaid meek, to wait upon their will,
Pluck and prepare their food, make smooth their couch,
And, as they shall direct, the garden tend.
Humble thy bearing, silent be thy tongue
Save when directed. Eat and sleep apart.
Thy issue, too, inheriting thy sin,
Shall be to Adam's seed perpetually
Bondmen and serfs. Nor is this yet the worst.
Thou hast subdued thyself to age and death.
Thou shalt grow old, thy vaunted beauty fade,
And die at last, blind, toothless and deranged,

While Adam thrives in deathless strength and pride.
Then Eve once more: 'Adam, you loved me once.
Nay, though I ate, you said you loved me still.
Degrade me not, but rather let us go
Outcast together from these hideous woods.'
To whom the sad archangel thus returned:
'Alas, alas, see with what poisonous speed
Thou art become infected. Not content
Humbly to bear thy punishment deserved,
Thou deem'st it lightened if the innocent
Are made partakers in its misery.'

At length our general father thus addressed
The heavenly pair: 'Is there no other way,
No means of pardon, for I love her still?'
'None', said the stern archangel, 'for, though God
Is perfect love, is perfect justice too.
She knew and risked the forfeit. Heaven would dote
Did it not keep its word and penalty.'
Then Adam thus: 'What if I ate the fruit?'
And Michael: 'Then indeed the fate forewarned
Would fall on thee, on her, and all your seed,
But with redoubled wrath, since thou wouldst taste,
Not suddenly in fond uxorious throe,
But in mature defiance of Heaven's King.'

Then much perplexed the parent of mankind
First picked from off the ground where it had dropped
The fatal fruit, then raised it to his lips,
Lowered his hand, then lifted it again,
And stood confounded in dubiety.

Irreverence

The unseemly itch to catch the great undressing
Right-minded people must pronounce distressing.
Symbols, we know, cement the State's connections,
And symbols faint beneath profane dissections.
You say not merit gains power, but possessions,
The judge's robe hides sexual repressions,
The mayoress must be held in tight with girdles,
In the priest's hand the milk of bounty curdles.
All right: but bear in mind that no containers
For universal solvents are restrainers.
The same jeers will applaud the same unseens,
Whether you rip off knee-breeches or jeans.
The commune, like the law, can seem a harlot,
Mud deftly flung will stick on any target,
Resistance leaders, too, can feed cartoon or clown,
The red star sports as many angles as the crown.

Non Event

Let's agree to sever,
Saving grief and gloom.
You want a freehold property.
I want a motel room.

Better abort the friendship
Before it's too old to kill.
You want Joan and Darby.
I want Fanny Hill.

We would never have been concordant,
Either in heart or head.
You want a lifelong union.
I want an hour in bed.

You can't say I deceived you.
I never promised rings.
You want Tristan and Isolde.
I want a twang on the strings.

Haikku

Bitted and bridled
Champs the new-broken stallion.
Girl's church-ringed finger.

Lust and Love

Lust's an honest robber,
Bludgeoning for sex.
Love's a whining con-man,
Passing phony cheques.

Lust is intermittent,
Sups his fill and sleeps.
Love from dawn to sunrise
Castigates or creeps.

Lust is standard issue—
Men or pigs or geese.
Love's a visitation
From some god's caprice.

Lust can be diverted
Towards another goal.
Love is monomaniac,
Compass to the pole.

Yet some say the prize piece
Life's mint ever coined
Comes when by some chance freak
Lust and love are joined.

Ancient and Modern

'... for he (the ruler) beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.'

Romans XIII, 4

No, not the sword,
We use the key.
Not God appoints:
Society.

Not vengeance for
The evil thing:
We readjust
Malfunctioning.

Let's paraphrase
The apostle's page,
Updating it
To fit the age.

The State empowers
The magistrate
The deviant
To sequestrate.

And to patch up
Social repair
They are prescribed
Custodial care.

It is approved
Penology,
But something short
On majesty.

Study in Comparative Physio-Psychological Libido-Metrics

A god has immortal virility.
No centuries slacken its string,
Still taut through changed shapes and millennia,
Homing Zeus on the hoof or the wing.

Man's graph is erratic and terminal.
At sixteen it reaches its peak,
But the shafts fall too often at random:
Much vigour but judgment is weak.

As the graph flattens down in the forties,
The string becomes loosened and frayed.
When expertise reaches its optimum,
The impetus flags and is stayed.

But sometimes the gods in gratuity
Toss the sixties an unhopd-for wage:
Some mints after dinner to sweeten
The bitter black coffee of age.

The Apocalypse

To a revolutionary acquaintance on his telling me 'This is the Apocalypse now,' about the year 1970

I grant it is disconcerting that a child with the head of an elephant
Should be born to the seventh son of the seventh son of a lama in Thibet,
I concede that those deep plangent sounds occasionally heard at midnight
From the top of Mount Lofty may proceed from archangels at
trumpet practice,

That those cracklings high in the heavens may be due to the smashing of vials,
Or the flames of celestial forges as the four horses bound to be shod,
That we have entered the year of the tiger and are sealed with the sign of
the scorpion,

And it is only too probable that God has repented his promise
And cancelled the rainbow covenant. I grant and concede these things.

I cannot avert the Apocalypse and I will not wear sackcloth to greet it.
I did not murder the innocents or augment the stake by a faggot,
I never sailed on a slaver, or crammed up a chimney with sweeps,
Or opened the gates of the gas chamber, or gratified lions with a martyr,
Or offered to outrage a goddess, or snatched at the lightnings of Zeus,
And Africa yields me no dividends, and Asia has paid me no tribute.
The sins of the world are not on my head and I will not assume them to
please you.

My peccancies strictly parochial, I will pay for my localised guilts.
Nor would I regard it as ethical to let off a bomb in the Post Office
With the object of sewerage Bolivian slums in the year nineteen-ninety-four.
As the universe dwindles and darkens, let us fan up the sparks of our lives.
Too soon their brief tinder turns ashen, we have eaten the best of the year.
I will work, write, love, drink and do justice: you plot on and buy me a beer.

Deed of Release

(from Charles d'Orléans, Le Songe en Complainte, ll. 371-82)

Know all men present and to come,
That we, Desire, advised by some
Our counsellors, without constraint,
And giving ear to the complaint
Of Charles of Orléans, duke and peer,
Who has to us for many a year
So loyally played the vassal's part,
Do reconvey to him the heart
He mortgaged to us long ago,
And all the homage he may owe,
His oath and faith, we set at large
And by these presents him discharge.

Rondeau CXLIV

Charles d'Orléans

Do you really want to stop them,
The rivers in their courses?
The cranes, cloud-striding horses,
Do you want to ground and crop them?

Such things, to logic-chop them,
Serves only fools' discourses.
Do you really want to stop them,
The rivers in their courses?

Let time plant facts or lop them,
As fortune's whim endorses.
The future's hidden forces
Need none to underprop them.
Do you really want to stop them?

Adaptations from the Greek Anthology

The Dedication of the Mirror

Julianus (Palatine Anthology 6.19)

Goddess, I owed to you my beauty once,
And what you gave me time has now withdrawn.
Then let your temple take my looking-glass,
And with the substance let the shade be gone.

Love and Wine

Rufinus (Palatine Anthology 5.93)

Fortified with reason's shield,
Venus cannot make me yield.
One to one, I can withstand
All the cunning of her hand.
When Bacchus joins her I'm undone.
How can I fight, two to one?

The Horoscope

Antipater of Sidon (Palatine Anthology 11.23)

Brief life, I'm warned, my stars foretell:
So say the astrologers. Oh well,
I don't much care. One common fate
Awaits us all, some soon, some late.
So drink, my friend. Wine is a horse
That bears you smoothly down the course
To where the next day you can greet
Pedestrians on muddy feet.

Death at the Wedding

Meleager (Palatine Anthology 7.182)

Death, not your lover, was your bridegroom, Clearista.
For him you loosened the knot of your virginity.
The flutes that in the evening piped for you the wedding-march
Wailed in the morning your merger with infinity.
The torches that were kindled to light you to the marriage-bed
Have ushered you downwards on the pathway to the dead.

After Long Absence

Anonymous (Palatine Anthology 5.304)

When your grape was green you denied me.
When your grape was ripe you despised me.
Can I have a nibble at the old sultana?

Epitaph on a Portrait Painter

Lucilius (Palatine Anthology 11.215)

A hundred canvasses and seven sons
He left, and never got a likeness once.

The Roman Conquest

Alpheius of Mitylene (Palatine Anthology 9.526)

Zeus, keep Heaven free.
Rome now holds earth and sea.
The road to Heaven's gate
Alone stands inviolate.

Epitaph on a Teetotaller

Leonidas of Tarentum (Palatine Anthology 7.452)

This is the grave of a certified total abstainer.
Drink it up: all of us finish in such a container.

Life, the Stage

Palladas (Palatine Anthology 10.72)

Life is a pageant. Play the role
With skill, but stay detached in soul.
Alternatively bear and feel
As if the part you play were real.

Speech

Palladas (Palatine Anthology 11.300)

You chatter and waste breath.
Shut up and steer for death.

Anonymous (Palatine Anthology 7.704)

When I am dead, mix me with earth or fire.
Who cares? Life gave the sum of my desire.

Fastidiousness

Callimachus (Palatine Anthology 12.43)

I detest heroical poems, strained out in grandiose modes,
Warmed up from the epic stock-pot. I avoid the main roads.
I don't drink from the common well. I never use public facilities.
Or seek lovers who demonstrate widely the range of their carnal abilities.
Take Lysanis, now, he is fair, fairer than all of his brothers.
But before I can focus my interest, Echo retorts, 'He's had others'.

The Grave of Archilocus

Gaetulicus (Palatine Anthology 7.71)

By the salt and bitter wave
See the bitter poet's grave,
First of poets to infuse
With viperous gall the harmless Muse,
First to make the measured flood
Of mild Helicon run blood.
This the family suicide
Of his target testified.
So tip-toe past, lest you exhume
The wasps that nest inside his tomb.

Note: Archilocus was a poet of the seventh century B.C., said to be the first satirist. He was engaged to a girl called Neobule, but her father, Lycambes, broke off the match to wed his daughter to a rich suitor. Archilocus in revenge is said to have composed satires on the family so wounding that they all committed suicide. As with other novel weapons, satire has lost some of its effectiveness in the course of the centuries.

The Truant Lover
(After Theognis, lines 1249-1252)

The straying horse, returning late,
Nudges at my stable gate.
Sated, stuffed with foreign oats,
Sick, he seeks for antidotes:
Water cool and shade from heat,
Rider with a gentle seat.
But is it right for such a ranger
To front at the domestic manger?

Conversation Piece

(Anacreonta 7; Loeb, Elegy and Iambus, Vol. II, 27 supp.)

'Anacreon, you're getting old',
So the ladies chatter,
'In the looking glass behold
How your front hairs scatter.'
'I don't know about my hair,
Whether sparse or plenty.
I at sixty only care
To play up like twenty.
All the more since toward my gate
I hear approach the steps of Fate.'

J. J. Bray—whose third collection of poetry this is—was born and educated in Adelaide. After a distinguished career at the South Australian Bar he was Chief Justice of South Australia from 1967 to 1978 and in 1968 became Chancellor of the University of Adelaide. He is now retired apart from his University appointment and a post on the Libraries Board of South Australia.

J. J. Bray began to write poetry seriously in the 1950s and acknowledges the important influence of the late C. J. Jury on his work. Bray's long standing affection for the classics is evident in this collection.

His two previous books of poems, *Poems* and *Poems 1961-1971*, were published in 1962 and 1972. He is also the author of three verse plays.



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