



Deaths and Pretty Cousins

David Campbell

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David Campbell has served a long, serious apprenticeship in the craft and art of poetry. Now, in each new collection, structure is totally harmonised with content and each poem seems to spring effortlessly from the page, as astonishing and inevitable as the natural world where the poet moves with such ease; the senses transmitting colour, movement, shape and sound to the mind, and the mind transmuting these into the word.

In many of the poems in *Deaths and Pretty Cousins* Campbell still draws upon this rural region which was the source of his first published poetry, and of which he has said, 'Sometimes I had the feeling that I was living and riding round in a world of my own creation'. The binding threads are as strong as ever but now he moves further and further afield in his explorations — of history, of paintings, of people: of other cultures, other times, other lives.

To the reader of poetry the slow attainment of a poet's maturity is as exciting to watch as the emergence of a new talent. It is of necessity a slow process since all artists must first acquire and then discard:

The gull turns on the wind and its brief shadow

Falls cleanly through the wave

On rippled sand. In stone its flight is stayed,

A moment weathering to eternity.

Campbell's brief poems on sandstone rock carvings provide a splendid example of this process.

Mastery without loss of energy, knowledge without diminishment of inquiry, diversity of expression and singleness of purpose — all these combine in the work of

the mature creative artist. A phrase describing the work of a poet who died nearly two thousand years ago seems equally true when applied to the work of David Campbell: 'the scales tremble, but the poet's hand is steady; it is the exciting equilibrium of mature art.' — R.D.

Deaths and Pretty Cousins



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David Campbell

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Other books by David Campbell

Speak with the Sun

The Miracle of Mullion Hill

Poems

The Branch of Dodona

Selected Poems

Starting from Central Station

Devil's Rock

Poets on Record

Evening Under Lamplight

Modern Australian Poetry (Editor)

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*Then there is a time in life when you just take a walk:
And you walk in your own landscape*

– Willem de Kooning, 'Three Americans'

SNAKE

The tiger snake moves
Like slow lightning. Like
A yard of creek water
It flows over rocks
Carving the grass.

Where have you gone,
Long fellow, cold brother,
Like a lopped limb or
Truth that we shy from
Leaving a cast skin?

Snakes are like a line
Of poetry: a chill
Wind in the noon,
A slalom in the spine
Setting ears back, hair on end.

'Some people will not live
With a snake in the house.'
Mice make off. Look
Under your chair; worse
Take down a book:

A line like an icicle!

DOVECOTE

The pigeons whirl at dawn
Like a merry-go-round
About their dovecote
At the end of a cord.

At sunrise like thistle-down
They drop down and down,
Wind sings in the shrouds
Of their thrown-back wings
Until they alight on pink feet
Home. 'Home', they say. 'Love me, love me!'

Pouting shot breasts, they strut
Like blue-rinsed women
About their 'home', their gait
Oddly mechanical, heads thrust in and out.

'Love me!' they groan. 'Men
Are so self-centred. Do you like
My new morning gown?'

The pigeons wear bands
About their ankles. Sometimes at dawn
On the merry-go-round
One cries, 'I love! I love!' and the cord
Snaps. She flies off cured.

FAIRY MARTINS

Pot their pendent nests
In creek banks, sandy gullies,
Sea-cliffs, water-tanks.

A migrant people, their lives are like
A ship in a bottle, anxious to be off.
'In winter we fly north. The air
Nimbly recommends itself.'

Always expatriate,
They live for the day,
Flitting a little tipsily,
Kissing their image in the mirror
Of lakes and ruffled dams.

Light-winged, quick,
Blue tipped with white and tan,
There is no tomorrow . . .

Until it comes, an itch
To be off, and they fly north
Not knowing if their potted cities
Stand.

They are not political
Like Macbeth,
Have no news of Duncan's death;

Like syllables, they may end up in sand.

Yet dipping a wing in mirage,
Their minds still cling
To the shape of a pitcher, a water spring
And temples where the air is delicate.

MUDLARK

Like the clash of light in leaves,
Stark black and white! His song
Has the sharpness of shallows,
A dazzle in the brain.

Rolling clay for a nest
His stick feet leave broad arrows;
But a desert
Stretches out when he sings,
Humping wings at each note.

Sling a stone in a pool,
And light-waves open out, ring on ring;
And cattle die of drought
In the mud of the last waterhole.

Perched on a parchment skull
Or barrel with a backbone,
The mudlark hoops his wings.
His song is a stone thrown
Into the heat haze.

The mind leads on to seas
Where Sturt still wanders
Blinded by the mirage of that voice.

The mudlark sings, Rejoice!

THE ANGUISH OF ANTS

Meat ants, meat-coloured, greet each other
On the hard roads between their gravel cities,
Granite red;
Cross antennae, bow and turn about
On serious unintelligible business
Of state: maybe a whale stranded
In a dry gully; and they lift it like bulldozers,
Bear it off in a bucket,
A bug three times their weight:
Iron ants make light work of it.

How many sets of feet
Beat this highway, carrying merchandise, news,
Between metropolis and lichened farms?
And should a grazing horse stray
Planting a hoof in the market place,
Or boys in short pants stir up New York with a stick,
Their alarm system is the scent of resin,
A stink of pine, a siren
Shrieking in the sense of smell. Archaic
Armies manoeuvre, nurseries are evacuated,
Horatio fronts a tractor blade alone.

But the trees fall: blackbutt and candlebark,
Archipelagos of the huge,
Stacked up in rows by dozers much like ants;
And the autumn burn bloodies the sun. Over nude
Ridges men stride planting out pine:
Conifers march in green ranks over
The meat ants' thin red lines, each tree

Destined for paper mill, the morning news;
While tense in the scent of resin,
Whole cities perish of anxiety.

SUGAR LOAF

*'I see the whole huge hill
in the small pool's stomach'*

— Ted Hughes, 'Sugar Loaf'

Also it could prove serious for the pool,
Reflecting in its tilted glass
The hill, a tall giant, trustful
As a bloodhound but simple, tossing clouds about,
At one with each sunken pebble.

The pool is like a snail
Digesting a garden, a green
Goods-train in a see-through tunnel.

Only after rain the pool
Shows its true colours. Tan
Bubbles rainbow and blink.
But then the hill
For all its granite bluff and spur
Has a vision of plains.

Pools cannot feed on air.

LANDFALL

It is coming up.
Where water beetles wheel on water
Over green depths like galaxies
Or dodgem cars, it is coming up.

The water-dragon stares as still
As the paperbark he lies along,
Fishing with his tongue.

The saucer comes up like a moon as if
The east had turned transparent and you saw
Below the glow of the horizon.

It is coming up a rope ladder
Of bubbles, waving claws,
Until its snake-head
Breaks the surface tension and
Two yellow eyes appraise the world of air.

The daylight moon
Crinkles in the pool
And beetles rock like dinghies.
The water-dragon does not stir.

Trim in his shell, the tortoise rows ashore.

CLAUDIA

Came to us through the wife
Of the Chinese cook of a Dutch ambassador.
A cat, she lived her own life,
But was friendly, especially
When pregnant which was often,
Being friendly. From her hellcat
Screams after midnight, it seems
Her sex-life was amicable,
But she lost her cool when
Her time came, panting at heel
Like an engine. Once
During a trunk line call,
She had three kittens on my knee.
When we drowned her seventh litter,
Claudia clawed my wife
During our evening walk. After that
We stood outside schools
Handing out kittens to children.
She scattered the rabbiting pack
By jumping like a jockey
On to the back of a greyhound.
She climbed the hill through frost
With a rabbit in her jaws and laid it
As an offering on our mat.
Later she ate the head, and cleaned her paws
With one hindleg stuck out
Like a road sign. Stalking birds,
She froze as still as a sphinx
But for the pulsing of the last inch
Of her tail. She was killed in the end
By a drunk stationhand
With a shovel. A grey cat, but spruce,

She looked shabby in death
Like a child's sweater dropped and forgotten
On the worm-veined earth. I dug her in.

HAIRBELL

Hairbells like punched out
Pieces of sky leaving
Starshaped spyholes,
Nipples of Aphrodite.

Hairbells I set in
Your softer than touch hair,
Blue snow on the crest
Of your mount of Venus.

And naked we walked where
The hills were breasts and
Your breasts bare hills
Astonishingly round.

When we lay together
Your eyes were blue
Hairbells, madonna
Of the moment's paradise.

EUROPA

1

Candid as mountain water; waterfalls
Stream with her hair. Sometimes she rocks the moon
Like a sleeping doll and drops it like an old bone
To shatter in shallows. Dreaming in teatree pools,
Two stars become her breasts, and weeds a girl's
Green pubic hair. Shy animals come down
To drink and tell their secrets, 'Ah, the shrill noon!'
Like thought a platypus glides, a mopoke calls
Like memory. But water runs downhill:
Europa stretches, conscious of her curves
And willowy reaches while dreams recur: a river
Mingling with her wilder waters. Never!
Yet from far off she hears the stamp of hooves;
High tides come in. Europa mounts the bull.

2

A farmer tracking down his cows
On the wind-rippled sand
Of the sea beach found
A washed-up teatree bough.

Tough and pliant from the sea,
He whittled at it with his knife
On the verandah of his house,
Fashioning a handle for his whip.

When in the spring his bull
Stepping through neighbour fences felt
Its sting and lash, he bellowed home
Tonguing and turning bloodshot eyes.

From use the teatree took
A knotted gloss. The farmer fondled it
On the verandah lined with fishing rods
And hung it by the kitchen door.

COCKATOOS AT MARTIN ROAD

A single sunflower turns
Looking for last year's moons:
They fell out of the blue
To creak like white dwarfs on the lawn:

Cracking sunflower seed,
Their eyes extinct as craters
Till a wrinkled lid slid up
And memories flickered

Of mornings in Monaro: the metal sun
Like a sunflower
Lifted above bare hills,
A green flame licking the grain

Of the oat paddock: each shoot
Single, in line,
Lean men in green,
And the cockatoos peeling off.

But why come here? — cornstalks
Down for the Show,
Boasting of nuts they've cracked,
Crops they've wrecked;

And passing the word:

Good pickings at Martin Road;
Never had it so good
With the drought and all . . .

And all at once taking off
Clumsily, flickering like lights,
Lost in mirage. This year
There's a sunflower, eye lashed with fire.

COURLAND PENDERS

Dustcovers fly off at Courland Penders
Like cockatoos through Moreton Bays. Bay leaves
Levitate in circles, bees
Crouch still as tigers in a crocus fire.

The ghost has left who trailed a blackened finger
Up banisters to scrawl
Posthumous poems on dead cedar – hand
Most capable yet scarcely warm:

A finger in the dust that snailed
Iron rungs and lichened slats,
And wounded wound a cobweb round
Against the yellow candleflame.

Fires blue their caves, names do not change,
At Courland Penders, Genevieve,
Where smile at heel and bloom on bough
Sweet Michael, Maryled, in death walks high.

INSPECTORS OF MINES: MAJORS CREEK

A township the size of Bath or Queanbeyan. Where
Thirty-six pubs fired twenty thousand, one
Drunkard in George Street lights his way to beer
At the Elrington (late Major). Not a good town
For drunkards homing through blackberry that sprawls
Over the pitted diggings. An Inspector of Mines,
Charles Harpur, turned from newchums sinking holes
In the land he loved (at dusk the woods – his lines –
‘Hang like mighty pictures of themselves’)
To raise his glass (like Kendall at Araluen
Clinking to bellbirds – and now on the same shelves);
But alcohol soured like friendship and mockers moved in
As sly as saplings. Again the woods look down
At dusk from mullock on the one-pub town.

POETRY READING

For A. D. Hope

'A predominantly student audience, I would say.
What would you say?' Some readers say too much.
Some tear ten epics, smile and scratch their crutch:
'And now one more.' Get drunk, that's the only way
To enjoy your own reading or other fools' if they
Must read before you. I sit down with a lurch.
Alec stands at the rostrum as if in church
While light and fine hairs at his temples play.
From watermeadows, hear the soft vowels climb,
Grow strong, grow sonorous; and now we let
Our spirits from their cage. They follow him
To Hellenic snows where terror and beauty sit
Over live chessmen. He bows. As crowds go home,
On their knees in blue-jeans girls throng to his feet.

TUPP'S INDISPENSABLE

Stewart fishing with his nose, a blade, in sunlight
Rinsed by mountain thrushes in cool calls
Like pools the sky falls into, as blue as bluebells
With five petals and a white centre. Right?
But stowed away for later, for his line is tight
And a trout breaks from the poem's centre. Five petals,
And a rainbow leaping between the stanzas. He reels
Them in together, scales shot bluebell white.
'My old man, Eltham lawyer, would say, "You kids
Don't know how much you mean to me. We Scots
Are a tongue-tied lot." A sentimentalist
Lurks in every lawyer.' And with a flick of the wrist,
He cleaned the fish and tossed away the guts.
'Give me rivers, mountains, chill poetry, clear heads.'

PEDRINA

Port Moresby: Pedro, the day that you flew in
With your four Hudsons, Pearce said, 'The bastard's
scared.'

Most were; and you were blue from one day's beard:
Lithe, sallow, unmoved. You Pedro with your tin-
Pot composite squadron and the Japanese in New
Britain

With a battle fleet. It was as if you declared
A private war on the Emperor. While fitters repaired
One shot-up aircraft, you took off in another one:
Skip-bombing destroyers and transports with Johnnie
Lerew

At the Gasmata landing. John walked home. You
Flew on reconnaissance north of Bougainville
With a fresh aircrew. A treetop sniper killed
You biscuit-bombing later, as time will kill
Your legend. I write this for your wife and child.

STRZELECKI

For Manning Clark

And so Strzelecki set out from Hannibal
Macarthur's station, leaving the girls behind
In Sydney. — All night the Nacki washed my mind
Like willow roots in water. — From the Geehi wall
The party climbed Mt Townsend through a whole
Avalanche of wild flowers only to find
The south peak topped it — much like one in Poland
Called Kosciusko, Strzelecki claimed. The Pole
Scaled it alone, and when a cloud came down
Shutting the alpine vastness in a room
With his brief triumph, Strzelecki picked the bloom
Of one of those rare snowflowers sprung from stone
Remembering Adyna Turno and her love,
And joined the others happily enough.

GHOSTS

Ellerslie

At night, they said, a dray creaked round the home-
stead:

I lay awake and, listening, almost heard
The grate of iron on gravel, timber complaining,
Between each gravel breath.

Our Irish cook heard it. 'Old Webb was out
Last night. He can't lie still
For thinking of his buried gold.' With shovels
We delved all day in the whippet wood.

But at night there was the dray, and a convict buried
Under a cornerpost. The fire was warm,
We mocked at ghosts and death. But after midnight
When breath blows white, we held our breath.

Burbong

This year the hawthorn trees
Planted by Gallagher are red
With berries in the frost.
Grey birds like ghosts
Fly creaking from the hills
To eat the fruit.
Their cry is like a dray
Grating on memory's axeltree.

Ashen bloodcrested birds
Older than Webb or Gallagher,
Than wandering Ulysses, feed
Like spirits on the trees of red.

DESCENT TO BRINDABELLA

For Jock Maxwell

The wagon moves like a snail,
The bullocks drawing out
Through the green timber.

The snail dips over a leaf;
And with wheels chocked
And sapling brakes between tree-trunks,
The canvas shell lurches down the east face.

The tree boles are ribboned
For eighty feet
Or scaled like goannas
That look up their full length
Through thin crowns below us.

Below us the valley waits
Like the first garden.
The river eats its way through green
Leaving a silvered snail-track,
And clouds snail over.
Their shadows slide through slippery blue
On the noon range.

And the wagon creaks and jolts:
Bullocks hang in their yokes
Bellowing, ball-eyed. One false

Move and the whole caboose
Could slip like water, pile up
Like debris in a treetop.

But the wagon inches with evening
Into the open valley dragging
Like a snail its humped shadow
Through the scents of mint and watercress
And the caress of water.

It has our house on its back.

RIBBON-GUMS

Left behind unaxed still
Holding to the ends
Of streamers, the ship gone.

Bark grates on wind and
Fist of green fingers,
A bough waves a tattered hand.

Grief creaks in, black
Cockatoos flap like crêpe
Cutouts of hill mist.

With the Koori people
As on lakes swans,
Even the ghosts are dark.

PORTRAIT OF MRS DEUCHER

'From Turalla to Manar
There was a koala in each tree;
And her eyes were the colour
Of the skies of 1880

Seen through lean timber
(With a koala in each limb)
From the back of a leather buggy
That smelt of rain and housemaids.

'And Alexander at dinner
Told lies about lyrebirds
Dancing to lightning
As he rode through the Tinderrys.'

TINY O'KEEFE

Tiny O'Keefe said,
'I keep my coffin in my house.
It could hold all three of youse
Skinny buggars. Strike me dead!'

So they put down their glasses
And reeled uphill
To the red house he got
For burying dead 'uns.

The coffin filled the back porch. 'There's
A sweet piece of silky oak.
Pile in, you blokes.'
And he slipped home the latch.

WETHER COUNTRY

Pricked out with stumps and rotting logs and sticks,
Hills ringed with sheep-tracks crossing tracks between
The meat ants' gravel towns; the sheep-camps green
In winter, white in summer; and where the axe
Has spared a southern slope of trees, it looks
Like an invasion, trees parachuting down
On white shroud-lines, dun canopies. Even
The moon is thin between the rocks in creeks.
But the planners are cleaning it up. Where wattle showed
Its yellow dog-tooth and wild orchids split
Shale with their hooded thought, where morning-glory
Blushed like a schoolgirl on a country road,
Dreaming, remembered, bulldozers forage. It
Will soon be pine hills, pulp for another story.

BELLBIRDS

Bell-miners ring like axemen in the green timber:
Chink ching and a water tree
Sways on its dappled bole, one hundred feet
Of waterfall, and falls; and the long reach
Rocks in pockets of light in the shocked silence
Of water tinkling over stone. *Ching chink!*

The axes redouble their labour, falling like rain;
Lopping the branches, chopping the bole
Into lengths for the waiting jinker. And the bells
Ring out *ching chink* from the harness of the horses
As the forests melt away. In snowing sawmills
You can hear the thawing of the water. *Ching!*

Chink chink! Ching ching! To the song of tiny hammers
Houses go up in the clearing. Men squint down beams;
The beams arch over like ribs, barring the stars
That chime at night in the lonely tree by the window;
And two bell-miners cock their heads in their cage,
Rusty green birds that sometimes sing *ching chink*.

WIND

Wind hurries through the
Dark like fear, tearing
Its thin skin on briars,
Lurching into houses.
Birds catch in its hair.

The wind is boneless
Dark air. The trees
Have their own ailments,
Houses their lives to live. Hills
Cornered, bare bleak stone.

What is all the hurry
Wind? A date with a dustman or
Itch with a conscience
Peering down chimneys, caught in corners,
Trying lockers and drawers?

The wind can't sleep. The bed-
Springs need oiling. They
Coil in the mattress waiting
To spring through in houses
People used to call home.

PORTENTS OVER COFFEE

1

Turtles hatch in the hot sands
Of Florida. This summer
Shouldering from shells, they turned
Their backs on the nursery waters of the Gulf
And headed inland. Volunteers
Wheeling them to sea declare
Thousands slipped snake-headed through their hands
To perish on the highways.

2

At Boston, Mass.

Five negro teenagers
Forced a young wife to drench herself
In gasoline, and flicked a match.
The woman in a hood of fire
Walked two crowded blocks and crossed
A street to call an ambulance.

3

At the West Coast Sanctuary
For pelicans, at nesting time
The egg shells proved so frail
They smashed like unfired clay beneath
The feathers of the mother birds.
No young survived.

SYDNEY SANDSTONE
(ROCK CARVINGS)

Fish and Moon

It rained. I sheltered under a low bush
Uncovering a fish
That swam, as the moon rose and the pools filled,
In scales of silver in those lunar hills.

Lyrebird

The lyrebird dancing in a trance
Of stone and silence makes
A song in amber sweeter than the pause
Between the honeyeater's sipping notes.

Seagull

The gull turns on the wind and its brief shadow
Falls cleanly through the wave
On rippled sand. In stone its flight is stayed,
A moment weathering to eternity.

Gumbooya

The great pocked rock wallows on the hill crown
Pecked out with whales and monsters

That rise from deeps among red bungalows
Guarded by concrete gnomes, to trouble sleep.

Hermaphrodite

About the lovers, creatures of the chase
Crop lichen without fear
In an enchanted ring. Half man, half woman,
A figure like Tiresias broods apart.

Woman and Whale

A whale blows from the sandstone, and a girl
Dreams naked in those jaws
Where she is doubly lost, for see the whale
Is sinking through the rockface like a ghost.

Ball's Head

The city towers and rumbles. At Ball's Head
On a flat rock among
The wharves and tankers at the town's back door,
Is a carving: Jonah swallowed by the whale.

Moonie Moonie

While the storm passed we sheltered in a cave
Where there were stencilled hands;
And three black cockatoos creaked by like ghosts
Of others who sought shelter while the storm passed.

LE WOMBAT

*Voyage de Découvertes Aux Terres Australes
(Atlas par MM. Lesueur et Petit)*

Le wombat inhabits the Ile King
Of Terre Napoléon
En Nouvelle Hollande.

L'île de l'artiste M. Lesueur
Is a scrubby cloud where
Le wombat bleu watches
La femelle rousse watching
While four enfants wombats terribles
Climb out of her pouch. Voilà!

Les wombats mère et père
Have the innocence of a magician
Producing un lapin blanc
From le chapeau noir.

If le père wombat bleu
Were to burrow in the shallow cloud
They would tumble tout de suite
Into le Golfe Joséphine. Les pauvres!

At l'ouverture du Golfe Joséphine
Is un pied-à-terre circumnavigated
By la corvette le *Géographe* in 1803,
Le capitaine, M. Baudin.

Ah l'Ile Decrés! where le casoar
Displayed his petites jambes bleues
And fine blue mutton-chops
Before his harlequin poulets. Hélas!
The dwarf emus of Kangaroo Island
Are only to be found today
Dans l'oeuvre de l'artiste M. Lesueur.

And la ville de Sydney
En Nouvelle Galles du Sud
With her moulins et boulangeries,
Her magasin de liqueurs fortes et de salaisons,
Mr Palmer's Woolloomooloo habitation,
Mr Campbell's débarcadère,
And the black Première Potence en Activité
Dans le Village de Brick-field,
The natives blowing coals
Among the stacked-up merchandise
By the Route de Parramatta?

Lunching above cloud
Above the murmur of the turning city
And the geographical outlines of
La ville de Sydney 1802 preserved
Dans l'atlas de l'artiste M. Lesueur,
We are moved by the innocence of the penal colony
As by le wombat français de l'Ile King
And les travaux executés dans le Golfe Bonaparte
A bord de la corvette le *Géographe*.
'Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!'

RED BRIDGE

Part 1

If you can do away with one, then why not several?

— Nadezhda Mandelstam

The Wolf Of Gubbio

Sassetta

In perfect line astern the heron
Describe like bombers after 'Bombs away'
An arc above the city

And the road swings through the wood
Between dead men's bones
In the foreground
A head and naked leg are shrewd reminders

Send these courtiers to a tailor and you have
Any Peace Delegation
The wolf is a reasonable fellow

St Francis ('Hold it') holds his paw
Yesterday's Kissinger
The airy delegates
Discuss the international weather

And the people look down from the walls
At the wood and the foreshortened group
About to smile
The wolf will keep his word.

Deaf Man's House

Goya

A functional square lantern
Supplied by the commissariat
It throws a plastic beam

'To shoot me is unthinkable'
Yet the rifles do not falter
A red plastic flows
El 3 de Mayo 1808

And all night outside my window
The gestures of the falling
Now at breakfast
Saturn devouring his child

The Lord be praised
For my deafness
Yet in the spirit
Blue wounds and a rending of bone.

On An Engraving By Jacques Callot

For R.F.B.

We fruit in season, Monsieur; and life goes on.
Bronze autumn groans with corpses. Not to lose,
You'd think the one orthodoxy, yet the cross
A laddered priest thrusts up where shin by shin
Swing the converted and shall rise again.
What is appalling is the lack of fuss.
When death is every day, death lives with us
On neighbour terms. That bird with her young man
Finds her blood quickened. Tongue-tied by her need,
Syllables falter, eye communes with eye,
And beauty masks plain faces. It is the seed
Asserting its right to live, for see men die.
Here, anywhere, love seeks its consummation,
To fruit in season, Monsieur. And life goes on.

Brother And Sister

A brother and sister, gold dust on their skin,
Poise in the terminus, and an animal
Looks up incurious above the kill
As over ivory chessmen. The keen sun
Like Donatello traces in eye and chin
The lineaments of beauty. From what temple
In Sanchi did they steal their self-forgetful
Sensuousness, their innocence of sin?

They stand as on the confines of the land
Of parrots and the Wak Wak tree. They will
Find many masks and faces here, the best
Will sympathise, will even understand
And love them as a duty while the rest
Banter like Abraham climbing with knives the hill.

Part 2

*The bear, the wolf, the fox subdued –
All these the painter showed, and more,
Then overturned his pots of paint
And threw his brushes on the floor.*

— Rosemary Dobson, 'The Wild Wood'

Rote Brücke

The moon is a cool goddess
The seas obey her
She has drenched the town in blue

A whale blows in the fountain
Dolphins wheel by windows
Fishermen
Tug at the nets of sleep

The Roman wall goes under
Bloodied with memories
Keels plough the square fields

In his violet tower
Paul Klee puts out the lighthouse
Goes back to the dead

Rippling the moon
Looks through blue water
At the fishing town.

Suzanne Valadon

Modelling for young Renoir who said
'I was born lucky
I can do nothing but paint'

Not strictly true
In the end
An Italian journalist
Gave his name to the child

Utrillo
Might have been one of a dozen
Cela ne fait rien

Dealing my heavy sketches
For the master
Degas grumbled
'You are one of us'

And Maurice an alcoholic at eleven
Drawing streetscenes from postcards
His White Period absinth

Gets him out in the air
And Auguste Renoir arthritic
The brush strapped to his hand

In the country it is quiet
I have my drawings
and my memories
And a famous son
sometimes sober.

Cezanne

Son of a provincial banker
He attended Manet's evenings at the café Guerbois
In filthy clothes
 'Maître' wiping a hand

Savage on canvas sullen on sidewalks
 'He would have invented love'
 But lived with Hortense Fiquet
 endangering his allowance

Critics were scornful Zola began
L'Oeuvre of the artist-suicide
Dogged resentments
 Made him turn even from Pissaro

Finally there was nature and Aix
 'I advanced my canvas all at the one time'
 'My canvas joins hands So'
 He had found his master

Mont Sainte-Victoire prayed for him
Fruit and fields showed their true sides
Melons worshipped at the classic dome of his head

Peasants played cards like royalty
ignoring him

The town mocked

In the end all was the same
His gardener Vallier became the wall

Famous rich in rags he stumbled through storm
With his 'unfinished' canvases
That did not vacillate although he died

Compost and bone
Roots of Paul Klee's tree
 whose abstract boughs
Are tagged by the rival schools.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon

Picasso mocked: *Les Demoiselles* is good!
I painted a bordello

All the same
You may recognise a pious friend or two

There were sailors in the drawings
But somehow they got lost at sea
Maybe
That is the cause Les Demoiselles are sad

His friend Braque cautioned 'Painting like that
Is like swallowing petrol
In order to spit fire'

Chance callers turned their eyes up turned
To his slim circus wanderers
but returned
The painting changed the vision of a century

A retired railway clerk
Le Douanier Rousseau laid aside his bow
And raised a hand in blessing like his Muse

'We are the masters of the age Monsieur
You in the Egyptian manner
I in the modern.'

Matisse

The leader of the Wild Beasts wished
His art to be an easy chair
For tired businessmen

Voices from childhood urged
Hurry Hurry
A voice quite alien to normal life

Lines which constitute a sort of writing
The idea of absolute blue
A larger space beyond intimacy

There was the light from the window
The blacks and other colours
And the subtleties absorbed from the model

Two world wars and the master
Painted his cool girls
'Creating things that are beyond me.'

Blue eyes behind gold rimmed glasses
'Everything I have done
I have done from passion.'

Modigliani

Stroking red wine
On the white tablecloth I invented her
Cara cara Italia

Eyes of a Siamese cat
Neck of the swan
Breasts of breaking pomegranate

Soutine surly a slaughtered ox
Painted in blood
They have guillotined beauty

Cara cara Italia
Caro le vin Utrillo
Cara Jeanne – 'Haricot Rouge'

Her parents have shut the door
They eat slaughtered pigmeat
Should I die
Jeanne swears she will jump out the window

Neck of a swan
Broken pomegranates
The end of beauty *Cara!*

Balthus Girls

Hanging out of windows
Noses in books
Showing their drawers

Dreaming naked in a looking glass
Looking for pimples
Nipples pubic hair

(The absorbed candid stare
Of nobody there)

I am Cleopatra
She tells her cat
On the chaise longue gown thrown back
Show Caesar in

I shall give someone
Merry hell
See if I don't

And she is a hot bird burning
Desperate with the pillow on her bed
Pillows can play dumb

And she is sad
Watching a tear snail
Through gold down Salt

In *La chambre*
Watched by the cat
Mother throws the curtains wide

Shameless! but she is not
Sleeping Beauty Princess & Frog
No living man could live up to her wish.

Hoosick Falls: Grandma Moses

For Lorna Tracy

It snowed in Hoosick Falls
The yellow train
Froze like fingers to the metal rails

A couple in their travelling clothes
Halted as they locked a pinewood door
The skaters paused on the white stream

The horses of the coloured sleighs
Felt the bits chill
 Ice blued a spire
The congregation held a note in awe

Windows stared
 Like snow
Silence settled on the wooden town
Some blamed the ten-thumbed snowman

The child in red outside the post-office
Put down her brush
 And wrinkled into age
The years roar over Hoosick Falls.

RELIQUES, FROM THE CELTS

The Blackbird's Song

It is eleven thousand sea miles to Loch Loigh
And eleven centuries
Since the blackbird sang there in a yellow bough
That calls from this page and in my garden trees.

The Red And The White

The red rose and the white rose meet
In a red skirt by the river:
The red may shed its petals yet
The white rose is my lover.

Edan

A thousand years and fair Edan have gone,
Edan who would not sleep a night alone.

TWO SONGS WITH SPANISH BURDENS

1

A Grey Singlet

I was washing my lover's grey shearing singlet
When a squatter drew rein beside our quince tree
On a red impatient horse, with me at the copper:
And 'How much do you want for that stinking shirt?'
says he.

Though his singlet is grey, his skin is a lily.

'A semi-trailer load of trade wethers would not buy it,
Nor a pen of prime lambs sappy from their mothers,
Nor a yarding of vealers with a leg in each corner,
Nor a mob of springing heifers with the dew on their
nostrils.'

Though his singlet is grey, his skin is a lily.

'Not for a white homestead with a verandah all around it
And in vine-shade a waterbag of cool well water,
Thyme crushed on stone paths and bruised plums in
the orchard,
Would I sell my lover's singlet to a show-off on horse-
back.'

Though his singlet is grey, his skin is a lily.

Spring Lambs

Winter blows itself out with quick cloud and white
sunshine;
Crows go down the wind like crepe torn from a funeral
And their cry the tearing. You ride home in the
evening
With a flame in one cheek and a lamb on your pommel.

*If you feed my lambs, I shall kiss you;
Otherwise I'll feed them and you may kiss me.*

Frost feathers the grass and furs the fence wires;
There's ice in the bucket and a moon in the morning
Over the paddocks where shadows are frozen
And you vanish in mist while I stand gazing.

*If you feed my lambs, I shall kiss you;
Otherwise I'll feed them and you may kiss me.*

White lambs leap up under the quince trees;
They suck blue milk from a dented bucket,
Tugging at my fingers and at my heart strings.
Thoughts follow your hoof tracks like a shy blue
heeler.

*If you feed my lambs, I shall kiss you;
Otherwise I'll feed them and you may kiss me.*

SERRANILLA

Ambling through Monaro
I lost my bearings:
Hills were young breasts,
The weather was snowing.

A homestead light
Held out yellow fingers.
'Come in', called the lady;
'We see few strangers.

'My mother and daddy
Lie under stone here;
And my darling, my husband,
Is selling shares in Canberra.

'Come in, don't be shy;
Here are fire and sherry,
While I make up the bed
In my vine-grown nursery.

'We will get a son
Who will be Vice-Chancellor
Or the garbo man
For the whole of Canberra.'

Her smile was shining
Like the midnight sun:

We'll staff Ursula College
Before cock cries dawn.

WORK

'Sweet pretty creature': Shepherd's Companion

A bird and a cow forage together
In a blond paddock. The cow
Snails her blue tongue round dock,
Digesting the hours
To a line of cowpat clouds on the horizon.

The bird flits about her hocks
In pursuit of gnats. A black and white
Mechanical weathercock,
All the still noon
While the trees sleep, he is hard at work.

A blue calf butts for milk, props and in play
Chases the sharp bird
In and out of the cow turds.
Hear him swear: 'Some people won't grow up.
Damn silly creature. Bugger off. Go away!'

FLAWN

1

White suns come up: thin
Jaw-bones of moon and
Heron in willows. Dew is pale,
Wet footsteps walk off green.

Through bearded rock, briars' pink
Fingers, thoughts leap
After me like goats,
Butt under silence, sleep.

Rattle of droppings, hooves: tap
Of verses or a blind stick? Goats
Leap white as frost on hills
Furred with the blue of icicles.

2

In the centre of a high
Like cracks in skim ice
Is the spiderweb
Cold.
Like a furred hand,
Slim fingers
Fingering a banjo,
Winter fishes the wires.

Gilt pluck of a bird.

WATERCOLOURS

1

Parson's Bands

I met beside the sea
Two priestly orchids three
Centimetres tall
Who stood with outstretched hands:
To bless, in sleep, to fall?
They call them Parson's Bands.

The sea rang like a bell.
Its green vibrations crawl
From the horizon and
Like mile-long dozer-blades
Rip up the cliffs for sand
And wet the orchids' heads.

2

Ruszkowski At Depot Beach

The waves unfold along the shore
And ripples widen in the pools.
Art is like a cabbage leaf
Ruszkowski said; and kangaroos
On withered forelegs graze the green.

The shy beasts pitch like dinghies and
Fishingboats like kangaroos
Browse the blue kale of the sea
That veined and mottled, holed with light,
Unfolds broad leaves along the shore.

3

Pram On A Beach

A stroller on the beach
Abandoned by the waves,
Wheels pigeon-toed in sand,
Bare frame of rusted chrome:
The waves green on the reef,
A gull cries like a child,
But the pram's skeleton
As jauntily awry
And tragic as a clown,
Keeps itself to itself.
Under the teetering cliff
Where kite and kestrel build,
It weathers and is dumb
To lovers hand in hand
In blue depths eye to eye.

HEAD OF THE RIVER

Four of us in the river: Mal,
My youngest son, fourteen,
And the French girl, as good as naked,
Who chickened us in;

And me, of course, game to the last,
Sea-lion among green weed
Bubbling a call of lust.
She and Mal swarm off.

All afternoon the eights and fours
Stroked the long river
Like coloured dragonflies; and younger
Than youth, I tumbled for her:

For the woman of Lawes. Her ancestors
Brewed beer in Flanders and
Drank wine in Paris. She was cool and curved
As Chateau Yquem. Faint bubbles rose.

'Your Strine wine does not give!'
Mal's smile was slow as summer. 'I rowed once;
And then I saw the morning.' Eights
Walked on the water and were gone.

They've stacked the shells in tiers
For another year. White counterpanes

Cover the beds of the Mens' ward
Where I ferment with fever, chill as wine.

DEATHS AND PRETTY COUSINS

1

Mr Hughes

When my grandmother left the races with Mr Hughes,
She left at the same time eight children and a husband
The committee deeply loved. She waved a hand
And Mr Hughes was dressed in purples and blues.
He kissed the hand and listened to her views
Which did not surprise him. He bought newspapers and
Confectionery and said in yellow grand-
Mother looked delightful. He was a goose;
And she never regretted leaving the maids, the flies,
The paddocks and the children – not to mention
That house and its verandahs. Throwing up her eyes,
There was the ferry greening into Mosman –
So convenient. Her rooms were bright if snug.
Mr Hughes smiled like a tiger from the rug.

2

Portrait Of A Daughter

From P.L.C. and dreaming and *The Girls' Own Annual*, Madge worried home. But as the train
Blew in to the toy siding on the quicksilver plain,
She knew her true calling. There was father, and her
brown

Eyes filled with selfless tears, though he swung her down
And around in a waltz, quite unlike the heroine
Of her high journey. 'And how is my little kitten?' —
She'd do anything for him. — 'Wearing our first frown?'
For father would not be serious though the David Jones
Account swallowed the wool-cheque. 'There is
Yarragreen.'

There were also nurse and the children, the maids and
the men,
And cook whom she feared, though from her even
tones,
Who would ever know? For there was her dream to
sustain
Her; and her love for father. He became her romance.

3

Josephine

Jo was the first to go. She was four feet ten
And men and mirrors loved her. She said to cook:
'If I hear one word of you, I'll come straight back
And fire you from a cannon.' 'That Josephine!
She would, you know.' It took a cup and scone
To settle cook's ruffled feathers. Jo had no truck
With Gran whom she loathed, and her gigolo. 'Good
luck

To the pair of them!' In six months she held the town
In her small gloved pointing hand. For Josephine
Could put a ring around the moment. It sang
With first-light innocence suddenly come of age.
So she endured seven engagements, maybe nine,
And an unhappy marriage. When men were tongue-
Tied, she listened. For months, they were the rage.

4

News Of The Family

Shem loved her mother and horses. She rode at shows.
Bruce wrote from Yarragreen. Spring racing, Madge met
A green-eyed doctor who joked with father. At
Petty's her room filled up with flowers. A rose
Lay on her plate. She found one in her shoes
In the corridor. The doctor would sit and chat
For hours with father and then like father let
His eyes stray to her. Before he could propose
She left, but he caught her at the station. Reg
Played the piano and sailed for Gallipoli.
When the boys came home, he told young khakied Dan,
'It was bloody shocking,' and never spoke again.
The children were growing up. Behind the hedge
Norman rolled his pretty governess, and came to stay.

5

Men!

My mother and aunts were shocked but not surprised
By talk of Mr Hughes and an affair
With the wife of a French woolbuyer. But how dare
He! Surely being poor, the fellow realised
His duty of self-interest? He should be pleased,
Whisking Gran off and sponging on her. Where
Would she go now? My aunts were in despair;
And mother caught the ferry. Admiring, she paused
By a blue garden where a pink old man
Was fashioning a nosegay: 'For a friend,'
He said, 'who walks about this hour.' And grand-
mother came round the corner. 'There you are!'
Her nose in flowers, she said, 'No harm, my dear;
Though men get jealous. Men! Have you a pin?'

6

Ulinda

There was a duck egg as green as the evening sky.
Trout hovered in the horse-trough. The road was white
And vanished like a headache in sheets of light
And pale blue mountains. The homestead creek was
dry
And warm with pebbles. Grandfather said that *Why?*
Was a crooked letter. His beard got in his plate.
'Milk grandfather. Sugar grandfather.' 'Now that
Is just what I can't have.' And he winked the bluest
eye.

It was like the duck egg. We were only playing a game,
But mother left the table; so we ran along.
One sundown they butchered a pig and I saw it scream.
I held my ears and it went on screaming. 'What's wrong?'
They said. 'It's only a dream.' But I sang in my dream:
'Grandfather's dying. He's going to die,' I sang.

7

Deaths and Pretty Cousins

When Mr Hughes died at seventy-three, Gran
Was ninety. I looked after her for one day
In her Wahroonga flat. She had a way
Of sitting under her portrait, *Young Girl with Fan*:
Neither was good. She had a list that ran
To a dozen items. I could do it all by railway:
It meant four stops for I was not to pay;
She ran accounts. I felt sorry for that man
Hughes; and so were they. Dear Mr Wyatt:
They'd miss him. Always a smile. Each day he came
At the same time — you could set your watch — not
that
He wasn't running down — for the Gold Top cream.
Of her death, I recall Gran's nose and some pretty
cousins
I had not met before. They were Uncle Norman's.

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