

II: Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2000

Les Murray: *'Mysticism and Poetry'*;  
and Nigel White's *'After Les'*, figures.

(In Memory of Gerard Hamer)

*Introduction: Penelope Nelson*

Good evening and welcome. I am Penelope Nelson. It's a great pleasure to welcome you to this second event in our series *Mysticism and the Muse*. This is an event organized by the Society for the Studies in Religion, Literature and the Arts – such a mouthful! We say the RLA Society – under the leadership of Dr Colette Rayment. It is the second of these evenings in which we are attempting to look at the sources of creativity across boundaries of different art forms and last month we started with a very exciting lecture that some of you were here for with Contemporary Artist, Ross Mellick, who drew links between his own art and the story of Rilke's creation of his series of *Elegies*. And interestingly enough Ross Edwards' composition, *Raft Song at Sunrise*. And we ended the night with wonderful haunting music on the bamboo flute. Riley Lee playing shakuhachi. If you missed that and are intrigued by that particular creative story – he had one image of creativity that it was like walking along an ice-floe and suddenly out of the blue the ice in front of you cracks, a blue whale pops its head up looks around, vanishes again and in time the ice freezes over. That tape is for sale tonight.

Tonight will be combining the visual arts with poetry. I am delighted to be able to welcome Les Murray and Nigel White. Most of you have seen Nigel's works, entitled *After Les, figures* – had a little glimpse of them. Towards seven o'clock we'll be moving back to the McDonald's room where Les will officially open that part of the proceedings. In introducing Les I will just say that the title we originally gave this lecture has turned out to be a complete red herring. We gave it the title 'Tom Fisher

was *My Grail King*' which was the first line of Les's poem 'Incunabular' which is a poem about Fisher Library. Les has been ruminating about the topic *mysticism and poetry*. He's not going anywhere near Fisher Library or that poem which is probably just as well because it's one of those spoonerism lines that I find very hard not to say Tim Fischer was my Grail King so he intends to read and talk about the creative sources and spiritual significance of about twelve or thirteen of his poems. So I'll ask you to join me in welcoming Les Murray.

*Les Murray*

Thanks Penny, actually she thought of that title and I thought it was such a rattler, you know you can do anything under that title – splendid. I was about to read you about the first five lines of it but she has now dispensed me from doing that. I thought I'd show you some samples of poems that I think are relevant to the topic and say a little bit about each of them although I don't want to trap them in authorial comment. I would start with a couple of general things and they are mostly disclaimers.

I'd say that I'm not a mystic poetic in the sense of claiming any privileged communications from on high. I only get the same communication as everybody else is offered and that is Jesus, you know. I'm not a religious poet in the sense of say St John of the Cross. Somebody sent me his book the other day translated by Roy Campbell. It's a wonderful thing and I'm more of a poet who is religious. There are religious poets and poets who are religious and I'm a poet who is religious in fairly shaky ways, you know. I started life as a Calvinist and became a Catholic many years later. And I suppose I tend to write from fairly low down. I thought that it would be fair to say that I write more about the heart than the height of things.

So I am reading some poems that are relevant. I looked at my whole list of poems that I have published over the last – say, getting on close to forty years and I found forty or fifty that would have been relevant. There were a few lines that were relevant in each but I thought, no, keep it down, keep it tight, keep it down to a level of twelve or thirteen.

The first one was written in 1967. It's called 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow' and it arose from being called twelve thousand miles from Sydney and thinking about coffee shops. When I got to Sydney in 1957 it was the great age – it was the first age, of the coffee shop – the espresso machine and my education came, in equal parts I think, from Fisher Library, this Library and Lorenzini's Coffee Shop and smaller parts from all sorts of other adventures – mainly I suppose the Sydney University Film Society, but least of all possibly, lectures; but I learnt a few things in lectures. I learnt the German language. That was useful.

And I've lived in two cultural eras. That was very much still the era that I call the Calvinist-Stoical one – the era when people were supposed to have extreme self-control. It was a world that came out of the Reformation. It came out of war, it didn't believe in depression, it didn't allow too much display of emotion, messy emotions. And then within a very short time after I wrote this poem, a new era arose which I suppose these days we call political correctness which in some ways was a strange mirror image of that era of Calvinist-Stoicism. Calvinist-Stoicism of course has not gone away; it's still there in many fields. It is still quite dominant in business and in pastoral life and the military and many places like that and I'm happiest when I'm in neither of those worlds. I'm not really comfortable in Calvinist-Stoical world or the world of political correctness. I'm happiest I suppose in a Christian atmosphere or a Judeo-Christian atmosphere. This poem probably arose from consideration of the coffee shops and of the emotional parsimony which was required of God's frozen people in those days. And I used to think that's what it meant; but I'm not all sure what it means now – I don't know what it means at all except that I think that it is a permanent sort of sign of contradiction of whatever era is going at the time. And the poem goes:

An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow

The word goes round Repins,  
the murmur goes round Lorenzini's,

at Tattersalls, men look up from sheets of numbers,  
the Stock Exchange scribblers forget the chalk in their hands  
and men with bread in their pockets leave the Greek Club:  
There's a fellow crying in Martin Place. They can't stop him.

The traffic in George Street is banked up for half a mile  
and drained of motion. The crowds are edgy with talk  
and more crowds come hurrying. Many run in the back streets  
which minutes ago were busy main streets, pointing:  
There's a fellow weeping down there. No one can stop him.

The man we surround, the man no one approaches  
simply weeps, and does not cover it, weeps  
not like a child, not like the wind, like a man  
and does not declaim it, nor beat his breast, nor even  
sob very loudly – yet the dignity of his weeping

holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes about him  
in the midday light, in his pentagram of sorrow,  
and uniforms back in the crowd who tried to seize him  
stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their minds  
longing for tears as children for a rainbow.

Some will say, in the years to come, a halo  
or force stood around him. There is no such thing.  
Some will say they were shocked and would have stopped him  
but they will not have been there. The fiercest manhood,  
the toughest reserve, the slickest wit amongst us

trembles with silence, and burns with unexpected  
judgements of peace. Some in the concourse scream  
who thought themselves happy. Only the smallest children

and such as look out of Paradise come near him  
and sit at his feet, with dogs and dusty pigeons.

Ridiculous, says a man near me, and stops  
his mouth with his hands, as if it uttered vomit –  
and I see a woman, shining, stretch her hand  
and shake as she receives the gift of weeping;  
as many as follow her also receive it

and many weep for sheer acceptance, and more  
refuse to weep for fear of all acceptance,  
but the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing,  
the man who weeps ignores us, and cries out  
of his writhen face and ordinary body

not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow,  
hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea –  
and when he stops, he simply walks between us  
mopping his face with the dignity of one  
man who has wept, and now has finished weeping.

Evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street.

There was a fellow came from Persia once to do a thesis on the wonderful topic of *the theme of blood in Les Murray's poetry!* He was a lovely man called Mohammed Tavalai. He was a Sufi, really a Shiite Muslim, but he was a Sufi, you know, believed in the fair equality of Christianity, Judaism and Islam and he always thought I was one of them. And there might be a bit in it.

This poem is called 'The Broad Bean Sermon' and to introduce it I would just say that I learned a word the other day 'dadirri' which is an Aboriginal word from the Roper River – discernment of the spirit in things. I don't think you can discern the actual

spirit in a thing – the one that only God sees, but I think that you can discern a spirit in things and you can certainly see given a sense of its inner life and I've done a lot of that in poems. It is a poem of close observation and openness to the facts which I do a lot of. And words in poetry, I don't think, isolate – in science they tend to isolate themselves from other associations but in poetry they include – it's an opposite way of using language. They suggest connection. So this poem – whatever poems say they are about, they're also about humans. This one's about broad 'beans' but it's also about human beans. Okay.

### The Broad Bean Sermon

Beanstalks, in any breeze, are a slack church parade  
without belief, saying *trespass against us* in unison,  
recruits in mint Air Force dacron, with unbuttoned leaves.

Upright with water like men, square in stem-section  
they grow to great lengths, drink rain, keel over all ways,  
kink down and grow up afresh, with proffered new greenstuff.

Above the cat-and-mouse floor of a thin bean forest  
snails hang rapt in their food, ants hurry through several dimensions:  
spiders tense and sag like little black flags in their cordage.

Going out to pick beans with the sun high as fence-tops, you find  
plenty, and fetch them. An hour or a cloud later  
you find shirtfulls more. At every hour of daylight

appear more than you missed: ripe, knobbly ones, fleshy-sided,  
thin-straight, thin-crescent, frown-shaped, bird-shouldered, boat-keeled  
ones,  
beans knuckled and single-bulged, minute green dolphins at suck,

beans upright like lecturing, outstretched like blessing fingers  
in the incident light, and more still, oblique to your notice  
that the noon glare or cloud-light or afternoon slants will uncover

till you ask yourself Could I have overlooked so many, or  
do they form in an hour? unfolding into reality  
like templates for subtly broad grins, like unique caught expressions,

like edible meanings, each sealed around with a string  
and affixed to its moment, an unceasing colloquial assembly,  
the portly, the stiff, and those lolling in pointed green slippers ...

Wondering who'll take the spare bagfulls, you grin with happiness  
– it is your health – you vow to pick them all  
even the last few, weeks off yet, misshapen as toes.

The next poem here is called 'The Mitchells' and it is more particularly about language and style – an older Australian style which is now unfashionable. It speaks about ritual and ritual I think is a universal thing – it's a given thing – part of human behaviour. And ritual underlies ritual – you know the rituals you do in church are underlain by a human tendency to ritual and rituals are bit autistic. But so is every human being; we are all a little bit autistic. I know it because we've got a child who is the full thing – who is autistic. From that you learn to see the autism in everyone – there's a little bit every where. There is a beautiful Jewish one which is used in prayer. It's called *daviner*, rocking or nodding as you're praying. You see that in every autistic child in the world. Okay, this poem is called the 'The Mitchells'.

### The Mitchells

I am seeing this: two men are sitting on a pole  
they have dug a hole for and will, after dinner, raise  
I think for wires. Water boils in a prune tin.

Bees hum their shift in unthinning mists of white

bursaria blossom, under the noon of wattles.

The men eat big meat sandwiches out of a styrofoam  
box with a handle. One is overheard saying:

*drought that year. Yes. Like trying to farm the road.*

The first man, if asked, would say *I'm one of the Mitchells.*

The other would gaze for a while, dried leaves in his palm,  
and looking up, with pain and subtle amusement,

*say I'm one of the Mitchells.* Of the pair, one has been rich  
but never stopped wearing his oil-stained felt hat. Nearly everything  
they say is ritual. Sometimes the scene is an avenue.

A theme that I worked through a few times – you tend in poetry to come around to a certain subject or theme a few times until you think that you've got it down and you've finally got it written, got it said. And one of mine was the theme of peace and it's the conflict between peace and human rigour. We see in our society the use of war imagery a lot, particularly in enterprise or in politics – the enterprise of revolution. Humans need their victories and their poems, you know their centres of meaning of significance. In some ways the original sin of modern society is the passion to originate and be famous, to change, to make the world begin. This is a short poem from a longer series called 'Machine Portraits with Pendant Spaceman' which comments on it and its about a crane. I actually went and rode in a crane to get it and I was very proud of the fact that the crane driver put the poem up in his cabin.

No riddles about a crane. This one drops a black clanger on cars  
and the palm of its four-thumbed steel hand is a raptor of wrecked  
tubing;

the ones up the highway hoist porridgy concrete, long spars  
and the local skyline; whether raising aloft on a string



bizarre workaday angels, or letting down a rotating  
man on a sphere, these machines are inclined to maintain  
a peace like world war, in which we turn over everything  
to provide unceasing victories. Now the fluent lines stop, and strain  
engrosses this tower on the frontier of junk, this crane.

When I first came to Sydney the place was more or less settled. There wasn't much building going on. They were fairly satisfied. But by the sixties the place became a great field of victory – a great field of rebuilding and it's been that way ever since. I think in many ways that drove me out of Sydney, the fact that it was so full of a kind of warfare against the past and a desire for victories. And one poem my wife brought home from a parking lot in Chatswood once is another slant on the same subject called 'The Hypogeum'.

### The Hypogeum

Below the moveable gardens of this shopping centre  
down concrete ways  
to a level of rainwater  
a black lake glimmering among piers, electric lighted  
windless, of no depth.

Rare shafts of daylight  
waver at their base. As the water is shaken, the few  
cars parked down here seem to rock. In everything  
there strains that silent crash, that reverberation  
which persists in concrete.

### The cardboard carton

Lorenzo's Natural Flavour Italian Meat Balls has foundered  
into a wet ruin. Dutch Cleanser is propped at a high  
featureless wall. Self-raising Flour is still floating  
and supermarket trolleys hang their inverse harps,  
silver leaking from them.

What will help the informally religious  
to endure peace? Surface water dripping into  
this underworld makes now a musical blip,  
now rings from nowhere.

Young people descending the ramp  
pause at the water's brink, banging their voices.

Probably relevant to heroin.... I wrote in a book called *Freddie Neptune* which I'm not going to talk about much tonight because it's too big and long to get stuck into; but there's a line in there which read *'Things that didn't happen are a history too, maybe they're heaven's history'*. I wrote this poem and I wasn't sure about it. I wrote it in a couple of forms. It may not be right yet exactly; but it's an interesting subject. The subject of the things that never happen because they were prevented and how much of the dynamic and history comes from things that were not allowed to happen – how much worse could it have got? It's the theme I suppose of negative achievement. It's discounted because it's invisible and un-provable. If a cart had run over Adolf Hitler would we know what we had been spared? No we wouldn't. We may find that this wasn't trivial. There was a time when a lot of babies died; eventually medicine prevented these deaths and people who never came to exist suddenly did come to exist and the world changed. The poem is called 'The Chimes of Nowhere'

The Chimes of Nowhere

*How many times did the Church prevent war?*

*Who knows? Those wars did not occur.*

*How many numbers don't count before ten?*

*Treasures of the Devil in Nowhere.*

The neither state of Nowhere  
is hard to place as near or far  
since all things that didn't take place are there  
and things that have lost the place they took:

Herr Hitler's buildings, King James' cigar,  
the happiness of Armenia,  
the Abelard children, the Manchus' return  
are there with the Pictish Grammar Book.

The girl who returned your dazzled look  
and the mornings you might have woke to her  
are your waterbed in Neverwhere.  
There shine the dukes of Australia

and all the great poems that never were  
quite written, and every balked invention.  
There too are the Third AIF and its war  
in which I and boys my age were killed

more pointlessly with each passing year.  
There too half the works of sainthood are  
the enslavements, tortures, rapes, despair  
deflected by them from the actual

to beat on the human-sacrifice drum  
that billions need not to die to hear  
since Christ's love of them struck it dumb  
and his agony keeps it in Neverwhere.

*How many times did the Church bring peace?  
More times than it happened. Leave it back there:  
the children we didn't let out of there need it,  
for the Devil's at home in Neverwhere.*

Weird poem that one. I'm not sure whether I like it or not but I thought to write it.

Rituals are a comfort and a bore as any kid being forced to go to church will tell you. But the illuminations of religion like those of poetry come when they come and must be cultivated to allow them to come. I've got this theory of poetry that has three legs. Not just poetry, poetry *and* art have three legs. They are the conscious mind, the dreaming mind and the body. Art is a sort of a concert between the three. It's a kind of fusion of the three which never lasts for very long. It lays down its deposit in the work; it's nothing new. It goes away but some people have it in other forms that you would never think of particularly as art. A racing driver will have it in the form of a Porsche perhaps. I think that's the introduction to this poem anyway it's called 'Poetry and Religion'.

### Poetry and Religion

Religions are poems. They concert  
our daylight and dreaming mind, our  
emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture

into the only whole thinking: poetry.  
Nothing's said till it's dreamed out in words  
and nothing's true that figures in words only.

A poem, compared with an arrayed religion,  
may be like a soldier's one short marriage night  
to die and live by. But that is a small religion.

Full religion is the large poem in loving repetition;  
like any poem, it must be inexhaustible and complete  
with turns where we ask Now why did the poet do that?

You can't pray a lie, said Huckleberry Finn;  
you can't poe one either. It is the same mirror:  
mobile, glancing, we call it poetry,

fixed centrally, we call it a religion,  
and God is the poetry caught in any religion,  
caught, not imprisoned. Caught as in a mirror

that he attracted, being in the world as poetry  
is in the poem, a law against its closure.  
There'll always be religion around while there is poetry

or a lack of it. Both are given, and intermittent,  
as the action of those birds – crested pigeon, rosella parrot –  
who fly with wings shut, then beating, and again shut.

I was having a mental argument with Buddhism one time and I happened to notice something on the river at Taree. There's a very noisy festival in Taree every Easter now. It used to be around the end of January but that clashed with the country and western music festival so they moved it to Easter. It is a festival of very powerful speedboats on the Manning River called the Aquatic Carnival. One of the best things about Taree – well nearly all the best things about Taree are the river and much of those best things are the pelicans in the river. And the pelicans make themselves scarce every Easter, away from the powerboats. But you often start to write a poem about one thing and it turns into something else. There was a pelican up at the fish co-op on the River. There's always been a fishing industry – right back into Aboriginal times – a fishing industry on the Manning River and this pelican had a twisted beak – it couldn't make closure of the beak and would have died but it had been brought to the co-op by other pelicans. The humans threw out fish guts from the fisherman's co-op and that little handicapped pelican lived on the guts. And that was something that humans had not done. Pelicans had done it. And I thought, there's a mystery here. Animals do come to us for help. We may be the most notoriously awful species on the planet as we keep telling ourselves these days with a kind of melancholy satisfaction. It's funny. A lot of wild creatures do come to us. This poem I suppose was counter to a kind of anti-human ideology that was around and is still around and I don't know why I wrote

amongst the notes here but I think it's probably relevant: The Jews were one people who had a mythology like everybody else and they abandoned it. It was very striking. Mythology goes round in circles. A pagan mythology goes round, follows the cycle of the year round and round forever. Jews stopped that and went forward into something new, a kind of thing that became the theory of evolution amongst other things but long before that it was religious evolution. It was going somewhere. The creation wasn't just going round in circles. It was going *somewhere* and that's the great thing that came out of that tradition and I think that it was this kind of thing that is relevant. The poem is called 'At the Aquatic Carnival'.

#### At the Aquatic Carnival

Two racing boats seen from the harmonic railing  
of this road bridge quit their wakes,  
plane above their mirroring shield-forms  
and bash the river, flat out, their hits batts of appliqué  
violently spreading, their turnings eiderdown  
abolishing translucency before the frieze of people,  
and rolled-over water comes out to the footings of the carnival.

Even up drinking coffee-and-froth in the town  
prodigious sound rams through arcades and alleyways  
and burrs in our teeth, beneath the slow nacelle  
of a midsummer ceiling fan.  
No wonder pelicans vanish from their river at these times.  
How, we wonder, does that sodden undersized one  
who hangs around the Fish Co-op get by?  
The pert wrymouth with the twisted upper beak.

It cannot pincer prey, or lid its lower scoop,  
and so lives on guts, mucking in with the others  
who come and go. For it to leave would be death.

Its trouble looks like a birth defect, not an injury,  
and raises questions.

There are poetics would require it to be pecked  
to death by fellow pelicans, or kids to smash it with a stick,  
preserving a hard cosmos.

In fact it came with fellow pelicans, parents maybe,  
and has been around for years. Humans who feed it  
are sentimental, perhaps – but what to say  
of humans who refused to feed a lame bird?  
Nature is not human-hearted. But it is one flesh  
or we could not imagine it. And we could not eat.

Nature is not human-hearted. So the animals  
come to man, at first in their extremity:  
the wild scrub turkeys entering farms in drought-time,  
the done fox suddenly underfoot among dog-urgers  
(that frantic compliment, that prayer never granted by dogs)  
or the shy birds perching on human shoulders and trucks  
when the mountains are blotted out in fiery dismemberment.<sup>1</sup>

One of those observations. I've never seen any other poet write about that. It seems to be something I've discovered. This one's called 'Ariel'.

Ariel

Upward, cheeping, on huddling wings,  
these small brown mynas have gained  
a keener height than their kind ever sustained  
but whichever of them fails first

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<sup>1</sup> [Les Murray did not read the rest of 'At the Aquatic Carnival'.]

falls to the hawk circling under  
 who drove them up.  
 Nothing's free when it is explained.

I think I'll follow the precept of the poem and make no comment except that there was something that I saw in Dixon in the ACT in 1964. I reckon one of the best pointers how to read poetry is in scripture. It is, whoever has ears let them hear.

Now what's grace for the goose may not be grace for the cockroach but this one sees terms of grace for all creatures and gives a far out example. It's from a series of poems called 'Translations from the Natural World'. It's a bit of a satire too, I suppose, on Authorised Version English – the old 'thees' and 'thous'. It's 'Shellback Tick' – an animal most humans wouldn't like too much. You know, it gets on you, it's very bad for you, it wants your blood – that's all it wants.

#### Shellback Tick

Match-head of groins  
 nailhead in fur  
 blank itch of blank  
 the blood thereof  
 is the strength thereof is  
 the jellied life-breath is O the  
 sweet incision so the curdy reed  
 floodeth sun-hot liquor the only ichor the only  
 thing which existeth wholly alley-echoing  
 duple rhythmic feed which same of great yore turned  
 my back on every other thing the mothering thereof  
 the seed whereof in need-clotting strings  
 of plaque I dissolve with reagent drool  
 that doth stagger swelling's occult throb.  
 O one tape of splendour turned to me –



blank years grass grip  
sun haggard rain  
shell to that all.

What's grace for the human may not be grace for the tick.

This one's theological. It's called 'The Say-but-the-Word Centurion Attempts a Summary'. It's spoken by that Roman officer who, as you'll remember, asks Jesus to cure his servant at a distance believing Jesus could. Jesus was amazed at this kind of faith. And this fellow is a man of his time – first century AD – (he didn't know it was AD!) He has an ordinary Roman education and he's trying to work out what's occurred.

#### The Say-but-the-Word Centurion Attempts a Summary

That numinous healer who preached Saturnalia and paradox  
has died a slave's death. We were manoeuvred into it by priests  
and by the man himself. To complete his poem.

He was certainly dead. The pilum guaranteed it. His message,  
unwritten except on his body, like anyone's, was wrapped  
like a scroll and despatched to our liberated selves, the gods.

If he has now risen, as our infiltrators gibber,  
he has outdone Orpheus, who went alive to the Shades.  
Solitude may be stronger than embraces. Inventor of the mustard tree,

he mourned one death, perhaps all, before he reversed it.  
He forgave the sick to health, disregarded the sex of the Furies  
when expelling them from minds. And he never speculated.

If he is risen, all are children of a most high real God

or something even stranger called by that name  
who knew to come and be punished for the world.

To have knowledge of right, after that, is to be in the wrong.  
Death came through the sight of law. His people's oldest wisdom.  
If death is now the birth-gate into things unsayable

in language of death's era, there will be wars about religion  
as there never were about the death-ignoring Olympians.  
Love, too, his new universal, so far ahead of you it has died

for you before you meet it, may seem colder than the favours of gods  
who are our poems, good and bad. But there never was a bad baby.  
Half of his worship will be grinding his face in the dirt

then lifting it to beg, in private. The low will rule, and curse by him.  
Divine bastard, soul-usurer, eros-frightener, he is out to monopolise  
hatred.

Whole philosophies will be devised for their brief snubbings of him.

But regained excels kept, he taught. Thus he has done the impossible  
to show us it is there. To ask it of us. It seems we are to be the poem  
and live the impossible. As each time we have, with mixed cries.

The theme of the impossible comes up again in a later poem I'll read you in a minute. I don't know who said it but you'll tell me. Somebody said 'credo quia impossibile': 'I believe *because* it's impossible'. The world's systems all fall short and are made to fall short by fashion. (I am watching the time carefully so I don't go over it.)

This is a true story. It happened to a fellow of my acquaintance from Yorkshire. He was out in Central Australia and he thought he'd like to go up in one of those hot air balloons. And he was keeping a close account of his money and thought if I spent the

rather large amount they wanted I wouldn't be able to go on travelling in Australia for quite so long so I won't do it. The balloon he was going to go up in crashed – thirteen people were killed. You remember that, it was a few years ago.

Suspended Vessels  
*for Joanna Gooding and Simon Curtis*

Here is too narrow and brief:  
equality and justice, to be real,  
require the timeless. It argues  
afterlife even to name them.

I've thought this more since that morning  
in barren country vast as space-time  
but affluent with cars  
at the fence where my tightening budget  
denied me basket-room  
under the haunches of a hot-air balloon

and left thirteen people in it,  
all ages, teens to grans,  
laughing excitedly as the dragon nozzle  
exhaled hoarse blazing lift, tautening it,  
till they grabbed, dragged, swayed  
up, up into their hiatus.

Others were already aloft  
I remember, light bulbs against the grizzled  
mountain ridge and bare sky,  
vertical yachts, with globe spinnakers.

More were being rigged, or offering

their gape for gusts of torch.  
I must have looked away –  
suddenly a cry erupted everywhere:  
two, far up, lay overlapping,  
corded and cheeked as the foresails of a ship  
but tangled, and one collapsing.

I suppress in my mind  
the long rag unravelling, the mixed  
high voice of its spinning fall,  
the dust-blast crash, the privacies  
and hideous equality without justice  
of those thirteen, which running helpers,  
halting, must have seen  
and professionals lifted out.

Instead, I look at coloured cash and plastic  
and toddlerhood's vehement equities  
that are never quite silenced.  
Indeed, it prickles, and soon glares  
if people do not voice them.

I mention those three things that are fused by making art. I should have said the fourth thing is God. That's saying religion. That's not in our trade; that's the occasional rare intervention from beyond which is the real distinction between religion and art. And it is a real one. There are a number of occupations which are sacred, primordial. They go so far back you think of them as sacred and the mark is that we feel uncomfortable about paying for them. The large one of course is wife and mother. Some smaller ones are the priest..... The more sacerdotal, the more sacramental a priest is the less people like to pay. The poem is called 'The Trances'.

## The Trances

We came from the Ice Age,  
we work for the trances.  
The hunter, the Mother,  
seers' inside-out glances

come from the Ice Age,  
all things in two sexes,  
the priest man, the beast man,  
I flatten to run  
I rise to be human.

We came from the Ice Age  
with the walk of the Mothers  
with the walk of the powers  
we walked where sea now is

we made the dry land  
we told it in our trances  
we burnt it with our sexes  
but the tongue it is sand  
see it, all dry taste buds  
lapping each foot that crosses  
every word is more sand.

Dup dup hey duhn duhn  
the rhythm of the Mothers.  
We come from the Ice Ages  
with the tribes and the trances  
the drum's a tapped drone  
dup dup hey duhn duhn.

We come from the Ice Age,  
poem makers, homemakers,  
how you know we are sacred:  
it's unlucky to pay us.  
Kings are later, farmers later.  
After the Ice Age, they  
made landscape, made neuter,  
they made prose and pay.

They are bodied by the trances,  
loved, analysed and scorned:  
a true priest's loved in scorn,  
how you know he is sacred.

We're gifted and pensioned.  
Some paid ones were us:  
when they got their wages  
ice formed in their mouths  
chink, chink, the Ice Age.

A prose world is the Ice Age  
it is all the one sex  
and theory, that floats land  
we came over that floe land.

we came from the Ice Age  
we left it by the trances  
worlds warm from the trances  
duhn duhn hey dup dup  
it goes on, we don't stop  
we walk on from the Ice Age.

This one comes from an Aboriginal legend from up home, up along the North Coast – mainly from the Gumbayngirr people. My brother-in-law, Stephen, worked with them. But the characters have different names down where I come from. This man is called Gulambara where I come from and since nobody owns his story anymore I feel free to tell it. It's a moment when he, Gulambara, who was a great warrior, is brought down by his enemies who knew his weakness – he had a weak spot beside his collarbone, here. They managed to get two spears into him because to kill a Dreamtime hero you have to kill him twice same in the same way. And he falls down on the ground and his two wives have to call on him to rise from the dead – they have to do it in unison or he won't rise. And this is just the moment when the elder wife wants him back and the younger one has got to be persuaded.

#### One Kneeling, One Looking Down

Half-buried timbers chained corduroy  
lead out into the sand  
which bare feet wincing Crutch and Crotch  
spurn for the summer surf's embroidery  
and insects stay up on the land.

A storm engrossing half the sky  
in broccoli and seething drab  
and standing on one foot over the country  
burrs like lit torch. Lightning  
turns air to elixir at every grab

but the ocean sky is untroubled blue  
everywhere. Its storm rolls below:  
sand clouds raining on sacred country  
drowned a hundred lifetimes under sea.  
In the ruins of a hill, channels flow,

and people, like a scant palisade  
 driven in the surf, jump or sway  
 or drag its white netting to the tide lane  
 where a big man lies with his limbs splayed,  
 fingers and toes and a forehead-shine

as if he'd fallen off the flag.

Only two women seem aware of him.

One says *But this frees us. I'd be a fool—*

*Say it with me, says the other. For him to revive  
 we must both sat it. Say Be alive. —*

*But it was our own friends who got  
 him with a brave shot, a clever shot.—  
 Those are our equals: we scorn them  
 for being no more than ourselves.  
 Sat it with me. Say Be alive.—*

*Elder sister, it is impossible.—  
 Life was once impossible. And flight. And speech.  
 It was impossible to visit the moon.  
 The impossible's our summoning dimension.  
 Say it with me. Say Be alive again.*

The younger wavers. She won't leave  
 nor stop being furious. The sea's vast  
 catchment of light sends ashore a roughcast  
 that melts off every swimmer who can stand.  
 Glaring through slits, the storm moves inland.

The younger sister, wavering, shouts *Stay dead!*



She knows how impossibility  
is the only door that opens.  
She pities his fall, leg under one knee  
but her power is his death, and can't be dignified.

This is my earliest memory. It's a Christmas memory. I would have been probably not even three years old and it happened in a little village called Coolongolook.

### The Holy Show

I was a toddler, wet-combed  
with my pants buttoned to my shirt  
and there were pink and green lights, pretty  
in the day, a Christmas-tree party  
up the back of the village store.

I ran towards it, but big sad people  
stepped out. They said over me *'It's just, like,  
for local kiddies and but let him join in;*  
the kiddies looked frightened  
and my parents, caught off guard

one beat behind me, grabbed me up  
in the great shame of our poverty  
that they talked about to upset themselves.  
They were blushing and smiling, cursing me  
in low voices *Little bugger bad boy!*

for thinking happy Christmas undivided,  
whereas it's all owned, to buy in parcels  
and have at home; for still not knowing  
you don't make a holy show of your family;

outside it, there's only parry and front.

Once away, they angrily softened to  
me squalling, because I was their kiddie  
and had been right about the holy show  
that models how the world should be  
and could be, shared, glittering in near focus

right out to the Sex frontier.

This poem's got a story to it. It was caused by Steven Liebman on the *Today Show*. I went on to talk about a book called *Freddie Neptune*. I was keyed up to talk about that and he threw a curve ball at me and I stumbled all over the place. He said 'Those people who've just got drowned in New Guinea by that tidal wave, how can a good God allow that'. So I made a complete mess of it which you tend to do when you're not prepared. If you are prepared you can just say well God sees both sides of death. Complete the framework in which to look at all things we see as horror. Did I say anything sensible to Steve? No. And I began to think about the tidal wave deaths. Tidal waves come out of earthquakes – earthquakes come out of the movement of the continents around the earth – continents slide under each other and over each other. The earth's got this crackly, outside sort of outer skin. If it didn't have that moving shell to soak up planetary heat there would be no life – the internal heat of the earth would heat us up to roughly 800 degrees like Venus on which no life is possible. That moving of continents expresses enough of that heat for us to live. So I wrote this poem called 'Ernest Hemingway and the Latest Quake'.

#### Ernest Hemingway and the Latest Quake

In fact the Earth never stops moving.  
Northbound in our millimetric shoving  
we heap rainy Papua ahead of us  
with tremor and fumarole and shear

but: no life without the under-ruckus.

The armoured shell of Venus doesn't move.  
She is trapped in her static of hell.  
The heat of her inner weight feeds enormous  
volcanoes in that gold atmosphere

which her steam oceans boils above.  
Venus has never known love:  
that was a European error.  
Heat that would prevent us gets expressed

as continent-tiles beings stressed and rifted.  
These make Earth the planet for lovers.  
If coral edging under icy covers  
or, too evolutionary slow

for human histories to observe it, a low  
coastline faulting up to be a tree-line  
blur landscape in rare jolts of travel  
that squash collapsing masonry with blood

then frantic thousands pay for all of us.

Different traditions will see this poem differently. I see it from a Christian point of view but I won't say too much about it. Just read it to you. It was caused by a critic the other day saying Murray doesn't write very much about what Rilke calls the poetry of a soul in space – he writes mostly about human relations, natural phenomena and stuff, you know, everything but without the soul. I thought 'alright. Yeah OK, I'll do that'. You do what you're told. So I called this 'Predawn in Health'. I should mention that – this is the last poem so I can dilate a little bit – it's a bit of an answer to a poem I wrote when I had depression called 'Corniche' where I am talking about what a hell hole it is

to wake up at four in the morning and really have a bad bout of depression. And now I haven't got depression anymore and how nice it is, how livable it is, to wake up at four in the morning. You know, awakened by your bladder as people of my age are. It's just so lovely.

### Predawn in Health

The stars are filtering through a tree  
Outside in the moon's silent era.

Reality is moving layer over layer  
Like crystal spheres now called laws.

The future is right behind your head:  
Just over all horizons is the past.

The soul sits looking at its offer.