



THE ILEX TREE

LES A. MURRAY & GEOFFREY LEHMANN

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Les A. Murray
and Geoffrey Lehmann

Les A. Murray and Geoffrey Lehmann are two young Australian poets whose work has recently begun attracting attention. Both write enjoyably, preferring lucidity and clarity of image. Les Murray works from a deep attachment to countryside and the past; his earlier work is concerned largely with imagined situations and modes of existence, especially war, but more recently he has come to explore a more immediate world of his own experience, and his verse has become tenderer and more natural. Geoffrey Lehmann, on the other hand, is a poet of city and sea. He prefers legend and mask to direct lyrical statement, but his elegant surfaces conceal much intensity of feeling. The two poets have been good friends for several years, and this book is, in part, a result of their friendship.

Les A. Murray was born in the spring of 1938 and grew up on his father's dairy farm at Bunyah, on the lower North Coast of New South Wales. After attending various country schools, he came to study at Sydney University, leaving there some years later without taking a degree. This was followed by a period of what he calls 'overdone but enjoyable' literary vagabondage, after which he came to Canberra to work as Translator in the Australian National University. With his wife, Valerie, and their two children, Murray now lives in Downer, a suburb on Canberra's less-fashionable North Side.

Geoffrey Lehmann was born under the sign of Cancer in 1940. He attended Shore school, graduated in Arts and Law at Sydney University, and now practises as a solicitor in Sydney. In association with Les Murray, he edited the University magazines *Arna* and *Hermes* in 1961 and 1962. Of mixed German and Irish descent, Lehmann generally lives on Sydney's North Shore.

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By chance, just as Daphnis had settled down in the shade
Of a whispering ilex tree, Thyrsis and Corydon came there,
Thyrsis with sheep, Corydon with milk-heavy she-goats,
Two youths in their prime, Arcadian singers both of them,
And equally keen to make up a verse, or match one.

Virgil, *Eclogues VII*.

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
CANBERRA

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L.A.M. & G.L.

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LES A. MURRAY

The Japanese barge

A strange thing happened here
Concerning phantoms.

A barge
Arrived one night on the beach,
Lugged in by the night-tide, queer,
Foreign and Japanese.

It wallowed,
Its rudder-post frozen with coral,
Up the bay and grounded, reaming
Water, bow dug in sand. Phantom
Soldiers disembarked and scattered.

We found some buttons and a tin
Of mud-fused cigarettes: no more
Did we find of them but bootmarks
And the corpse of a Diesel engine,
No more than that.

And yet, all day,
Dead wars and ghostly samurai
Incited us to come and stare at it,
Whale-dead, ridiculously silent . . .
And there was talk of battles.

That night
The tide withdrew it, whispering
Out of the shallows. None saw it go
Out to the deep night, drowning there
Into the dark of mind and ocean.

The samurai did not come back at dawn
And we forgot to talk of battles.

Property

In my secret garden
I kept three starlings
In my hidden wallet
Three copper farthings.

One dim grey evening
The birds escaped me
And a crippled man stole
My shining money.

The starlings wandered
Till three hawks took them
And now my agents
Have caught the cripple.

The singer's nag

My old mount picks her way along
Unshod on gravel roads, a plump
Nervy sow-bellied crone, she dreams
A small monotonous theme of plains
Where riders crash, and saddle-pains
Are smoothed from backs, where little streams
Give rise to sweet grass, clump on clump,
And none but breezes care for song.

She hates . . . no, better, she dislikes
My psalmistry, my centaur's pride:
She'd love to find some hedge of spikes
To toss me in, and end my ride.
But then, such is our parity
In weakness, she would wait for me.

Privacy

The rain is easing, one and a million dark
Over the water, off through the hills of trees;
As night comes down, my window bogeymen,
Pine and greygum, draw in round the house.
Now I'm a child again in dim July,
In the indifferent, ah, but dancing rain,
The spiced fantastic winter on the roof.

And while you pour out sharp, sweet kerosene
To fill that lamp, light up the wick and set
The chimney on, that's just how long I take
Unbuttoning twenty years, so that I sit
Before a fire that's been ash and soot
Longer than your life, a char on a scatter of bricks
Up where the hill-clay holds a map of rooms,
Beside a creek that never was for you.

Here are three sorrows knotted into one:
Loss, July, the privacy of dreams.

Love after loneliness

Plucking the petals of a song,
Tossing them to float and fall,
A girl went wandering along
At evening by the city wall:

And I stood far off in dismay,
Lost in the ebbing of the day.

Leaning, laughing, from his mount,
A horseman swept her from her place,
And both went cantering off around
The ancient wall at merry pace:

And I stood far off in dismay,
Lost in the ebbing of the day.

For then I thought I'd never come
To seize a maiden nor to prance
My charger past the wall and ride
With my sweet love to distant France:

And I stand now in new dismay,
Lost in the strange dawn of my day.

Dolores

No, he doesn't sleep alone,
Old Timothy Tempter,
With lightsome grace and gentle tone
He proves his manly temper.

Oh yes, the world is very wide
And full of light and revel,
With, here and there, the bitter-eyed
Cuckolds of the Devil.

That desperate virgin Hilda made
The grade at last with him,
And that old doxy Adelaide
Became his on a whim,

But poor Dolores had to choose
Old Belial or Honest John:
She went to hell in snakeskin shoes
Unloved by either one.

Personality

Only yesterday some Selves
And the current I declared a truce:
We meet again tomorrow night . . .
(God send, of course, it is no ruse).

There is a little Europe here,
A nascent continent of Me,
Full of dark tales and kings, for which
Sorrow serves as Holy See.

There is a frightened Europe here,
A Christendom to build, or lose,
Important to none, yet oddly dear
To Sorrow . . . so we'll let her choose

For purposes of her own, the fate
Of him who'll own this vexed Estate.

Artificial harbour

For Brian Jenkins

I would tell with absolute
Plainness how waves break
On the sea-wall, cold, resolute
Breakers, killers of boats

In the swaying dark, or equally
Sparely sing you how heavy
Stones were hewn, carried, carefully
Sunk in the water, piled in

The calms and the lawless wintertime
Roil and sounding of storms.
I would grieve the work and the quicklime
Graves of the builders who died . . .

All this, but for a ship in the roadstead
Bearing the evening sun upon her deck:
Yes, and that too, but for a crane that goes swinging
Over the mole, a perfect tower of noise.

Agitation

The curtains move. A picture comes and goes:
Lucerne fields, a hill, a gust of rain . . .

The woman rises, but the curtains close.

She sits back, sighs a little, smooths her clothes.
A cold wind looks in darkly on her pain:

The curtains move. A picture comes and goes.

She says: 'No need to look. I'll just suppose
The weather's kept him from the road again.'

The woman rises, but the curtains close.

'Yes, when it rains, the river overflows:
I hope he doesn't come, for, should he drown . . .'

The curtains move. A picture comes and goes.

'And yet, he could still get here if he chose!'
The clock chips flints of anger in her brain:

The woman rises, but the curtains close.

Lucerne fields, hill, and still the storm rain blows
'I loved him. I've earned better than disdain.'

The curtains move. A picture comes and goes . . .

The woman rises, but the curtains close.

Tableau in January

January, noon. The idle length of a street . . .
There is more light than world, and what few outlines
Persist forget their meaning in the heat.

The metal sea's too bright to walk upon.
Thoughts pass, and figment shops, and random glimmers
From crystals in the concrete, and oiled swimmers.
The sky does not exist when it's outshone.

On the dazed white sand, umbrellas stiffly lean
To pose and impose their shade upon the shifting
Languor of bodies and glare, and all the sifting
Motes of dim music mingled with the scene
Fade into summer, January, drifting. . . .

Things drift apart, significances fade.
The returning street, once blue, is taut with azure
Tension between persistence and erasure.
In the cool of doorways, shirts drink lemonade.

January, noon. The unreal, idle street.
There is more light than world. The poet, smiling,
Takes his soft lines and bends them till they meet.

The trainee, 1914

Ah, I was as soiled as money, old as rag,
I was building a humpy beside a gully of woes,
Till the bump of your drum, the fit of your turned-up hat
Drew me to eat your stew, salute your flag

And carry your rifle far away to your wars:
Is war very big? As big as New South Wales?

A New England farm, August 1914

August is the windy month,
The month of mares' tails high in heaven,
August is the fiery month,
The windswept doorstep of the year.

But who is this rider on the road
With urgent spurs of burning silver?

August is the winter's death,
He dries the rotted June rain in the earth,
Stiffens fat roots, ignites within the peach tree
Flower and seed. August is time to think
Of facing ploughshares, getting our new boots,
And of the first calves shivering in the grass
Still wet with birth-slime.

But who is this rider at the gate?
Why do the people run to listen?

August is the new year's hinge:
Time out of mind we've stacked the raddled autumn
Cornstalks on the river bank for burning,
Watching the birds come dodging through the smoke
To feast on beetles. Time out of mind
We've retraced last year's furrows with the plough:
How can this August fail us?

Why do the young men saddle horses?
Why do the women grieve together?

The burning truck

For Mrs Margaret Welton

It began at dawn with fighter planes:
They came in off the sea and didn't rise,
They leaped the sandbar one and one and one
Coming so fast the crockery they shook down
From off my shelves was spinning in the air
When they were gone.

They came in off the sea and drew a wave
Of lagging cannon-shells across our roofs.
Windows spat glass, a truck took sudden fire,
Out leaped the driver, but the truck ran on,
Growing enormous, shambling by our street-doors,
Coming and coming. . . .

By every right in town, by every average
We knew of in the world, it had to stop,
Fetch up against a building, fall to rubble
From pure force of burning, for its whole
Body and substance were consumed with heat . . .
But stop it would not.

And all of us who knew our place and prayers
Clutched our verandah-rails and window-sills,
Begging that truck between our teeth to halt,
Keep going, vanish, strike . . . but set us free.
And then we saw the wild lads of the street
Go running after it.

And as they followed, cheering, on it crept,
Windshield melting now, canopy-frame a cage
Torn by gorillas of flame, and it kept on
Over the tramlines, past the church, on past
The last lit windows, and then out of the world
With its disciples.

Les paras

Upon seeing a news photograph of some Foreign Legion paratroopers

I will remember these faces:
Though the style is that of our time,
Their eyes are most ancient.

They stand, simple as lightning,
Dressed in mottled fatigues,
Berets and glistening jump-boots.

They stand, the desert behind them
And smile . . . at what do they smile?
At some joke? At the camera?

Or is this merely a tolerant
Gesture they make to a world
They gave to be soldiers?

For each, on his left breast pocket
Wears an invisible clasp:
That of Sammaël, the Destroyer.

Deck-chair story

For Chris Koch

I see the horses running on the plain,
I see the carbines lift in line and sweep
Down and level like a swathe of canes

Cut with a single long, imperious stroke,
And they are splendid. They are levelled each
And all at me. The horses closing now,

I rise to shoot . . . and I am hammered down.
Such hooves of burning nickel burst my eyes,
Such boats of thunder shoal above my corpse. . . .

All that night, I crept back into life:
But now I wonder, since I have grown old,
Eating warm soup and bothering the sun:

I see the horses running on the plain,
And wonder where my soul went when it joined
That moment and that regiment of horse?

The winter rising

We lived below the houses of the hill,
Their light, their music were not ours,
Their songs were delicate and French.

Bowers

Of tin were our dwellings, and terraces
Of weeping brick all down to a frozen river.
At night, the shunting freight trains nagged us
Into nightmares. We learned love shivering
Under the viaduct, down amongst the weeds.

One day

The idea there was something could be done
To change the tenor of our times arrived
Amongst our houses, youthful, fierce, begrimed,
Not to be trusted.

But we listened; listened:

It turned our faces and our hatred up
Towards the Hill. And at dawn we enlisted
Knives, torches, beams against the walls
Of the great houses.

Their fall was enormous,

A flood of crystal, privilege and baubles,
And well-bred corpses, indelicately dead.

And then,

When all the walls of tyranny were down,
It was still cold. The rivers were still ice,
Our houses tin, and no lights on the hill.

Manoeuvres

At piccaninny dawn, a silver silence
Sustained a single wound. My shout
Rang in the frosty paddocks, and the tent-lines
Swelled and rumbled as the troop turned out.

Our dawn parade left bootmarks on the whiteness.
The prints of shouts upon the melting air
Remain and remain. Smoke from the breakfast fire
Discovers the cloudy sun wound in its hair.

We're going far. We have got our orders,
But something in this country mocks our violence:
Our strength is lost on these hills. Our loud array
Of tanks progresses through a fine blue silence.

Minuet

For Don Kirby

Dancing. They were dancing in my dream.
The dead were moving in a minuet,
And serried candles, topaz-topped, agleam
Were lost in that enormous room. And yet

I know I moved amongst the circling dead,
I touched those graceful shoulders, spoke
Their names . . . and not one turned his head,
Nor saw me there. And I've not yet awoke . . .

That world of tapestries, of prickling stars
Woven in women's hair, that marble floor
Afloat with candlelight . . . how very far
I've come from there. I'll see no more.

I must go out. I must avoid my bed
Lately I've dreamed too often of the dead.

A poem for Valerie

Descending into the level country
I saw, as far as the wind could blow,
The naked trees were leaning away
From the blind gift of the snow,

And darkness grew in the eye of the wind,
The closing plain smoked grey as the sea,
And I, who had lent myself to such weather
Was harried and driven wearily

Past house and light, past rest and need
Of rest or warmth till the hunter's moon
Broke out in the heavens of the wind
And the snow failed soon.

Weary's the way beyond weariness
That brings me home to your hearth:
Forgive me if my shoeprints leave
Some dead snow on your path.

The widower in the country

I'll get up soon, and leave my bed unmade.
I'll go outside and split off kindling wood
From the yellow-box log that lies beside the gate,
And the sun will be high, for I get up late now.

I'll drive my axe in the log and come back in
With my armful of wood, and pause to look across
The Christmas paddocks aching in the heat,
The windless trees, the nettles in the yard . . .
And then I'll go in, boil water and make tea.

This afternoon, I'll stand out on the hill
And watch my house away below, and how
The roof reflects the sun and makes my eyes
Water and close on bright webbed visions smeared
On the dark of my thoughts to dance and fade away.
Then the sun will move on, and I will simply watch,
Or work, or sleep. And evening will come on.

Coming on dark, I'll go home, light the lamp
And eat my corned-beef supper, sitting there
At the head of the table. Then I'll go to bed.
Last night I thought I dreamed — but when I woke
The screaming was only a possum ski-ing down
The iron roof on little moonlit claws.

Noonday axeman

Axe-fall, echo and silence. Noonday silence.
Two miles from here, it is the twentieth century:
Cars on the bitumen, powerlines vaulting the farms.
Here, with my axe, I am chopping into the stillness.

Axe-fall, echo and silence. I pause, roll tobacco,
Twist a cigarette, lick it. All is still.
I lean on my axe. A cloud of fragrant leaves
Hangs over me moveless, pierced everywhere by sky.

Here, I remember all of a hundred years:
Candleflame, still night, frost and cattle bells,
The draywheels' silence final in our ears,
And the first red cattle spreading through the hills

And my great-great-grandfather here with his first sons,
Who would grow old, still speaking with his Scots accent,
Having never seen those highlands that they sang of . . .
A hundred years. I stand and smoke in the silence.

A hundred years of clearing, splitting, sawing,
A hundred years of timbermen, ringbarkers, fencers
And women in kitchens, stoking loud iron stoves
Year in, year out, and singing old songs to their children

Have made this silence human and familiar
No farther than where the farms rise into foothills,
And, in that time, how many have sought their graves
Or fled to the cities, maddened by this stillness?

Between the trees, the tall light reaches me.
Things are what they are, and that is frightening:
They require obedience, if they are to be mastered
And so many have tried to force their dreams on this planet.

Things are so wordless. These two opposing scarves
I have cut in my red-gum squeeze out jewels of sap
And stare. And soon, with a few more axe-strokes,
The tree will grow troubled, tremble, shift its crown

And, leaning slowly, gather speed and colossally
Crash down and lie between the standing trunks.
And then, I know, of the knowledge that led my forebears
To drink and black rage and wordlessness, there will be silence.

After the tree falls, there will reign the same silence
As stuns and spurs us, enraptures and defeats us,
As seems to some a challenge, and seems to others
To be waiting here for something beyond imagining.

Axe-fall, echo and silence. Unhuman silence.
A stone cracks in the heat. Through the still twigs, radiance
Stings at my eyes. I rub a damp brow with a handkerchief
And chop on into the stillness. Axe-fall and echo.

The red-gum murmurs now. The scarves in its trunk
Crackle and squeak now, crack and increase as the hushing
Weight of high branches heels outward now, and commences
Tearing and falling, and the collapse is tremendous.

Twigs fly, leaves puff and subside. The severed trunk
Slips off its stump and falls upon its shadow. . . .
And then there is no more. The stillness is there
As ever. And I fall to lopping branches.

Axe-fall, echo and silence. It will be centuries
Before many men are truly at home in this country,
And yet, there have always been some, in each generation,
There have always been some who could live in the presence
of silence.

And some, I have known them, men with gentle broad hands,
Who would die if removed from these unpeopled places,
Some again I have seen, bemused and shy in the cities,
You have built against silence, dumbly trudging through noise

Past the railway stations, looking up through the traffic
At the smoky halls, dreaming of journeys, of stepping
Down from the train at some upland stop to recover
The crush of dry grass underfoot, the silence of trees.

Axe-fall, echo and silence. Dreaming silence.
Though I myself run to the cities, I will forever
Be coming back here to walk, knee-deep in ferns,
Up and away from this metropolitan century,

To remember my ancestors, axemen, dairymen, horse-breakers,
Now confined in silence, down with their beards and dreams,
Who, unwilling or rapt, despairing or very patient,
Made what amounts to a human breach in the silence,

Made of their lives the rough foundation of legends —
Men must have legends, else they will die of strangeness —
Then died in their turn, each, after his own fashion,
Resigned or agonized, from silence into great silence.

Axe-fall, echo and axe-fall. Noonday silence.
Though I go to the cities, turning my back on these hills,
For the talk and dazzle of cities, for the sake of belonging
For months and years at a time to the twentieth century,

The city will never quite hold me. I will be always
Coming back here on the up-train, peering, leaning
Out of the window to see, on far-off ridges
The sky between the trees, and over the racket
Of the rails to hear the echo and the silence.

I shoulder my axe and set off home through the stillness.

Beside the highway

In the Aboriginal Settlement, men are sleeping
Sprawled on verandahs. Women sit in dim rooms
Drinking water from jam-jars, mending holes in cheap cloth.
In the weatherboard schoolhouse, children watch the teacher
And dream of ice cream, petrol fumes and swimming.

Bareheaded in the heat, Mad Jess the dreamer strolls
Through the wavering paddocks, talking to the sun.

In the dozing Settlement, half- and quarter-caste toddlers
With dirt in their hair crouch under houses, playing,
Building toy roads, while off in the bush, in a secret
Sweltering hollow, a muttering circle of young men
Out of work once more, drink port and cheat at cards.

Mad Jess stands still, once more assailed by visions.

Inside the Settlement fence, paint flakes from houses.
Outside on the highway, cars approach like missiles
And scatter glare as they pass. Off in the distance
A runaway five-year-old, crying, is encouraged
By six white children to piddle on the asphalt.

Slapping at flies, Mad Jess comes drifting home.

Rank flowers wilt in the clay and are not watered.
The boys of the Settlement, fixing brass studs and chromium
Stars to their fake-leather jackets, talk of going
To the beach for a while, or driving off to Queensland.
Yeh, let's do that. What, go to the beach? Nah. Queensland.

Beside the Settlement hall, Mad Jess sits down
In the withered grass and contemplates her shoes.

The Settlement eats corned beef and boiled potatoes,
Drinks tea, chews bread and treacle, stares at walls.
Another day half gone. 'And I was dreaming,'
Says old Mad Jess to herself, 'flash cars was coming
At me like hailstones, cutting me to pieces.'

The away-bound train

For Con Kiriloff

I stand in a house of trees, and it is evening:
At the foot of the stairs, a creek runs grey with sand.

A rocking, unending dim sound,
A racket as if of a train,
Wears through my sleep, and I wake
To find it late afternoon

At which I sit up, rub my eyes —
Beneath us, the carriage-wheels moan
On their winter-wet, wind-polished rails,
But the train hurries on, hurries on.

The loco horn beams out its admonition
At a weatherboard village standing on the fields.

I turn to the window and stare
At a gate slashing by, and a lane,
A house with its dairy, a slope
Where stump-roots and tussock-heaps burn —

I light up a cigarette, wipe
My breath from the cold windowpane
(What threatens me is, there's so little
To do on this rapid dull train)

And this is my country, passing by me forever:
Beyond these hills and paddocks lies the world.

The upland farms are all bare,
Save where dark, storm-matted fern
Has found its way down from the heights,
Or landslides have brought down raw stone

For, outside, it's silent July,
When wet rocks stare from the hills
And thistles grow, and the rain
Walks with the wind through the fields —

But I must forget the farm, and how the seasons
Appear and are — or else not reach the world.

The near hills rise steeply and fall,
The hills farther off settle down:
Now the swift intermittent dead trees
Cease, and I notice a plain

Low down in the East, and a town
Beyond which, immense, the sea
Stands and, far out, a ship —
But now there are hillsides again.

The loco horn sounds far across the uplands:
From a distant ridge, a horseman eyes the train.

Outside, it is timeless July,
When horses' hoofs puncture the chill
Green ground, mud dogging their steps,
And summer's plough sleeps in the barn,

When rabbits camp up in the mouths
Of flooded burrows, and dogs
Under creekbanks wince at the thump
Of a gun fired close to the earth.

The cold time, the season of clouds
Beyond the end of the year,
When boxwood chunks glare in the stove —
But that is the past. I am here.

I look across the clear, receding landscape:
The price of the past is bondage to the dead.

The train never slackens its speed:
An iron bridge echoes, is gone,
On the far bank, twilit and tall
The green timber gathers us in.

As we dash through the forest, my face,
Reflected, wanders and sways
On the glass of the windowpane, and
I press my nose to my nose . . .

A man with no past has all too many futures:
On the world's huge ocean, there are many ships.

I take out a book, read a phrase
Five times — and put the book down.
The window-sash chatters. My mind
Trails far in the wake of the train

Where, away in the left-behind hills,
Through paddock and cattlecamp I
Go drifting down valleys towards
The empty country of sleep . . .

I wait in the house. It is raining in the forest.
If I move or speak, the house will not be there.

Spring hail

This is for spring and hail, that you may remember:
For a boy long ago, and a pony that could fly.

We had huddled together a long time in the shed
In the scent of vanished corn and wild bush birds,
And then the hammering faltered, and the torn
Cobwebs ceased their quivering and hung still
From the nested rafters. We became uneasy
At the silence that grew about us, and came out.

The beaded violence had ceased. Fresh-minted hills
Smoked, and the heavens swirled and blew away.
The paddocks were endless again, and all around
Leaves lay beneath their trees, and cakes of moss.
Sheep trotted and propped, and shook out ice from their wool.
The hard blue highway that had carried us there
Fumed as we crossed it, and the hail I scooped
From underfoot still bore the taste of sky
And hurt my teeth, and crackled as we walked.

This is for spring and hail, that you may remember
A boy long ago, and a pony that could fly.

With the creak and stop of a gate, we started to trespass:
My pony bent his head and drank up grass
While I ate ice, and wandered, and ate ice.
There was a peach tree growing wild by a bank
And under it and round, sweet dented fruit
Weeping pale juice amongst hail-shotten leaves,
And this I picked up and ate till I was filled.

I sat on a log then, listening with my skin
To the secret feast of the sun, to the long wet worms
At work in the earth, and, deeper down, the stones
Beneath the earth, uneasy that their sleep
Should be troubled by dreams of water soaking down,
And I heard with my ears the creek on its bed of mould
Moving and passing with a mothering sound.

This is for spring and hail, that you may remember
A boy long ago on a pony that could fly.

My pony came up then and stood by me,
Waiting to be gone. The sky was now
Spotless from dome to earth, and balanced there
On the cutting-edge of mountains. It was time
To leap to the saddle and go, a thunderbolt whirling
Sheep and saplings behind, and the rearing fence
That we took at a bound, and the old, abandoned shed
Forgotten behind, and the paddock forgotten behind.
Time to shatter peace and lean into spring
As into a battering wind, and be rapidly gone.

It was time, high time, the highest and only time
To stand in the stirrups and shout out, blind with wind
For the height and clatter of ridges to be topped
And the racing downward after through the lands
Of floating green and bridges and flickering trees.
It was time, as never again it was time
To pull the bridle up, so the racketing hooves
Fell silent as we ascended from the hill
Above the farms, far up to where the hail
Formed and hung weightless in the upper air,
Charting the birdless winds with silver roads
For us to follow and be utterly gone.

This is for spring and hail, that you may remember
A boy and a pony long ago who could fly.

Driving through sawmill towns

1.

In the high cool country,
Having come from the clouds,
Down a tilting road
Into a distant valley,
You drive without haste. Your windscreen parts the forest,
Swaying and glancing, and jammed midday brilliance
Crouches in clearings . . .
Then you come across them,
The sawmill towns, bare hamlets built of boards
With perhaps a store,
Perhaps a bridge beyond
And a little sidelong creek alive with pebbles.

2.

The mills are roofed with iron, have no walls:
You look straight in as you pass, see lithe men working,
The swerve of a winch,
Dim dazzling blades advancing
Through a trolley-borne baulk
Till it sags apart
In a manifold sprawl of weatherboards and battens.

The men watch you pass:
When you stop your car and ask them for directions,
Tall youths look away —
It is the older men who
Come out in blue singlets and talk softly to you.

Beside each mill, smoke trickles out of mounds
Of ash and sawdust.

3.

You glide on through town,
Your mudguards damp with cloud.
The houses there wear verandahs out of shyness,
All day in calendared kitchens, women listen
For cars on the road,

Lost children in the bush,
A cry from the mill, a footstep —
Nothing happens.

The half-heard radio sings
Its song of sidewalks.

Sometimes a woman, sweeping her front step,
Or a plain young wife at a tankstand fetching water
In a metal bucket will turn round and gaze
At the mountains in wonderment,
Looking for a city.

4.

Evenings are very quiet. All around
The forest is there.
As night comes down, the houses watch each other:
A light going out in a window here has meaning.

You speed away through the upland,
Glare through towns
And are gone in the forest, glowing on far hills.

On summer nights
Ground-cricket sing and pause.
In the dark of winter, tin roofs sough with rain,
Downpipes chafe in the wind, agog with water.
Men sit after tea
By the stove while their wives talk, rolling a dead match
Between their fingers,
Thinking of the future.

GEOFFREY LEHMANN

The traveller hasteth through the evening

Leaving warm farmers-homes
Behind, on a dim path
He hurries as night comes.

Black hat pressed down and grey
Coat flowing in soft winds,
He makes his silent way

Past silent trees and grass.
This slim, swift gentleman
Knows twilight must soon pass,

Eyes like a fox, lips tight,
Hurrying on into nowhere
Through the uncertain light.

An image

Lions on a beach at dusk. A strange quality
Is in this image, a quality of sameness.
One can imagine the lions calm as the sea
Great and monotonous padding through the calmness. . . .

Soft paws on the soft sand, soundless as sand,
Or curled on the beach, hides coloured like the beach,
The colour of the beach matched by a band
Of tawny sky, and always out of reach

Watched by sailors, they pace. Sometimes one roars.
The roar is sometimes echoed by the sea,
As slowly a wave breaks on the darkening shores.
Those phantoms of boredom merge in the dusk's ennui

And slowly stretch themselves and drowse off, each
In a warm hollow of sand in the fading light.
The ocean turns in its sleep and breathes on the beach.
The sensitive muzzles breathing through the night.

Old man possum

We did not know that you were dying old man possum
Among the rafters of the veranda roof
Trapped — if you had only whined or cried
As a cat would have cried, but you did not, for you
Said nothing, only perhaps shuffled over the rafters
Once or twice. And we failed to notice.
And only when you were long dead did we know
When the flies were angry.

We carried you deep down
To the bottom of the garden among the gumtrees,
Your ancestors' first home, and buried you
A large and uncouth ginger-coloured corpse
Grown old with eating berries and scraps and fighting,
Beneath the trees down in the damp clay.

And you had died trapped in the veranda roof,
Between the wood ceiling and the galvanised iron,
For one hot starlit night you must have come
To our veranda roof and had a look in
And pressing down a board that blocked your entry
Plunged into the gloom never to return. . . .
For when you tried to leave you found that the board
When you pulled it back and tried to climb over
Sprang upright. And you were trapped hopelessly
Beneath galvanised iron where no stars shone.

Days of being cooped in stifling air, thirsting,
Days of growing weakness growing hunger
You must have spent in there baked by the sun
Beating on the old roof, dazzled in your world
Of darkness by the fierce green line of garden
Creeping in from the edges of the roof,
Shambling stumbling about there helplessly
With your great heavy ugly scarred body.
And you bit a hole big enough to get through,
You bit a hole through a full inch of wood,
You bit a hole at the edge of the roof hoping . . .
And when you had bitten it you found
That the overhanging galvanised iron blocked you
And you could only make scratch marks in the rust.

If you had only bitten through the board
Which stopped you getting out in the beginning . . .
But you were to die in your animal stupidity.
If you had only bitten through the ceiling
On which you stood — and that was easily done —
You could have just jumped and dropped to freedom.
But through primeval instinct you never thought
Of moving earthwards — your race had always climbed.
And so you groped up to reach the sky and escape
From darkness and if you had only thought of the ground
You would have been saved. And so many die trying
To reach the sky, to escape from darkness, and if
They only thought of the ground they would be saved.

Summer night

Gardenias scent the blue-black sky which glows
Over grey lawns — blurred glimmering lakes of space.
Leaves patter with the fine spray of a hose.
A woman with a watchful, downturned face
Shining a pocket torch walks through the night,
And on the ground a circle of weak light
Hovers, dancing before her as she goes.

Late autumn

For Pat and Timothy Suttor

In the Canberra sky a light blue haze
And in the trees a lingering blaze
Trembling like tinfoil in faint breaths.
I swept a thousand golden deaths
Into a neat and crackly heap,
But the bright leaves refused to sleep,
For yet more of them sought the ground
Fluttering weightless and without sound,
Just here and there — persistently.
Irritated I shook the tree.
Electrified a thousand fled
Their twigs and showered around my head
Like shimmering gold, and by my side
Young Carmel jumped and shrilly cried
To see them swaying in the air
And tangling in her clothes and hair.
She called out, 'Do it again please.'
And with her small arm tried to seize
A rigid branch. So once more I
Shook a gold downpour from the sky.
She sang lost in a reverie
And danced, then stopped and turned to me,
Staring with eyes sharp as a wren.
'Do it again, do it again!'
I shook the tree. Now no leaf stirred
But singing like a wistful bird
Carmel danced in the autumn air
Amongst gold showers that were not there.

The last campaign

In the hot valley of the never was
This crumbling army stands, dry, mummified,
The cornet raising to his lips the horn
That never sounded, and a thousand hands
Clenching the hilts of swords they never raised,
Ranks of dead cavalry staring into nothing.

Strong liquor, songs shouted around the campfire
And excellent weather marked the setting out
Of this campaign against the powers of darkness,
And men from every village that they passed
Came out to join their ranks. For many weeks
They journeyed, for long months in fact across
The sunlit plateau and began to curse
The cloudless weather and demand a battle,
And every time they saw pale smoke at dusk
Rise from behind a hill, the veterans sniffed
With pleasure, stared hard through the twilight haze
And rode around the bend with sabres ready,
But always men in their own uniform
Rode out to join them.

So this cavalcade
Rode finally into the fatal valley,
Saw from the other end approaching them
A distant cloud of dust, sparkling with points,
(Was it the gleam of weapons?) and discerned
A barely audible thunder (Was it hooves?)
And headlong rode towards the cloud of dust
Which spread out and became a vast concourse
Of horsemen spurring sweating horses on.
Headlong they rode against the enemy,
Then saw they charged an image of themselves,
A mere reflection in an airy mirror —
And men, plumes, horses, suddenly all froze.

And so this army still stands in the valley,
The gold braid and black ostrich feathers crumbling
Of riders who still hold the fraying reins
Of horses with their hooves raised in mid air.

Emperor Mao and the sparrows

One morning the Emperor Mao got up and wrote:
'My subjects, do not laugh,
This is my sober proclamation to all
The provinces of China.
I your old Emperor, for seventy years
Have pondered on your woes, and only this morning
Stumbled on a solution in a dream.

'I dreamed of endless fields of ripe rice,
Strangely silent and devoid of sparrows,
Then it struck me that in my threadbare empire
Sparrows are the reason for men starving.
For every arm lifting hay with a two-pronged fork
Fifty young throats are hopping around.
So I decree all sparrows shall be wiped out.
March through the fields, my people,
Hunting the sparrows with brooms and crossbows,
Exploding firecrackers and ringing bells,
Till not one be heard twittering in your crofts.
Such is my proclamation.'
Mao summoned chancellor Chou and rolled
The proclamation and handed it to him wordless.

And so the Emperor's many-fingered hand
Reached through the countryside
Bringing death to the cheeping ones,
And in the spring
A million tiny feathered corpses
Flowed down into the Yellow Sea.

The same day, a year later, at daybreak
The Emperor Mao summoned Chou to his bedside,
'Is the last sparrow gone, the very last?'

'Your Highness, the last that I heard of sparrows
Was seven weeks ago,
A report from far off Sinkiang,
Sent by the Governor himself who said
He saw with his own eyes the last sparrow
Fly twittering coldly into the hills . . .
What bothers you, your Highness?'

'Only this, brother Chou,' the Emperor said,
Shaking a face still pale and thick with sleep,
'Only this, that at dewfall, this morning I dreamed
About a hundred thousand sparrows singing.'

Pope Alexander farewells his daughter

Eager and flushed you came to me at night
And pulled your knees up with your tiny hands
And laughing spread your thighs out.
Ah little cat! A strange heat grazed me,
Almost too much for an old man.

And now

I watch you riding with your latest husband
Young Don Alfonso and a train of nobles,
Your gold hair prim and silk clothes gently jolted
As your small horse ornate with bells and ribbons
Bears you across the bridge to leave me doting
Alone upon Saint Angelo's cold ramparts.
The air is pungent with the smell of lemons.
Each day without you is an emptiness.
Good luck to you my child and God be with you!

Christmas beetle

From the cool night this glossy stranger came,
Attracted by the candle's yellow flame,
Blundering in jerky flight around our room.
Dazed by the light his bronze wings noisily fanned,
And lest he burn into an odorous fume
I caught and held him prickling in my hand
And threw him back into his home, the night.
A pebble dropped and then whirled into flight.

Lines for a Chinese tear-jar

Back from the wars my lord comes riding.
The ladies of the court have hoarded
Their tears in tear-jars for their lords
Who from the wearying wars come riding.
And if my jar were dry and empty
What a sad look would cross his face,
My lord who from the wars comes riding!
But with a charming servant boy
To share my cares on rugs and bear-skins
What time had I for tears and sighs,
When to the wars my lord went riding?
I'll fill my tear-jar, even yet,
Shake tears from rose briars and small herbs,
And add a pinch of salt perhaps,
Now that my lord is homeward riding.
I'll run to him with brimming jar
And feel his skilled arms tightly grip me.
Why do I dance and softly hum?
Because my lord will soon come riding?

The pigs

For Chris Koch

My grey-eyed father kept pigs on his farm
In Tuscany. Like troubled bowels all night
They muttered in my childhood dreams, and grumbled
Slovenly in moonlight, sprawled in night-slush,
While chill winds dried the mud upon their hides.
I lay in the faint glow of oil-lamps,
In a musk-scented stillness,
And from the icy paddocks heard the pigs.

My thoughts were haunted by pig-greed, how pigs
Surge to their food-troughs, trample on each other,
And grunt and clamber swilling themselves full.
Often we emptied food on top of them,
So that they swam in muck. And then one day
When the wind splattered us with dust, my father
Heard a pig squealing, crushed beneath the press,
And we began to stone the pigs, and drew
Blood with our stones, but they just shook their buttocks,
And grunted, and still tore at cabbage leaves.

Passing a dozing boar one summer morning
My father pointed at two dead-pan eyes
Which rolled up quizzing me (and yet its head
And snout snoozed motionless, and flies
Fed and hopped undisturbed among the bristles).
Only a pig, my father now explained,
Could glance out of the corner of its eye.
I watch two bead-eyes turn and show
Their whites like death-flesh.

One dusk this huge old boar escaped and chased
Me through an olive-grove upon a hillside.
Dumpy, it thundered after me,
With murder in its eyes, like someone damned,
A glow of Hades perfuming the air.
That night my father took me in his arms
And told me that of all the animals
Only pigs knew of death

And knew we merely fattened them for slaughter.
Puddles of hatred against man, they wallowed
In greed, despair and viciousness,
Careless of clinging slops and vegetable scraps,
And the sows even eating their own young.
The knowledge of death made pigs into pigs.

Later that year this old boar ate
A peasant woman's baby and was burned
Alive one night by public ceremony.
My father stood there by my side,
His toga billowing in the rush of heat,
But in the flames my child-eyes saw
Not a pig, but myself,
Writhing with stump-legs and with envious eyes
Watching the men who calmly watched my death.

Pieces for my father

I

My father did not like the Swedish vases
Of blue and purple glass I bought to grace
The mantelpiece and elegantly gleam
Down on his bed, pure elongated shapes
Of blown glass with round bowls and long thin necks.
'Rubbish!' he said, resenting change and took
Them down and seized with a divine zest
(And also guilty, trying to laugh it off)
Grunting set up assorted whisky, wine
And brandy bottles on the mantelpiece,
A sherry bottle as the crowning piece
Set on a clock, to gurgle through the night
And phosphoresce and permeate his dreams
With cobwebbed cellars, great vats, musty barrels. . . .

II

It's spring and children in their billy-carts
Roar down the hill, chalk dirty words on footpaths
And birds perched on electric wires are trilling,
While breezes from the bright blue harbour buffet
A gnarled branch green with buds.

Ka-dell! Ka-dell!

The ice-cream man drives slowly past and rings
His bell. But in his tool-room my old father
Rummaging in old boxes thick with sawdust
Extracts an ancient bell with tinny tone
And chuckling runs into his yard and rings it.
Ka-dell! Ka-dell! And so bell answers bell.
'Ha! Ha! He thinks that he's got competition.
See, now he's going!' laughs my father proudly.
It's spring and children in their billy-carts
Are shouting while a child of seventy
With balding pate is ringing an old bell.

III

Silence of night and only possums scuttling.
The house asleep but for my studious self
And my old father with his eyeglass peering
Into his twinkling galaxies of watches,
Time spawned like stardust in their shimmering wheels.
Rising, he takes his eyeglass out and comes
Across to me. An old man's heavy breathing.
Shyly he lifts his frayed and faded shirt.
'D'you see it son? A tick.'

Sweet smell of sweat
And flabby, freckled back.

A patch of red,
A small black kicking head for which I probe
With tweezers. A sharp jerk. My father winces.
I go back to my book and now my father
Browses once more amongst his countless watches,
The spinning stardust of their endless wheels.

IV

On his sore ageing legs my father rubs
Rose embrocation from an old brown bottle,
And the hot dusk and the grave sticky scent
Put me in mind of childhood holidays,
Mosquitoes, citronella, sleepless nights,
Queensland and the gruff trains that slowly jerked us
Past moonlit canefields and crawled over bridges.
And still I see those brown-cream butterflies circling
While a cat leapt to catch them in the sun,
The scabs upon my legs from sandfly bites,
My father laughing as I ran from wasps
And photographing various island scenes
And waves bright as the wings of whirring beetles.
Rose embrocation and its swarming scent,
And I would hold my father here against
The window blue with dusk for ever.
Night folds us in and stings us with her stars.

Two photographs

My sister took two photographs I love
Both indoor colour shots with yellow filter
Of father tinkering with a radio
Glittering with tiny lights upon a table.
Wrapped in a hairy old brown dressing-gown
In heavy yellow light he sits and listens
To ancient earphones plugged into the set,
And in the next he has the earphones off,
And sits, a puzzled frown upon his forehead,
A man of seventy with kindly lines
Upon his weathered face, a youngster trying
To probe the age-old whistling of the ether,
The moans and crackles of the distant stars.
How young your face, old man, how young the hand
Of love that made the camera shutter click.

For William Rainer my grandfather

I

Eidsvold, lush, tropical former mining town
Where green tomatoes left upon a fence
In a few hours would all be brilliant red,
And on verandas butter turned to water
And children drank down raspberry wine at noon.
The milkman's house had a high wall of stone
And courtyard thick with shimmering vines and fruit trees,
And children thought the garden was like Eden,
But their elders hired love from the milkman's wife.
Eidsvold where disused gold-mines filled with water
And on hot nights the hills lit up with bushfires.
Enter into this town with three hotels,
Just as the light begins to fail near seven,
Amongst a cloud of dust and yapping dogs
A coach with William Rainer and his family.

II

The morning sun outside my grandfather's surgery
Shimmers dully on the banana palms.
In a quiet moment sucking at his pipe
He browses through a faded medical textbook,
Battered memento of his student days
In Edinburgh, wild and untrammelled days
Before he wed dear, proud and silly Belle
With mahogany-red hair and hasty tongue.
And he remembers friends he drank and bet with,
How once he slept out in the snow all night,
Beneath blue stars and with a whisky bottle,
And on the following day woke with pneumonia,
So that he won a bet and lost a lung.

III

I see my mother one hot starlit dusk
Tiptoe outside her father's surgery window
And looking in with uncomprehending eyes
While he with back turned hastily swallows something.
He goes in and announces to his wife,

'Belle, I am turning over a new leaf,'
And talks for half an hour of projects
And plans, excited as he always is,
Then lies down and turns over the new leaf
Of death. The autopsy shows morphia.

IV

Upon that fatal night the black men rode
Down from the hills and hitched their horses up,
And all the little white girls naked danced
Around a hose except my bashful mother,
Who walking by herself heard a dog moaning
And watched for falling stars and pondered how
Each star meant someone's birth and someone's death,
And so she looked in through the surgery window.

V

My grandmother haunted by a sense of loss,
Memories of Wales, her husband running down
A street and throwing pennies to the children
'The doctor's drunk, he went down by the river'
(From town to town they moved, would briefly stay
Until his blight caught up with him again)
And in her mind re-lives those days in Queensland
And sees her husband riding out that night
Of savage tempest with his horse and buggy
(The lightning was so bright she hung up sheets
Across the windows to keep out the brightness)
Riding out to a distant cattle station
To bury a corpse foul and rank from cancer.
Days later in fine weather he rode back
At noon, went into town to purchase gifts,
But staggered home at dusk with empty hands.
Quick words, an argument, he left the room,
Came back, 'I've taken morphia, but don't worry,
I've often had as much as this before.'
And they made up and ate and drank together
And both moved off to bed a little tipsy,
In white silk suit he slumped upon a couch
And fell asleep and never woke again.

VI

My mother as a little girl of ten
Sun-dazed looked through her father's surgery window
(The house was empty since her father died
And she had come to look for butter beans
With pinkish-purple skins in a hemp sack)
And saw amongst the glimmering medicine bottles
A black man rummaging, a thief, and ran
And hugged this to herself, a lonely secret.

VII

Once William Wilson Farquhar late of Eidsvold
You put a concert on to benefit
The family of my late lamented grandfather,
And this was over fifty years ago,
And thirty years ago, a bachelor
You died and left behind a will directing
Your home at Eidsvold and the furniture
To be destroyed by fire, and also stating
All fire insurance policies had been cancelled.
I have this set out in an old brown cutting,
Which says that on your death you wished no stranger
To live in what was once your family home,
And that you had few friends and no survivors.
Proud William Wilson Farquhar late of Eidsvold
The relic of a formal bygone age
When men at cattle stations dressed for dinner
And grand pianos tinkled in the wild,
I greet you down the years, incendiary ghost,
And see you tall, genteel, with a moustache,
Advancing through a cloud of dust and dogs
In white silk suit to help a lady down
From a coach just arrived at dusk in Eidsvold.

The dolphins

*A monologue for Marcus Furius Camillus
Governor of Africa*

I

My personal slave in Africa first told me
Of how they play with men and rub against one
(Though barnacles upon their backs may cause
Abrasions, even death)
And how they dive for bubbles and bright objects,
And mimic us with duck-like noises.

This slave once on a journey called to me.
I had my litter lowered, stepped out and followed him.
He ran down goat-tracks to a rocky cove
And whistled and a dolphin danced towards us
Across the flat grey sea. The slave
Threw off his tunic and his rope-soled sandals,
Swam to the dolphin with outlandish shouts,
Hugged it and bit it with a laugh.
Almost intelligible it clicked and whistled.

Months later, at the noon siesta,
He came to me distraught and led me wordless
Past bodies snoring in cool hallways
And over sand dunes to a beach.
A dolphin lay there, puffed with death, eyes squinting.
Making a sign to ward off evil spirits
He split the skull in with a flint. The brain
Lay large and lustrous, bigger than a man's,
A silvery pulp, marbled with tiny veins.
He pointed to it briefly, muttered hoarsely,
Then threw sand on the body.

That night he babbled to me about dolphins,
Their sea-lore and their songs and odysseys,
And how their minds excelled our own
And they would contact us one day and bring
Peace to the world.

The palm leaves clashed,

As breezes fanned the peristyle.
Rubbing ash on his face he softly moaned
Of the dead dolphin and his passion for it,
The language they had shared
And the shrill music that its blow-hole uttered,
Inaudible to him, but causing dogs
To freeze and listen, muscles trembling.

He raved of dolphins until dawn,
Of feats of magic and strange medicaments,
And history dating back before our gods.

My head drooped and I drowsed off on my couch.

Soon afterwards he vanished. Fishermen
Maintained they saw him swimming out to sea
One dusk, a strange light in his salt-wet hair.

II

My home at dusk. Now to forget the triumph
I led through Rome today past roaring crowds.
A slave girl singing to me of Arion,
Famed lutanist, who sailing home
With lavish trophies from a contest,
Was almost murdered by the envious sailors,
But singing on the sunlit deck,
So the sea came alive with listening dolphins,
He jumped upon a music lover's back
And fled to safety through the foam.

A shower of spray becomes a trumpet blast,
Chained negroes looking puzzled, silver eagles,
Processions carrying pictures of my conquests,
Of plains and date-palms, hills and rivers,
(In fact the plains are dry, the rivers brackish).
Men call me happy, but the Emperor's praise
Was tempered to chill rivals to his greatness.

Should I row out to sea with picnic basket
And throw fish to the dolphins,
And make weird noises trying to converse?

And if I found them stupid, what despair
To know that no minds could excel our own.

And if their minds excelled ours . . . then what envy!

Safer for me to quietly age in Rome
Amongst familiar unrealities.

III

A lute hurled on a deck and still vibrating,
Sunlight and anger in those sailors' eyes,
And their gesticulating, empty hands.
And is it they that have undone us,
Our hands that covet, make and take,
And if we had no hands . . .

Those gentle flippers,
Those heaving seas and that inaudible music!

IV

Walking one evening by the sea I heard
Laughter and splashing and strange voices,
And in an inlet came upon nine dolphins
Leaping and frisking in the stillness,
With moonlight gleaming dully on their bodies.
I listened to their comic mimicry
Of human voices, high-pitched and distorted,
And thought I picked out
Snatches of speech from various languages.
Not just the rudimentary sounds they mimicked,
But also tone, inflexion, quirk of speech.
The voices threatened, laughed, were sad or boastful.
Face down upon a shelf of rock I lay
And yearned to stand and cry with arms outstretched,
'I am a man and you are dolphins, let
Us love each other.'

But I was afraid.
Bubbles and flakes of phosphorescence.
Hour-long I watched, and now
With voices dwindling in a wake of stillness
They headed out to sea still gossiping.

Exhausted my eyes shut and I woke next day
Amongst red rock and sun and sea-glare.

Meditation of Marcus Furius Camillus in old age

Near Syracuse I called in at the villa
Of a man who was said to keep tame dolphins.
(Even in old age I pursue my passion.)
His villa was ornate and tasteless
But had a good position by the sea.
The man himself was a big fellow, self-made,
An ex-sailor who wiped snot upon his toga.

He showed me through his olive groves and vineyards,
And boasted of their annual yield,
(While crickets sang in the dry heat
And a rank smell rose from his body).
Cresting a hill the sea hove into view
And wind and waves boomed in our ears,
And I looked down a cliff at a vast pool
Hewn from the rock and saw amongst the foam
That surged across the sea-wall
(It was high tide) black bodies diving
And flashing sleekly in the sunlit pool.
By a steep path we climbed down to the shore,
I leaning on my ivory-handled stick,
Then my companion clapped his hands and shouted
And all the dolphins meekly swam towards us
And watched us strangely with their small weak eyes,
And did the antics that he ordered,
Jumped dancing in the air,
Swam in formation, wheeling as a group,
And when he stripped and dived in with them
They fussed around him, making affectionate noises,
But all the while he roared with contemptuous laughter.

When night came he put on a lavish banquet,
And told me, chewing vigorously, that he thought
Dogs had a greater intellect than dolphins,
For what use was a dolphin as a watchdog?
But (he continued in an awestruck whisper)
Was I aware that dolphins never slept?
What watchdogs they would make could they be trained!

This struck a spark in my old veins,
And at the banquet table all that night
I seemed to hear strange voices
Calling to me from honey-coloured breakers.
Reclining on a couch wine-lulled
I thought of those pure minds
Roaming the sea life-long, by night and day,
Yet never sleeping, never even dreaming.

Often at night a slave-girl reads me books
About the sea and soon my head
Nods with the surge and sees dusk-tawny headlands,
A salt-haze and those voyagers of love
Who do not sleep or dream
Playing endlessly in wave-crash and sun-spume.

The lions

*A monologue for Marcus Furius Camillus
Governor of Africa*

I

Dusk. We have set the lion traps. With luck
We'll hear them later in the night,
Baffled in pits, roaring with amazement.
Ochre hills across the lake shine in pink haze,
Grass slopes of lion's pelt, gentle paws of rock
And sleepy shoulders, timeless granite brow.
Glimpsed through ravines
All afternoon the lake has haunted us.
Close up we see its edge is a white rind,
And wade bemused through warm mush ankle-deep
Barefoot because the mud sucks off our sandals,
Seeking a deep clear patch to swim in.

This lofty German savage with blond hair
The natives dream has got a hold upon me
From month-long orgies in dim chambers,
Ripped bed-clothes, perfume and prodigious love-meals.
I never touch her. Once I tried,
But coolly she wriggled from my grip
With intense self-possession.
Sometimes she cowers for days in palace cupboards,
Then comes out fragrant from darkness
And follows me around like a shy shadow
With child-like laughter.
Beside me now, still as the lake, she stands
Holding my sandals.

II

Alone I stand in a night of blue charcoal
(Alive or dead?)
In tepid water up to my calves,
Feet sinking into ooze, thinking of nothing.
The blue-black water reaches without end
From rim to rim of the horizon, nothing
But sky and lake, and lake and sky.
Trudging for miles through water never creeping

Above my knees, my vagueness turns to terror.
How can I sleep or lie down here?
This harmless water slopping around my shins
Can kill me if I sleep and fall.
I build mounds of dissolving mud
Which crumble into squid's ink.
But why fear death, when I am dead already?
Dying again I shall wake in this lake
Standing where I have fallen,
Endlessly falling to stand where I am standing.

A rush of flame across my face.
Someone holding a torch in the roaring night
Is shaking me awake.
We stumble blindly to the pit and watch
Men hauling up a net
Convulsed by a savage ochre shape.

III

My skin has a yellow pallor,
My tanned legs have pink scars from tropical sores.
The African bearer in the rear is panting,
But gaily she strides ahead to the wharves
Firmly gripping my lurching litter,
And sometimes turns and laughs,
Enjoying a man's job and the shock she causes.
The only blue eyes in a swarm of black.
The natives wave their lions goodbye,
Guessing perhaps their shabby deaths in arenas,
Big charming cats mangled and moaning weakly
Lying in their own blood.
In wooden cages on the decks the lions
Roar and pace in the sun,
And huge oars hit the sea in unison,
Voices chanting in time,
As the great ships put out from port.

IV

Skinny legs are running, wind-blown robes flapping
As an escaped lion heads towards the shore,
Bobbing in the blue broil.
Panic becomes arrows.
We have cleaned the hills out of lions.
The villagers are happy to be free
From curious sniffing at night around their doorsteps,
But resent our administration.
Their nightmares are less interesting.
The hills are just sun-beaten rock
And no longer contain the death-bringers
Patrolling like dusty shadows.
Patient we build roads,
Exact taxes, erect bath-houses.
The lions will be back in a few years
And we shall once more prepare our nets.

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