

# **GROWING UP WITH MR MENZIES**

*by John Jenkins*

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John Jenkins, born in Melbourne in 1949, has published eight books of poems, including *Dark River* (2004). His verse novel *A Break in the Weather* was short-listed for the 2004 FAW Christina Stead Award. His long poem *Under The Shaded Blossom*, which won the 2004 James Joyce Foundation Suspended Sentence Award, was adapted as a drama feature on ABC Radio National. He has published much non-fiction, including travel-writing and books on music and music theatre. He has collaborated often, in works across several media. Jenkins lives on the semi-rural outskirts of Melbourne.

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## GROWING UP WITH MR MENZIES

This is the story of Felix Hayes, growing up in Melbourne during the Menzies Era, from 1949 to 1966. Certain historical figures, such as Menzies, Rylah, Spender and so on, are occasionally historically quoted; at other times the quotes are imaginary.

The characters in *Growing up with Mr Menzies*, including those characters based on real people, are entirely fictional.

*“News, news, news . . .! News has a kind of mystery.”*

John Adams, *Nixon in China*

## *Kissing the Baby*

*Mr Menzies wears his suit still buttoned as he leans over  
me. His white temples and iconic arched eyebrows  
below the wry smile are supported by a double chin.*

He has composed his face into its avuncular best for coo-  
cooing. Though he wonders what he is doing here,  
at 48 Surf Street Elwood, leaning over little  
Felix Hayes in his wooden cot, in this modest weatherboard  
near the notorious canal that floods annually mid storm and is surely  
not so grand, nor fragrant. He smiles. Something should be done about it  
– *by a state's man, of course; not by a statesman* (he blinks at his joke).  
Too trivial for a Queen's man, and so is kissing babies after all.  
Still, it is a politician's lot, and necessary, after all, from time to time.  
Mr Menzies takes a considerably handsome watch from one side pocket  
and dandles it upon a chain. The wide-eyed bub below him blows  
out a spittle chain, blinks, and mirrors back his smile!  
– *as most babies, but not all voters do* (he slyly notes)  
and lowers the watch, carefully, into the cot,  
and it swings there, the pendulum still swings.

## *Shining Years*

A world he must invent is conjured  
from the double-breasted air  
where pinstripes run parallel or collide  
in a pocket's tucks or around a sleeve,  
culminating in a giant, unseen hand.  
The bright object of new life's ambition  
is lowered wobblingly down *now*.  
It is a watch, a plaything, history:  
it goes *bob bob bob*, it sweeps air silver.  
There is no time outside a sudden *me-ness*  
of sensation when you're 10 weeks old:  
seeing is much more being than believing.  
The chain flows right up to a blur that's way  
up there, its links assemble and stars cascade  
down *now's* tiny little silver stairs of chain-link.  
The pendulum almost skims his nose.  
Things so close are giant  
things that never were before.  
A new life ticks here, cries *now-wah now-wah now-wah!*

## *The First Smile*

*Her smile is the first thing for me.*

*She constellates around her smile.*

*I grow out of her lips.*

*We grow apart together.*

Her face floats over his bassinette, bears the flower  
of a smile, which is accepted. Then the smile broadens  
from red softness into love's first subject,  
across light years of years, pale plenum blur  
of bliss, out of bits of past time, in constellations  
and stars making this original heaven  
truer now than fact; comets and sparkling photographs  
help articulate the mother grace and carry feeling.

I remember being in the velvet, endless sky here,  
waiting for her to receive me. I remember a love  
so intense and selfless, it drew me down to earth.  
I had wanted to be, so she could then invent me  
out of herself, out of her substance.  
(Impossible to believe now, I must  
have made all this up much later, when I could walk,  
talk and imagine it – to explain it back to me.)

I was all this: the double heartbeat of another  
who was me, and then a swimming, breathing  
fruiting-out, then sort of mental flash of music,  
a consciousness that dreamed itself awake.  
Might we still be *here* – in this fractured  
mosaic prised from time? Somewhere, in these lines?

## *One Mouth More*

You swim from your mother's swollen sea,  
multiplying up from single cells,  
overtake starfish, sharks, turtles, dolphin,  
dog-paddle up the taxa, make the shift  
from amniotic breakers onto clumsy land.  
Already, a nub of nerves has oozed a brainy  
coral from your spine, efflorescing into *you*.  
Your first word is a cry, from lips dribbling  
afterbirth. Here you are, one day old,  
just another human cosmos hung with sparks  
that all start to think at once, the star net *you*.

*– Bright blue cot beads, Mummy's  
smile from heavens above, each sound.*

A zillion nerve-tendrils grasp, grow and weave,  
in just two years more bits of world than  
all the rest of life: before the massive die-off.  
The spark net knits those inner pictures  
of it, them and you, into your blue *Is*. You start,  
quite literally here from the ground up,  
as the first time; cleanest slate; all promise.  
Touch, taste, feel, smell. Put pure sensation –  
the dirt, the shiny rattle – in your mouth!  
Another blubbing bub stares wide at nothing:  
cry baby, don't poo your pram. You have made it.

*I Am Making Noises in the Sun*

*Ba-ba-ba-ba . . . lub, lub, lub . . . ba-lub, ba-lu, ba-lub . . .*

*Lublar, lublar, lublar . . . bup-bup, bup-bup . . .*

Brightness runs down the  
wooden rail of my playpen.

I can't say this yet. I hear sounds  
and make them back. I can work  
my tongue and mouth, and push  
the air out slow and quick. This is what

I see and know, but cannot say it yet:

The sun talks to me as sparkle in the up-sky,  
the rushing of its blue down to my eyes.

I am happy now, and six months old.

*Ba-ba-ba-ba . . . lub, lub, lub . . . ba-lub, ba-lu, ba-lub . . .*

*Lublar, lublar, lublar . . . bup-bup, bup-bup . . .*



## *First Door*

*Here I am in my room I've been trying  
to open doors, am nearly high enough  
almost did this time, I'm reaching up to it  
and that's my hand in front of me,  
to move and not fall over, reaching more now . . .*

Down from the bed on wobble legs  
so I stay tall and big boy to the edge of sun  
on carpet pattern flowers so soft  
and pretty throwing roses to my eyes  
and nod-look on I go  
go-totter side to  
side reach up higher now and yes  
grab the door thing  
turn a twisty bit that's knobby knob,  
and hands on roundness that I grab  
let me through and *ooh!* it opens  
so I push-fall into now  
to step more forward, on the floor  
that's nice and soft, not falling now  
the door swings then I am  
on the other side, *other side now!*  
*it swings opens, lets the morning in*  
now I can open every one  
in my house, this house, is full of doors!

## *Safe as Houses*

I was born in 1949, the year that Pig Iron Bob,  
after eight years out of office, was reborn as Emperor Ming,  
leading his brand new Liberal Party. He had learned a faultless trick –  
to kick the ‘Labor Commos’, with a canny (knee-jerk) timing,  
all the way down to ’66. The war was over, and wealth from wool  
and mines built new suburbs for us far-flung citizens  
of Empire, who aped, nonetheless, though some years behind,  
the culture of America. Ming built his Great Wall of Tariffs,  
jobs were safe as houses and wages could hardly keep  
up with demand from new factories sprawled everywhere.  
Migrants from a war-torn Europe and beyond poured into  
pre-cast suburbs that became a way of life.  
The ‘credit squeeze’ of ’61 black-jacked Bob’s majority  
to a pair of seats, but he emerged, our ever bobbing  
knight again – the urbane and polished orator, and more  
than match for ‘Cocky’ Calwell, with his rasp and drawl.

## *I Want Teddy*

Teddy is left behind, and I am so upset.  
The tears sting. Where is Teddy? I am lost.  
I look and look. Daddy and Mummy laugh.  
Then they look. We look for him. Teddy's  
not in his places. Look on my pillow. No! I always  
have him, I carry him by his leg, and by his hands.  
I want that soft feel back. Everything is terrible.  
This hole gets so wide and I run down the road.  
Where is Teddy? I am lost, and running.  
Upset, the road is going in a blur. I feel sick.  
Running over the grass, I see the wire fence.  
There is Teddy!? On his side, wet in the grass. I grab  
his leg, and he's back with me. His face is the same.  
My heart is so fast. I found him! I found Teddy!

## *Tea and Stars*

The mouse travelled to the stars  
in a blue teacup. His friend, the dog  
with white spots, was in the saucer  
and the mouse looked down over the top  
of the cup at him. They glided all night, above  
our house, on a road of stars called the  
milky way, and into a velvet magic  
that was their wonderful feeling.  
Half way to the sun, the mouse dipped  
his spoon in the milk, and the stars  
sparkled like sugar. They had tea  
in the sky, in dark night, then floated down.  
This is one of my stories. I can see this  
with my mind. And it makes me happy.

## *What I See*

From our kitchen window, there is lawn  
and palings. You can see the backyard fence.  
On the other side are swings and slides.  
There I go to Kindergarten!  
I go with my mother. I see other kids.  
We swing through the air, and slide and laugh.  
The wind goes past then. All fresh and light.

## *Grain*

But this is not a history proper, or sociology. Poetry is  
just a droplet of becoming – held in a web  
of invented, quoted and remembered traces  
that help us find the next *here* from somewhere  
else, ghosts of light in texts warm as winter breath  
or mist on some *before*. Imagine it as a moment  
in the deeper grain of passing: the were or never were,  
or will be again – past's *absence* widening,  
a resonance in time's back yard, allowed to play there.

## *Menzies Cruises Home*

*First voyage, 1939*

A large man in a bowler hat and Union Jack ridiculously draped about his shoulders, takes the air on deck, the wind blowing a gale, yet his hat stays well stuck, right eyebrow cocked, like a careful rifle sight, wry smile on target, as if to say: "I'm more than a match for you, Sonny, but appreciate the joke". His hands are dainty, soft and plump, so he tucks them above deep cuffs and holds them in a tailored pocket. Vest, double breast, neat edges of handkerchief . . . silver-templed exemplar of a world made for black and white, he leans a notebook on the rail and writes, and watches the sea birds imitate the loops and spirals of his fair copperplate. "Home soon, for the first time!" Sailing in the *Strathaird* past the coast of Africa, through Aden . . . Remarkable! Even here, he sees homey touches everywhere: "Further reflections of a member delegate, to attend the Silver Jubilee of HRH, King George." Promised Lands emerge from barrenness, melt past the railing where he leans. "Here is a golf course, there a rugby ground. While doctrinaires speculate about self-government for natives, the British calmly go about their way, giving to these people what obviously they could never give themselves." He looks up from his notes. There is about his calculating slouch an irony, readiness to rebut, you can still see in men against the bar, or the monochrome rectitude of Collins Street by Brack . . . perhaps a whiff of cowshed if not tar, lackadaisical larrikin orator, his Australian-ness revealed like corks dropping from a bowler. He spots an urchin boy, running down the gangway. And shrugs. "One would expect a better class of passenger upon this line," he thinks. So the big bloke, soon to be an honorary master

of the Bench at Gray's Inn, then Councillor most Privy to discreet matters of state, strolls down to the bow and privacy, watching waves break prettily upon the moment. Onward.

Into glory! He imagines it: "At last, we are in England, our journey to Mecca ended, our mind abandoned to those reflections which can so move the souls of those who go, for the first time, Home."



## *Push This Wall Back*

Push this wall as far back as you can.  
Now as the bricks fall down, trace  
in their dusty trance what you have told yourself,  
stories you remember, some of which actually happened.

The story you invent from memory says where you  
come from, have been, are finally going.  
It says why you! And why not. And how we all fit  
into bigger memories called history and culture.

Is civilisation too big a word for little worlds like us  
to fill? Is the tiny 'I' excluded? How many voices  
must chorus its successive waves before you find  
your voice in that receding wave of voices? You hear  
you everywhere, and see your face in the profile of an age.

No wonder there are gaps! If we could recall any  
hour truthfully, it would take an hour to recall!  
A day a day, a year of years to tell all  
that detail, shining dust of tears, from the miles  
of files, just like the real thing. God's memory perhaps  
is like atoms buzzing on, a cosmos beaming  
it all back again, out of the big black hole in which time  
just disappears! How could we endure it?

## *Bubs Grade*

He stinks. And the kids hold noses at him.

They tease him. He poo-ed his pants, and his name  
is Murray Simpson. It went down his white, skinny  
legs, below his shorts. *Dribble dribble.*

*“Murray Simpson did a dance.*

*Murray Simpson poo-ed his pants!”*

He cried all day, you could hear him crying,  
and the teacher washed him and then his mum came.

*“This is our new room, boys and girls,”* Miss Mathews said.

*“And this is how we start each morning. First, I say  
to you: ‘Hull-looo boooys and girrrrls!’*

*Then you say back to me: ‘Hull-looo Missss Math-yous!’*

*Remember!”* And we did, every morning after that.

Then we sang a song, and she showed us the board.

We did Rhymes and Alphabet. She told  
some stories and drew pictures – in chalks,  
all colours. Then we all went home again.

## *I Can Read Now*

*I am in the Bubs grade  
Miss Math-yous has black hair  
She has chalks and the blackboard  
She does Singing and Spelling*

The first time ever this word lights up for me,  
S-U-N, I spell it out, *SUN* is running  
on three letter legs and jumps out from  
the board, we spell it out and it's my turn now,  
*SUN* I say, *Es-You-En*, is just the same  
as the sun in the sky that shines all day,  
she points to it outside, then points to three  
gold letters and a picture of the sun,  
and a sound is in my mind, it says *Sah-un*  
in my own voice, *Es-You-En*,  
three letters from The Alphabet,  
each letter in a row spells it out,  
and we all hear it back again, *SUN!*  
its picture smiles through gold chalk  
and I can read now, my first word is *SUN*  
and it's a new big *JUMP* for me  
I feel it shine, when *SUN* lights up!

## *Sunshowers*

I loved to smell the leather of my school bag  
and feel it bounce on my back to get warm  
as I run to school on cold days  
and see all the colours of the raincoats hanging on  
hooks (JOHN, BILL, JENNY) outside  
the classroom with hats strung  
up dripping damp.

Flexing nip-scrunched  
toes as socks steam smelly over heaters.

We spot droplets run sheening colours  
down and plop to little puddles  
on the wooden floor.

It was wonderful, breathing frost

and hard rain leaning sideways, like we did,  
running faster, when your eyes hit blur,  
more wet and splash swirling down . . .

The sun soaked, then blazed out through  
rainbow shine, floating crayons up on its own  
colouring-in. The sky was learning rain

dazzled drifts across the sky's big board.

## *Post-War Conventional*

A civil uniform of bricks and glass: the suburbs  
donned dun Mao suits – ‘Post-War Conventional’ splashed  
the mission brown around behind a paling fence.  
In those austere years, when khaki faded back to brown,  
soldiers looked for pegs to hang slouch hats, settle down  
and make a home. The women, packed off to factory or the Land  
Army, could now conjure families from the cusp  
of Victory and American Sunrise. Old ammo casings  
became flower pots on a thousand mantles, though  
most had detonated, ripping heads from torsos in a Second  
after the one-to-end-them-all, just upwind from the Bomb.  
No spare parts or credit: empty pockets  
launched the boom years, when everyone cried out for little  
blocks of happiness, and the blocks all joined up into  
streets and the fabric radiated joy, a new way of life.  
Authorities after 1945 were not prepared for floods  
of applications. Build 400,000 houses overnight –  
endless streets for rent. Every state had its new  
Commission, to lend an elbow, roll a sleeve, side by  
side with private cash. A tank factory in Holmesglen  
re-tooled to mass-produce desirable concrete homes: tilt-slab shells  
won the peace. Into those shells poured souls,  
a sort of concrete poetry born of love. But the ‘poor’  
(read ‘rich’, relative to coolies) tenants signed up  
for ‘healthy attitudes’, as well as paying rent on time.  
The Commission’s deal was cemented  
by good counsel and inspectors, do-gooding house calls,  
door to door. “You’s e can’t have homes for ‘illegal or immoral  
uses’.” The Neat Garden Competitions manicured our sweet  
patch of couch-grass into turf. And so we grew, and grew.

## *Table, Sunlight, Radio*

One of his places is under the big wooden table, in the lounge room where the carpet has red roses fading pink. Sees this sunlight leap down a crack between the blinds, right down the wall, to where he is. He loves the Marveer Polish, whorls of grain, the skin of dark light varnished. *The table is resting from a long walk. It stopped here, then it turned to wood. And went still from never moving.* This is a story he made up once, as dusty sparks crawl up when he moves about, and more sparkling pin-points make him sleepy. By the table is the giant radio, which *'plays'* all day. It's made of hard stuff called *'bakelite'*. He calls it *'baked light'*. Sometimes, he pulls it from the wall and sees bright *'valves'* all standing up in rows, with pins pushed into little holes so they don't move. He wobbles one. It's coated with dust and spider webs. Some glow, and softly hum to *'warm up'*. Dad says it has *'good tones'*. It's a *'Stromberg Carlson'*. Don't touch the *'valves'* or wires. You'll get a *'shock'*. At the front, is a wood part full of little holes and round *'dials'*. Music comes out here, through a *'speaker'*, soft and deep like honey. *But I don't know how this can happen. I don't think it can!* But it *does* do this, it speaks and *'plays'* all day. *And I listen.* It talks to everyone. It doesn't care.

## *Positives*

*We are moving back and forward now,  
we have become photographs, moving.  
The light which printed us is moving on.  
It is the light of vanished time.  
The truth of the photo surface is absolute –  
only it will stay the same.*

I saw myself as a separate  
figure in my memory's dream.  
Looking from outside, at my own body,  
like watching someone's film –  
it has already been acted,  
edited, made fiction.

In 1949, born under 'the shadow of the bomb',  
you watch it plummet down,  
its shadow swelling over earth below  
spreads like a stain from  
a propaganda news-clip from the last war,  
or the one to come that didn't come.

Beyond the cramped kitchens  
we imagined time and history  
made up of separate days, weeks, years –  
but there's a greater moment  
without division, its continuous dilation  
flowing back and forwards. It's all just *now*.  
Always 'always now',  
which stays the same, like an empty frame.  
Only the contents change, they come and go.

Human biography is so trivial,  
all our personal histories are inter-changeable.

I am a fly-spot in eternity.

Trivial to whom?

You are inside and outside of the lustres  
you have fleshed. And there's a sort  
of love in this attention.

Tomorrow, what will slip away, be lost?

Tomorrow, rust. A slow burning  
turns even stars to ash.

The person that I was is folded back into  
a self again.

Like rust stains metal, and memory  
collects in shreds. Light slants down from clouds  
of winter's rain, on galvo shelter sheds.

Toy snow is breathing a now:

floats in a small glass dome, the flakes swirl up  
in smaller hands. There, at last, you are miniature  
and revolving, host in your own toy set.

Meanwhile, even this has changed.

This concertina of *now-now-now* forever.

The whole ghostly contraption squeezes shut!

How convey plain wonder?

To go to find *first-times* of seeing.

And this is not a photograph.



## *What We Do*

I live with my sister Jasmin. She is much bigger than me, and we fight a lot. She wins, and I have to “just keep out of her way.”

When her moods are bad, she can be “a terror” says Mum. She doesn’t like me having anything she doesn’t have. She grabs my toys, and pushes me over on the grass.

Mum says to Dad: “*She feels Felix is the favourite.*” I heard her say that, and I am.

## *Beautiful Strange Moment*

We moved to Box Hill South in 1951.

In the street, trenches were full  
of water and orange mud.

My best friend, Ronald Candy  
from next door, showed me his new  
gumboots. We ran together, in wet  
grass beside my house  
and our shoes shone.

One day, when I looked at some  
weeds down by the fence,  
all things were just the same,  
and I saw this and gasped –  
they were just like me –  
because they *were!*

Every thing was here and new!

I was amazed, just to be!

I knew this with new gumboots on.

It was winter, and smoke drifted  
from chimneys all down the street.

## *The New Suburb*

An L-shape plan, the Commission's basic. Put down  
cement foundations and build your house.

I am playing on a toy tractor. No garden yet:  
a bare block, with new-turned clay, garage half-built,

assembling up from tin and fibro as I watch.  
Earthworks and trenching all along the street  
for water pipes. No sewerage plumbing yet  
(that's years later). We've just moved here.

Mum and Dad's bedroom has windows to the street.  
Red tiles make texture of a gable roof –  
they fade to rust brown, and break the  
'severe' look of the post-war years.

Roof ridge alongside a privet hedge  
that's still to grow. Our eucalypt is  
still a seed beside a pond of  
kidney-shaped cement, awaiting fish.

White walls. A chimney lends its tall relief as  
the one decorative 'feature' in the plan.  
There's a path of cement slabs for cars  
and feet. Pencil pines (still in pots) flank a wire gate.

In the back yard, steps sketch a cool back porch.  
Windows, steel-framed, open outwards,  
pushed on a lever-lock. An outside dunny,  
a wire clothesline and the backyard shed.

Inside: the laundry, kitchen via back porch,  
tiny 'hall' with linen cupboard, bathroom,  
lounge room, two more rooms with beds.  
Front steps take you to a cupboard porch,

a glassed-in alcove strong winds often rock.  
You are on the front doorstep; there's a wire  
screen then door. All of me is here, in this house  
I still carry everywhere, and I await your knock.

## *Teddy Shows His Mettle*

His mouth is just a line of stitches, turned into a smile that's upside-down. Teddy knows. He sees. Brown button eyes are *'airforce issue'*, with a crown above an eagle's wings, flying high upon the surface of the metal. Dad's a tailor, and made him on his own machine, sewing half the night when I was two. His nose a pad of leather, furry ears stick out. He wears purple overalls, going off to work. The hands and feet are just brown pads of felt. He sits so silent, and stares out into space. *"Such a serious little chap,"* they say when I play with Teddy. Do they mean him or me? He's not fluffy, or sweet, but good. He sits on my pillow, watching me at night. He keeps away bad dreams. Always right.

## *Visiting*

She whispered, as if she is telling me a special secret.

My Granny had only one tree called a *Massive Mulberry* in her back yard. I climbed it once.

In winter, the house smelt of wood, briquettes and smoky fire-places. There was a piano in the front room. While the grown-ups talked, voices down the red-velvet tassel hall,

I sat at the piano. The neat rows of keys, black and white, thick and thin. They were easy to press and the shiny flat touch of all of them made little trenches when you pressed them down and popped back up again.

The ripple of pressing them all down in turn was waves of sound across the top of touching.

I loved the sound of each one at a time, too – all sounding out, to fade to quietness in between.

I sat there for ages in that time. There was nowhere else there was a piano, only there.

## *Kitchen Physics*

It was the flash of dancing metal caught there!

*“I was from a big Catho family of ten,”* says Mum,

*“We couldn’t buy new toys, and we made our own.”*

Mum twirls a teapot top, topsy-turvy,

and sends it spinning with the rest. Soon, half a dozen lids

are skimming, like flying saucers upside-down,

all across the Lino of the kitchen floor.

She launches more, and I just stare, at the

flashes in stars and flares on shiny

clangers, wobbling down to slow, or hitting

noisy edges of the next one. I flick one

into orbit around our clattering stew-pot top, which

hits it back, and my lid glides and slows across

the floor, before it gets a clumsy stutter. The next

is better, thumb and index on the rim, then a quick

wrist flick sends more circles out in crazed light

of steel and aluminium, clang and clatter.

## *The Giant*

I am dreaming, and I know I am, climbing  
up the body of the naked giant. I might be  
very small, just inches long, with the giant  
a grown-up man. Or I might be as big  
as I am, just a little boy, but then  
the giant will be a *giant*, reaching to clouds.  
First, I crawl along his foot, climb up his leg,  
resting in all the warm cracks as I go,  
then climb up his belly, right up  
to his armpit, up much higher,  
until I reach his head. I like this dream.  
I have it many times, and wake up  
in my bed feeling it's made of sweat,  
with all the blankets tangled, in a mess.



## *Sticky Face*

I hate this dream: someone is throwing  
plates at me, which stick to my face.  
I put up my hands to stop them,  
but each plate flies through the air  
and sticks to my face. Bang! I pull the plate  
off my face then. I have to try, it's really hard  
to get it off. But when I do, there's one  
more plate, then another, and another  
one on top, and more below, in layers.  
But where is my face? I still can't find it.  
And I can't breathe. But I must try and try  
to pull away all the plates stuck to my face.

## *Dizzy*

I am riding on a small, metal merry-go-round,  
in the park, going round and round. Someone is  
pushing me, hard against my back, and everything  
goes faster. At first, I like it, then start to feel  
so sick. The park is just a whirl of green-blur  
speed, and I'm still going faster. I can't  
get off. I grab hold, so I don't fall.

When I do, I am pushed again, and  
the ride spins faster. I feel my body sway  
and lean against the speed, and it goes faster.

I can't get off. I'm so scared that I'll go faster.

A girl is pushing me. She laughs, and I go faster.

## *Bad Things*

She's put spiders on my face while I'm asleep.  
I wake up and see one on my eyes. My mind  
goes black when she holds me under in the bath,  
I swallow water, hardly breathe, I'm gasping but she  
laughs. In bed, plonks a pillow on my face and sits  
on it, till I go black again. Next time, I'm ready,  
call out and she's hit. Dad's in a *frenzy*.

## *The 'Orphanage'*

I saw the big gates from the bus that took us there. I went to 'Dormitory'. For boys. It was 'the orphanage', just me and Mum at first, then my sister too, without Dad. Mum worked there. I don't know where, or for how long. There was a matron in a blue uniform. I hated her. She stood over me while I tried to do shoelaces up. We had to be neat. I left them tied and dragged the backs of my shoes round each heel. I almost cried. I couldn't do the slip knot, just the granny. The kids at 'the orphanage' were all really tough, much tougher than any kids up the road. One gave me his shanghai, he called a 'ging', made of wire and rubber bands from a cut-up bike tube. I put a very heavy stone in, pulled all the big black *laccas* back. But I pulled it the wrong way, and hit myself and went black with stars and woke up like my head was just pain and dizzy. They said I knocked myself out on the spot. Mum was scared and we left 'the orphanage', where she had worked. We went back to Box Hill South and Dad. And they were quieter then and always said they did it *'for the children's sake'*.

*Menzies in the Garden*

*Botanical Gardens, duck pond, Melbourne, 1941:  
Menzies out of office.*

It was a mellow afternoon, the light autumnal,  
as Menzies strolled with his thoughts, pausing  
to scatter bread under scholarly trees inscribed  
with Latin tags, noting a similarity to certain phrases  
in basic torts. He drew his coat about him. Lakes  
of the botanical park reflected back. Melbourne growing dark.  
The white tower of Government House sailed high above  
thin conifers. A house of cards. And how it can fall:  
'Wermacht forces, Polish frontier stormed'. "My melancholy  
duty to inform you ... " intoned to a microphone at the cramped  
radio studio that Sunday evening. "Great Britain has declared war  
upon her . . . and Australia is also at war." War it was!  
Resignation need not mean defeat. He meant his own  
stepping down in 1941. One was just resigned.  
He adjusted his hat now, skewed badly by the wind.  
He *would* be a barrister, and ran all the way home  
to tell his parents. Smiles, and torn smiles,  
dancing on ruffled water. His parents were not rich.  
Scholarships and prizes were his way, not silver spoons.  
His gloom lifted. He had married Pattie Leckie; then state  
politics in 1929. The biggest leap, into Federal Parliament,  
aged but 40. The seat was his, and in 1934 Attorney-General,  
a post secured until 1938. Prime Minister, in April '39,  
just four months prior to the war – 45 years old.  
He knew his rise had been meteoric. And so his fall.  
He had assured them all: "the Allies will win!"  
And so they will! 'Pig-iron Bob' had been his mistake.  
But who cares? (He looked down at his hands.)  
The voters abandoned him. Now, he would have

to pull himself back up. (They were a young man's hands.)  
“In 1941 the Governor-General, who acts for His Majesty  
in Australia, called for the Labor Party to form Government ... ”  
He could see it, already written, in the history texts. And codicil?  
The air around him laughed, everywhere at once, and a kookaburra  
burst out from a gumtree. Laughed! “Let them all, for now”.  
Menzies chuckled too. “And the last laugh? We will see!”

## *One for Everything*

Years are like that: joy rises like the sun.  
My first pony ride, dashing down beside a flower  
farm, its neat and variegated nod and flash  
of blossoms. The calm white pony trots on:  
I'm like a bubble joggled in a spirit  
level; up and down to a flop of stirrups.

Winter again. At six, you choose your teams.  
It's easy! *The mighty Demons!* New socks  
and beanie, the red-and-blue wool smell  
rising from a sleeve. My team is Melbourne.  
It's where I live, it seems so clear to me!  
Kick-to-kick with the kids: a footy bounces  
any way it wants; we grip the grass with stops  
in our big boots, my goal posts are the sky.

My sister dolls me in old tat, woollen  
tresses and a hat: the little sister  
she really wanted. "*This is my baby,*  
*Jessie.*" She shows me off: I blush on cue.  
Next, she wraps her old *Spotty* in a nappy,  
bib and bonnet, and wheels the dog up to  
grown-ups in a battered pram. "*My new baby!*"  
The toothy bub-mutt snarls at her *coo-coo*.

Splash of memory brightens Brighton Beach.  
For the first time, I see the sea: limitless  
sense of salt and wind and sand. So excited,  
I rush down, cannot stand for joy, topple  
headlong into choppy waves.

Tears and taste of brine will one day seem like home.  
They dry me furiously as the swell lifts.  
I stand there crying, pissing in to spray.  
At last, all the waves greeting, waving.

The 'kids up the road' join hands and run in  
rings around me. In the middle, I see  
their faces melting past. They fed me bright  
red Autumn berries; 'lollies' freshly picked.  
*"They're pois-on. Now you're going to dieee-yiiii!"*  
I run home crying, spitting bitter juice.  
The berry taste will follow me for life.  
Their hands join in the first shock of forever.

Next, I fall and break my nose. Being is  
becoming all dislocated. Or was  
I pushed? There was a tricycle awry,  
arms thrusting out, then white-out in the shock  
memory turns down. Asphalt rears up, blood  
spurts and I can't stop it with a tiny,  
useless fist of tears. Not my last scar, but  
a lasting one, face crooked for a year.

A tram turns down memory, collecting  
ticket stubs left by the kind conductor –  
stuck in cracks beside each seat, for the kids.  
Undo the stubs, and bits of pretty ticket  
ends float up from a story of a boy  
who is good and taken to a city's  
heart for Christmas. Its lights shine the very  
first time. Dad says there's one for everything.



*Mr Menzies Walks at Midnight*

Sleepers woke, turned over once in 1950, went back to sleep.  
The exact moment of the flash! Remember Pearl Harbour,  
and how the sudden attack might fall from the sky.  
So a Cold War might turn hot, he reflected, and this time  
the bombs would be nuclear – in Korea, Malaya  
and the Middle East, all the Red factotums ...  
tentacles in each gloved puppet leading back  
to their ferocious head in Moscow. He had a melancholy  
expectation of war in just three years, a final global  
winnowing, and foresaw its dire climax as – 1954!  
What fragile hold upon these shores, and sparse spaces  
of the continent that must (“Labor still had sense here ... ”)  
Populate or Perish; was ever thus for us, our burden south!  
Mr Menzies paused, placing his damp broly in its stand.  
A leaf clung still to his boot. He looked down at it.  
He would be ready. He felt *some* satisfaction.  
“ANZUS is the bolt on our back door.” That was good!  
Stock-pile. Then raw materials. And make prepare –  
with hydro-electricity, the generators bomb-proof underground,  
in mountains where “the men from Snowy River  
rode their shovels ... ” (a faint half smile).  
We have a Communist Party of *Australia*! Outrageous!  
To strike and paralyse a nation in the coming war. “The war.  
What war?” This interminable *twilight war*, this creeping *cold*,  
this fading light of afternoon, obscuring the contours  
of bolder wars he understood – with battles that were clear,  
and either lost or won! He would do his best, certainly!  
But such steady, implacable plotting, ever-readiness  
and hatred, was not natural to a democrat of liberal  
(why, even libertarian!) persuasion.

The world's map – growing lonelier each day, alas,  
for want of outcrops of our sturdy Empire. “The Australian way  
of life, the English-speaking cause.” In the vast Pacific, so far  
from Home. A few canoe islands and of course  
(he smiled fully) there was New Zealand, “*our little cousins  
in the south,*” had almost slipped past, forgotten at the last.

## *Desk Lid*

There are two school blocks, one for big kids and one for little kids. They are made of cement bricks. A corridor runs down the middle, with doors to the rooms along it. When I am sleepy, I put my head on my desk. The desk is wood, with a heavy lid that goes up and down. It makes the sounds sound hollow, when you thump it down. You sit on the seat, and stick your legs out in front. Each desk is for two kids, side by side. I sit in the back row with Jimmy Hedge, who pushes me. The desk is for our books and pencils. When you open the lid, smells of paper and pencil shavings and old fruit peelings pour out. I made ink for the ink well, mixing purple powder up with water. Then you dip your pen in it, and the nib writes. I'm always top in ABCs and words. There is a groove at the top, to hold your pen and pencils. I was the 'ink monitor' one week, with a big blue bottle with a rubber pourer at the top. To stop the ink, you put your finger on the spot above the spout, which blocks it off.

## *Under Your Hat*

We know this surely is illusion: no one  
can go back. The present is our lot,  
all melts like dew, then forever lost  
in chemicals and fragile webs of tissue  
in a sponge beneath a hat. Our skulls last longer  
than any thought they sweeten like a nut.  
Always remember, it's still just *now*.  
And there it is! – your present world around you.  
As always, still in your body, even as you 'drift'  
to 'this' or 'that'. Only part of you 'goes back', making  
the past out of present time. The trance quickly jumps  
on growing legs, link to link; your whole self shifts  
on the entirely inward trajectory, telling your story  
to yourself, as subjective as a homespun dream.  
Old people do this: more of the world behind  
than still ahead, the past tense so often  
softens present blows – it becomes a timeless place  
to be and live again. The very young look back, too –  
from points and turnings on a life that all too quickly  
strains with growing pains, while turning into something  
else. We all live here, shaking hands with past selves  
again. And somehow it is important for us all –  
Everything you are is part of this.

*The Tunnel Beneath the Sea*

*A dream I have lots*

My grandmother is with me.  
She is holding my hand, and I can see  
the sand down below us, under the curving  
glass path where we walk. People  
point and talk and the water curls above our heads.  
And we walk way, way out. We pass big waves  
covered with foam, breaking above our heads.  
The water, we see, is very deep.  
There is a long tube, or tunnel, made of glass,  
or something you can see through – plastic  
or glass – that starts on the land, then going  
way down beneath the water. *The tunnel  
beneath the sea.* And I dream it,  
stormy grey, beneath the clouds here,  
where people have gathered. They talk  
and shuffle at the tunnel's start. Soon,  
we move with them, looking up as we walk,  
we see the greeny-blue water swirls and sloshes  
back again, outside, against the glass.  
I like the way it washes way up around us.  
More people are all looking up and pointing.  
It's not dark. There are lights. And not cold.  
Everyone is smiling as they keep on going  
down, but I know I should wake up soon.

## *Cold Fingers*

The best each week is the iceman, who brings ice for our ice-chest in the kitchen. His old tray truck goes slow and he calls out "*Iceman!*" If you need ice, you just go to him, and pay. He has a huge pair of tongs, and *boings* each pointy end of them into the ice, sending all the cold chips flying. He can cut the iceblocks into halves for you, with an ice pick and a chopper, and fill the air with showers of icespray. He gives each kid in the street a piece of ice to suck. Or we put them down the girls' jumpers. I love to run my hands over the iceblocks. They're slippery white, like fire, full of bluish spider-webs of light, all melting, and drip down in drips, into the tray. Your hand goes cold and numb, and then it hurts, and then you pull your hand away and suck the fingers and the warmth back.

*Why? How?*

Why are we called white, when we are pink?  
Where are the sounds on a record?  
How did the ghost riders get in the sky?  
Why does Biggles call Algy '*old bean*'?  
Why is there anything at all?  
If god made the devil, why doesn't he unmake him?  
If god is so good, why do bad things happen?  
After you die, how can you know about it, if there's no you  
to know any more?

How do glasses make you see better?

What is a lonely shack by a railroad track?  
Why not just nothing?  
How does a record player get the sounds out again?  
Why does Algy call Biggles '*old trout*'?  
Why aren't I a different person?  
Do my mother and father love me?

Why was the Wayward Wind born to wander?  
Then why do they fight?  
How do heavy steel boats float on water?  
If there is a god, what was before god?  
Why are people with red hair called Bluey?  
Can Dad really hypnotise the chooks?  
Where does space end?  
Will time keep going if there are no watches?

Why was I born, and not somebody else?  
If I hadn't been born at all, would there still be a me?

Why is a fridge cold, when you have to light the gas at the back?

What is 'an old cowpoke'?

If we don't pay the rent office, will we still stay here?



*Bandages (Torn from Old Sheets)*

Dad unrolls their long white whispers to the ground.  
“*Let’s have a squiz, Grub.*” Strips slip through his  
fingers, their light coils sheath my “*Oow don’t touch!*”  
And he’s off, conjuring hypnosis as he twirls  
fresh bandages around, theatrically – he’s patched up kids  
for years – his brother and his sisters first –  
“*My Dad your Grand-dad he had healing hands.  
Here’s Great Uncle James! He had them too.*”  
(Dad keeps their *snaps* in the same  
old tin, with his patent cures and powders.)  
“*Now, James threw sovereigns to the crowds  
on race days – built the first racecourse in Victoria.*”  
He winds cool whiteness round and round, lets it all  
flutter down, then pins up memory. “*And there’s  
old Johny. Yes. Had the hands.*” Tiny figure in  
a wheat field, formal in black suit, white goatee,  
with eyes that look back at me with part of us.  
“*Johny found water in the Wimmera, with his special  
bit of twisted wire. Walked in the sun for hours,  
in that old suit!*” Unties the scrolls and loops  
around again, so no caress is lost. “*A dowser, he was  
a scientist too, he worked with plants. And look at that  
old girl! That’s your Grandma Gurma, with her flaming  
parasols. Bold old snake, she whipped me from her  
horse once, for talking back! But had soft hands: the gift.*”  
The patter of his tenderness, while his hands dip  
in some ‘patent’ ointment, finds a living well there.  
“*There’s poor old Burt! – cats went mad that went into  
his house. Strange thing – he made ships in bottles,  
wrote poems, clever chap. Then became*

*a Missing Person – came back years later, mad and staring.*

*No one knew where he went or why, he wouldn't say."*

Names float down like stories and go on healing  
in the mind, long after wounds have turned to scars.

The fade-back to skin, slightly raised:

mending marks on anybody's body, tracing years  
from infancy, hot stoves and broken glass,

first lessons never really over. Dad's final touch

always *Baitz Salve* – as if he had the patent:

he takes its acrid liquorice stick, wrapped like a tiny

mummy in its tight cloth – it can suck out pus,

lift layers of pain out, reach down to deepest splinters.

*"You are from a line," he says, "of dowsers, prospectors,  
race-horse owners, gold-tooth speculators and self-taught  
healers. Cheaper than a quack in The Depression!"*

One flamboyant match is all it takes – a crack

of flame, held high. *"Hey presto!"* the reek and smoke erupt;

welling as it melts, dripping down black slick – then quickly

waxes over, seals the wound. The hurt pushing up can't last.

Down below skin-deep, pain ebbs into a cool reserve

held by our calm and kind, a father's hands.

## *Like a Sack*

This comic made me sick. It showed Superman with *cryptonite*, being drained of blood. There was a picture of his blood, jumping across, in spurts through the air, into the body of a mad scientist. Suddenly I thought of this, and couldn't stop: our bodies full of blood. Warm and pumping round and round inside us, like a sack. I nearly fainted. What if it all came out? Or leaked out? Mum said that it couldn't, but I wouldn't stop it. Blood came flying out, leaking everywhere. Like a big sausage skin. White! And all pumped out!

## *Old Wood Yard*

Scent of timber in the sun, where summer skinks  
bask or run under a tray of tailings, their squiggle  
lives a living writing, leap from leaning uprights.  
*One, two . . .* Weeds poke up through sawdust,  
a floor of shavings, gold dust, pure timber pollen.  
*Three, four . . .* your runners sink into your footprints.  
Trackers follow! *Five, six . . .* past shelves sagging  
with motley off-cuts. Feel the inch-long teeth  
of a circular saw blade, still sharp at the tips.  
It once spat chips, now rusted on to silence,  
stuck fast, forever, in its gears and bench.

*Seven eight . . .!*

The kids down the road hide and seek me.  
See them now, softly stealing –  
just a blink of light from cicada years,  
long humming up from sun-baked ground!  
And you hide somewhere, timber motes  
still drifting up from the freshness,  
and you inhale the very grain of it,  
crawling over racks of disarray, where buttery  
stacks of pine and hardwood are  
warping in their shaky racks. Climb way up,  
to tottering pavilions full of bits of wood,  
lopped ends, high tumbled rumpus,  
with a single sneaky peep-hole in the galvo  
roof. Watch one cloud, floating up upon itself  
in silence. Don't move, don't make a sound,  
don't breathe . . . *Nine, ten . . .* and you're caught!

## *Laundry Work*

Shirts squelched through rollers of thick yellow rubber.  
Front on, like big yellow lips, and a tongue  
of squashed washing winding out at you.  
I liked the crash of the mop and bucket, so I crashed  
them. And suds spilling out across the floors  
as you sloshed more water. Like fans and forks  
of soft bubbles, before bits of froth went flat.  
In this sea I stood, and sloshed my mop.

## *At the Pictures*

One was a real shock to me, and a part of it stayed always after, filling me with a horrible feeling. The policeman was looking for a man. In one part, he bent over a tank full of hot black tar, and scooped it with a shovel. The shovel hit something soft below, and the policeman pushed it. Then a finger poked just above the top, rising up slowly, like a stick. Then a hand and arm came up. It came up slowly. A man's dead hand was so limp and coated with black tar, all smoking slightly. I felt sick. The world was bad.

*Menzies Wakes in London (His Nightmare)*

*(June 1952, London. In the small hours, after talks with British defence authorities on what Britain would look like after an atomic attack.)*

Milk did not help, even with a dash of triple malt  
and sugar. His bedclothes in the Savoy twisted  
tight about his shoulders – he still imagined  
chimes of Big Ben, then a nightingale, but this was  
another whisper of sleep breaking through  
the usual polite reticence between dream and waking.

Found one shoulder was aching slightly  
and turned to the bedside light.

Five am no morning yet, only lingering shock  
of images arising, he could still not quite dispel  
even though awake. Green waters of the Mersey still  
aflame, flickers in a stench like rubber and the Church  
of Fairford crashed to atoms, an appalling tower.

The black cloud and deadly light climbed up  
the long sweep of the Wye above Tintern,  
he saw the face of Wordsworth alight and screaming.

Roman walls smashed to powder then two thousand years  
of history, all were ash and gone, all gone,  
old colour and light and soaring stone in York Minster fell,  
a tapestry of fragile parchment and the flames  
poked through its weave and all consumed, the Lords  
and Commons bowed, all were drowned in dread thunder  
of alarums, the broad Oxford plains smoked and field  
and fen glowed with corpses, not one steeple stood.

The proud earth poisoned, forever.

He saw the Royal mile at Edinburgh burn,  
kilted clansmen in the Valley of Tay aflame and devastation  
of tree, town and tower as the mushroom flattened out

and dropped great spoors of death and ruin as the planes,  
great sickle shapes, soared above the clouds.

Pages of Westminster statute and streets full of citizens,  
all smoke: London gone, proud London burning.

“Aghhh!” Menzies sat bolt upright in the bed, heart racing.

He pulled the bedclothes fast about him. It was six a.m.



## *I Didn't Do It!*

The head master called us, but I didn't do it. He was frowning. All the boys were lined up outside the Boys'. We went in, one by one, in a long line. A boy had done poo on the floor. He didn't like that. He said, "*How would you like to clean that mess up?*" He said "*Boys, use the toilet bowl and pull the chain.*" Then always wash your hands after. We looked down. But I didn't do it. I don't know who. Maybe Murray Simpson.

## *Sounds*

I put my head on my desk and hear the  
sounds inside my desk, like a shell and voices  
come down the corridor . . . So I look up at blurry  
lights along the room, and windows letting  
in sun. There's a blackboard at the front,  
and a ledge to catch dust the chalk makes  
when it talks. We come inside, up  
stairs from a ramp with steel rails,  
from the asphalt where we play called  
a quadrangle, and rows of red berry bushes,  
that you pick and throw, watch them bounce,  
and mirror bushes that you can fold  
and blow the leaves with a slit to make  
them squeak. I hear the voices coming.

## *Tram to City*

We went to the city on the tram, from Wattle Park. It went all the way to Batman Avenue, near the big station. It took a long time. It took ages, and I would snuggle on my mother's lap, like a pillow. I loved that part of it. And shut my eyes, listening to sounds of the tram. It scraped around corners, the metal wheels on hard tracks. It rolled with clunks and bumps, over all the joints in the tracks. People got on and off, and it stopped and started. The voices were all mixed in with the sounds, and some words stood out or fell back down. My arm was soft over my eyes, keeping the sunlight out and my breathing was much bigger because it felt so close, louder than the tram. My heart was beating, too. I could feel her tummy, as it went up and down, and her breathing. And her heart beat sometimes, when I moved, and shifted to get cosy. I got so tired, it was such a long way. And warm. And I spread out more into the seat around me and into the noise and the feel of it going along, and me with it. Sometimes, I would go to sleep then wake up when the tram bumped suddenly. It was always a surprise to be woken gently by my Mum in the city, way at the other end.

## *Funny Worms*

I walk to school, or ride my bike, down streets  
where a dog always barks at me, then a path  
beside the creek and blackberry bushes.  
A horse looks over sometimes, and the creek  
is called *Gardiners Creek*. In winter  
it floods and we have to be careful  
and in summer it dries up and is very muddy.  
Just before the school is a bridge and I stop  
and look down at the water. Just near school,  
the path joins with a new street. One side  
has gutters, but the other side is best.  
There's no cement yet, just a drain full  
of smelly water. Long pieces of green slime  
stream out in the water after rain.  
And bright red worms poke up heads  
from the mud, and wave back and forth.  
If you touch them, they slide down into  
mud again and you can't see them. Not garden  
worms, but something else, and very long  
and skinny. One day, all the geese got loose  
from a house – through old gates and lots  
of wire. They hissed, and one ran at me poking  
out its neck. It gave me a fright. Then the geese  
were at the drain and eating all the worms.

## *Spender, Sensible Chap*

Mr Menzies dined with Percy Spender, his Minister for External Affairs. The restaurant in Canberra was not too obvious, but solid. And it quietly affirmed its exclusive clientele. A Spartan, ex-service touch, but made cheerful by a starch-white cloth and full silver setting. Mellow lighting. Both had been dismayed, over soup, by their mutual assessment that Australia was “vulnerable to Asiatic penetration” (Spender). The shadow of a wine glass lengthened over his. “If Malaya goes Communist, then Indonesia might follow.” Menzies, then, let Spender overhear his thoughts. “To the Kremlin’s grand design . . .” Plates arrived, bowls taken; the ways of things were weighed. “And China?” Menzies settled back, looked up. “China, indeed!” The solid plate a bulwark – good Staffordshire porcelain. Knife poised, Spender launched into dissection. He had Menzies’ ear. Menzies approved. Menzies liked the cut – “The Russians trigger something our way, through their cronies, say in Indo-China.” – of his jib. “Well, you know. Atom bombs rain down, and when the smoke clears?” Spender struggled with a bone, dilatory about answering his own rhetoric. “Cut and parry, now, old chap. Let’s have it out.” Menzies winked, settling a fallen bib about one knee. “Well, they have the numbers, surely. The white nations are left shattered, bombed to Billy-oh, and survivors (now, it’s just sheer numbers) take the prize.” Menzies lifted his fork, agreed. “Korea is a cheap war for your Communist, since he fights it with Koreans, and not with his own men. Now, pass the salt, old boy.” Menzies paused, twinkled: “Many wonders,” he said obliquely. “They are sleek, and most exciting. I mean the inventions of our

modern age, and the most advanced are in our hands:  
atomic weapons, guided missiles, jet fighters.  
The public is eager in this respect, and the press. Of course,  
your Communist has the bomb.” Yet Menzies was still smiling.  
Spender risked a guess. “And you have some good news?”  
Menzies let the pause dilate, as the main course  
was cleared away, with pudding on the way. “I do.”  
He let expectations warmly percolate.  
“Chifley’s scheme, in the Australian desert.  
We’ll have the lion’s share of credit, completing his scheme.”  
“Chifley?” Spender raised a napkin to his lips.  
“Chifley agreed with Britain, in 1946, on joint missile research  
and testing. (We fully supported it in Opposition.) Now, I’ve had  
new talks with that scientist chappie, Oliphant. Surveys say  
we have more uranium than anyone. And he says atomic  
piles here could, by 1955, produce all the electricity we need,  
and the means for our own Atom Bomb. A perfect match  
between Nation Building and Defence!” Substantial  
men agreed. The privileged air was full of silvery talk,  
cutlery on plates. Puddings came. And then they ate.

*Skyline, Burwood, 1954*

Day by day, the big screen climbing higher  
above the scrub and flood plains, the worker  
ants atop, above Gardiners Creek and swallowing  
the blue up. A new skyline had broken,  
the low Southern Cross eclipsed every night.  
The parking spots: with accents from the squeaky  
speaker-boxes mounted on six hundred  
wind-up windows. A little bit of Burwood was America –  
it seemed official now, thanks to the Yanks we could  
visit California or bust, every Sunday night.  
Soon, almost half Down Under was in  
an FJ Holden, the all-Aussie crate  
from an outpost of GM, its new star on the flag.  
The Skyline Drive-in, Burwood, first in Australia,  
was built in 1954 – in a natural 10-acre bowl,  
for a perfect view. The Skyline had a playground,  
duck ponds and striped boat house. At Interval,  
a giant frog called Mack croaked among the lilies,  
buffets sold hot snacks or ‘car hops’ on bikes ferried  
them to you, dressed in white cover-alls, with blue  
berets, gold ties. Our lives shimmered in this stardust.  
Much bigger dreams projected down against a screen  
on to every one of us, brilliantly erased our lives.

## *Menzies Abroad*

The world is expanding. You can hear our little voices like mosquitoes over Aswan Dam. Time blinks in desert light as Nasser tucks his bat and Suez, a thin blue lifeline, into a briefcase and takes it home. The International Court defends his rights, globe tilting on new compass legs. Cairo, 1956. Menzies is astride the world, his mission farce. A 'neutral' might persuade the 'dictator' to relent. There is an odd exchange. The Egyptian serves the sweating, red-faced man sweet baklava and tea, courteous in the face of bluster. Europe will foment war between Israel and Egypt, then seize the waterway by force. Yes, of course. They will try. Nationalise, and be damned! But why this sideshow in a tent? Why send this pin-striped *mule* from the end of earth and Empire? This New World man is just *a pannier, does he not see this?* Australia has no *global interest* here. She acts against herself (Nasser recalls the '*false consciousness*' of Marx). Who the dog and why this barking? The caravan is stalled. Personal ambition? (But he has no time for *personalities*, for *novels*.) Nasser pours more tea, smiles blankly, stirring briskly. This Lawrence of Suburbia – at the heel of great powers.



## *The Kids up the Road*

I played with 'the kids up the road'. Once, there was a photo in the paper, with every kid in our street lined up in rows. It said our street had more kids than most streets in Box Hill South, where we lived. We had five big Catho families, even though we were not Cathos with only two. My friends lived in Commission Homes, the same as ours. There was Willy and Grant Bassinger, Larry Poath, Alec McCool and John Finlayson.

Robert Candy was my first friend but he moved. Janice Littletree had polio and iron braces on her legs. At school, they came with needles, and we had to have them. If you wagged it, they just came back. There were 10 in the Bassingers with Bob, Raymond and Jimmy in a sleep-out. Their beds were triple-bunk. Their little sisters Rosalie, Gloria and Rhonda slept in their Mum's room. I liked them. Willy or Bill

was my friend. He was a tough kid. Bill had a brother Grant, and they were best friends and both friends of mine. Grant was younger, with light hair. He was a tough kid, too. My best friend was Larry Poath, short with blond hair, blue eyes. But he was strong and good at wrestling. Some kids called him Monkey, which he hated. He had a little sister, Brenda, and even littler brother Peter. Peter looked just like Larry, so Larry

picked on him and bashed him up if he tried to play with us. Mrs Poath was from England. She was a widow. Larry said his father died, and their place was haunted with him. He was their ghost. I went and slept there lots.

Alec (but we called him 'Alecs') McCool lived in Clintock Street. He was younger than us and was skinny with blond hair. His parents didn't like him to get into trouble, and he was

not a *two-bob lair* (Dad said) like the Bassinger boys. He didn't like to go too far from home. He had a sister Chrissie, who didn't come out to play with us much. And you never saw Mrs McCool at all. Don't know why. Alecs's Dad had one arm, and where the other arm should be was his stub. He had a dog named '*Just Three Legs*'. Alecs's Dad would do gardening in shorts, digging a shovel with one arm, and '*Three Legs*' with him.

The dog was just his Dad's, and didn't play with Alecs, or with us. John Finlayson was much older, with glasses. His nickname was 'Duck', but no one knew why. His father was a teacher and Duck was brainy. He only played with us if there were no older kids around. He had birds eggs in some wooden trays, all with labels, every colour, from big to small, in rows on cotton wool. One day, the kids came up to me, all running, and said

they'd been playing doctors and nurses with Chrissie McCool underneath her house. She had taken off all her clothes and let them look. They said run, she might still be there, and I could see. But the game was over when I got there. I missed out. I hoped she would to do it all again for me. But she never did, and then her brother told on us and every kid got smacked. But later, got him back. Willy bent Alecs's arm almost off and made him bawl.

## *Our Places*

First, there was home and relations, and stuff about the house, and our shed and back yard. Next, was school, and things that happened there and back.

But the best part was the kids up the road, and places that we always went. Some were secret places.

There was playing down the creek and Blackburn Lake and Box Hill Baths and the old brickworks, Wattle Park and yabby ponds. We made tracks along Gardiners Creek and sneaked into factory yards past the Burwood Drive-in. We went to Mitchell's Riding School and to Paul's fish and chip shop and lots of other places where there were no grown-ups ever. Just our places. Me and the kids up the road.

## *TV or Not TV?*

was never the question, but simply *when*.  
The Bassingers got their first set right  
after the Olympics, though they were poor  
Cathos with lots of kids. I watched footy every  
Saturday, the whole neighbourhood glued to  
a precious cathode tube in their Commission  
lounge-room, cheering on our team. Mine was  
Melbourne. At the Poaths, I could stay up late.  
I don't know what finally made Dad  
buy our first set. He did not want one, then  
perhaps and finally did. It didn't work at first,  
just static then a black and white blur that bleached  
every corner of the room with its new headache.  
The antenna wasn't plugged in, or some dials  
twiddled properly. Finally, late evening, it worked.  
The test pattern jumped up at us perfectly, then  
music. The first thing we ever watched was a film  
called *Bedlam*, set in a London madhouse. A real  
horror I watched with the lights off, peeping out  
through fingers beneath the lounge-room table.

## *Fritz is a Dog*

My aunt is Veronica and my uncle Klaus,  
he was on German U-boats, and collected jokes  
and funny little statues they called 'novelties'.  
He had lots of match-boxes from around the world.  
He loved to play jokes and tricks  
and they had a sausage-dog called Fritz  
who ran up and down the hallway  
carrying the old door-stopper, every time  
you knocked at the door or someone called.  
His legs were too small for him, and his  
belly dragged along the floor. *Fritz! Fritz!*  
*You naughty dog*, and Fritz would trip, and tumble  
over in a growl still carrying the old door stopper  
chewed up, with bits of spit and fluff, snaggle-tooth,  
daring you to get it off him. '*Smiling!*' Fritz was funny.

*A Piano I Visit*

*First improvisation of 'Moonwalking Hands', looking back, from years later: then and now, in two voices.*

The wood looks warm: sit down.

The black and white, the thick and thin,  
the rows of keys. They look so quiet now.  
Hold your hand above them, they are *just so*.

Fingers walk across, walk back. Sounds rising up.  
Each, in its turn, is pure – *all colours have their personalities. Swelling out, opening up long envelopes of air, ripe from the very first attack.*

*The last bass white grows from your touch.*  
*Fruiting round and big, decays. Sharps and sweets*  
*rise all the way to highest gold-white dazzle.*  
Middle moods join up, *to twine a smoky*

*truss of chords, or smooth light quietness.*  
Your touching *patters on*; hands make tiny ears  
*of gestures. See shiny flats in ripples make arpeggios,*  
*sentences of sounds across the top of touching.*

## *New Year's Eve at Camp Eureka*

*Eureka! Child to adult, adult to child,  
telling what I now know, back to what I saw  
and felt back then. Information, hindsight, a context,  
then back to that place, smaller words and light  
through gum-tips, full in the face, without questions  
just the senses humming, simply being there.*

New Year. There were lanterns in the trees, high in the trees, then everyone running down to the water. There were party lights, candle-lights, in the grass all around the wide cement floor of the high, open-air place with tables, and on the bigger, wooden tables, too – candles in saucers and cups, there were hundreds of flickers and lights in the beautiful night, the still summer's night, when us kids ran down to find them there, then a winding trail full of lights, back to the river, and the pool where we played in the bend of the Little Yarra, and lights floating out there, with all the fresh night rising up around us, and our own voices shouting and laughing, and the stars were even more lights, and the lovely smell of water and grass and dust and we ran down to the edge of the water.

## *Gumtip Socialism*

Mum a part-time Leftie, in an ad-hoc Aussie and vernacular sense. She gave out leaflets, went to meetings, read her Marx and Engels. *“Up the workers!”* For her, Eureka Youth Camp was a cheap holiday for a week or two in summer. Over the backyard fence: *“Yes, Jean, a great place for the kids!”* Gumtip socialism and a healthy new Utopia, collective action round a camp-site kitchen sink. It was an eye-opener, and quite lovely too – a huge surprise for me, and fun, if you’d just been prised from

a Dad And Mum clinging, in their happy misery, as close as hydrogen atoms in an Aussie nuclear family in the suburbs. It was a bit like boy scouts quoting Shaw, and vision of the open air and self-reliance, half way along an amazing furlong table, where you carried your snags on tin plates, and sat down with The Comrades – and ate, and ate and ate! Everyone chipped in! Yes, there were Communists, and I was in their midst! But this was just 1957, and I was eight years old. What did I know? We stayed for weeks, three or four years in a row, in the late ’50s.



## *The Goldfish Syndrome*

Swimming a new bowl back into being  
takes a power of erasure, each time round.  
Under this fish, and its revolving re-discovery  
of curved water and airbrushed tail-fin life chased  
back into being, imagine a table in a ward,  
and watery flicker of TV beside a chair.  
This goldfish knows more than the 'idiot'  
or new infant resting here: the full deficit of *huh?*  
A sunbeam springs from the air,  
created from nothing in just that moment he sees it.  
But there's no 'light' or 'he' here yet –  
just pure seeing, and energy, and bits of edge and line.  
Even the TV knows how to find the teat of things, and consume.  
The new-born, goldfish, idiot are three figures  
for a culture that only believes in post-history.  
A time without a past has no self, and can not last  
if memory lasts no more than a sound-bite.  
Ultimate erasure the secret dream Narcissus sees:  
what goes round comes around again.

## *Walking on Cracks*

I kept forgetting my hanky. Spat it  
in my hands then wiped it under the arms  
of my jumper. The sleeves were always wet  
with spit. They teased me, I was always  
shy and felt my heart thump all the time  
and a hot feeling coming up, like I had to run  
away but was stuck on the spot when I walked  
down the roads. If anyone came the other way  
or walked towards me, I would cross the road.  
I can't look them in the eyes. Every one  
was judging me, and looked right through me  
to where I was afraid. I wouldn't walk  
on cracks in cement paths. I had little games  
I had to play with myself, and couldn't stop.  
I gave myself three seconds to do anything  
like folding a piece of paper perfectly  
in half, or count specks in a handful of dirt.  
If it took longer, then I would die. I did it over  
and over. I held my hands in this odd way,  
with my thumb caught tight in all my fingers.  
If I stopped doing this, something bad would happen.  
My ears stuck out. At night, I stuck them  
flat against my head with sticky tape. Next morning,  
I undid the tape and stared in the mirror  
to see if they stuck out less.

## *Bully*

Brian was the school bully, and he began to pick on me, but I don't know why. Every night on the way home from school, he pushed me over then hit me when I tried to get up. He said if I told he would hit more, much harder. What for I don't know. He just liked to hit kids. He always waited after school and caught me – it went on and on, I was bashed up for ages. Then had a plan. I would let him hit me easily, like a weakie. I had a stick behind my back and really quick said, "*Look! Here comes the teacher!*" and pointed behind. He looked, and as he turned back again I poked him in the face really hard with the sharp stick-end and it got him in the eye. He nearly went blind and wore a white patch tied around his face, but it got better. He said he fell. No one ever knew.

## *Hitler*

Mr Kleiner said Hitler was in the dustbin of history, listening to the date he read from the front of a stamp, in German, and he showed me the swash-sticker on it. Mr Kleiner was our dry-cleaner, and his shop was at Five Ways, where Mum always took our best clothes and liked to talk to Mr Kleiner. She said to him, "*Kleiner gets them cleaner*" and he liked that and played Mozart's night music for her, old 78s. He was fat and had big eyes that really looked at you and hair that shone. Mr Kleiner's shop smelt of mothballs and dry-cleaning. He had shoes and clothes to buy, as well as sewing kits, cotton-reels and wool for knitting, and lots of pairs of needles. Mr Kleiner had an accent, very slow. My Mum said Mr Kleiner was a Jew and "*a dear old sole, that's a fish*", she joked with him. He once lived in Germany she said – a man with a hard life. He was from 'the rag trade' there, and she was from the rag trade too, and rag trade people stuck together. Mum said she and Dad had shops once in Prahran. Dad was a high-class tailor. '*Dear Old Mr Baird*' was a Jew who taught her all he knew, setting her up in her first shop, they were a family to her she said no wonder

Hitler hated them. Now they are refos in Australia.

She said, *“When you meet a Jew always keep your eyes and ears open, they are clever and you learn a lot.”* Dad said this too.

Dad said, *“With a Jew he will set you up, in your own shop, three times, but it’s up to you to make a go of it.”* Dad said, *“If you really try, but go bust the first time that’s alright. It’s not so good the second though. It’s no more than three ever, and that’s fair.”* He said, *“Jews are not stingy!”*

Dad said, *“With a Jew, always get up early. Be first in when his shop opens, to buy cloth, because the first customer of the morning has to buy, to make sure the rest of the day is good trading. So you can ‘drive a bargain’. This is an old ‘rag trade superstition’ you can use.”* We said hello to Mr Kleiner

and called him ‘Hair’, that means ‘mister’.

One day, he gave me tons of stamps. Dad said, *“Jews are very special and God loved them more than most, like a son, but they have been through pain, because love was in a mystery and he couldn’t explain it’s too hard besides no one knows why.”*

I liked stamps and he had hundreds in little cello bags for sale. He had special ones I could have for nothing. A dirty-big packet, which he brought from home. They all had Hitler, swash-stickers and German writing such as *Reich*. He said,

*“I don’t want them any more in this shop of mine, but they do not mean a flute*

*to a little boy like you – you are too young,  
so they're just stamps.*” I was in a new  
world and Hitler didn't matter any more  
and that was good, because he was dead.  
*“So now, should he be!”* The dustbin of history.

*The Fireman at the Top of the Old Fire Tower*

He said they spotted smoke from fires.  
This was the part that scared me,  
not fires but he grabbed me up and held  
me right over the edge of the drop below  
and I looked straight down to the ant  
people all heads bobbing and arms  
down there, tops of cars, I was slipping  
in his arms and went dizzy and it went out  
and far away it was just a second but  
slipped a bit more he lifted me back to  
the floor I was shocked to death but  
he acted like he did this all the time.  
Then the teacher climbed up slow  
behind us, I must have ran ahead  
and no one knew but him and me  
but I had to sit down. He was cruel  
and sly and that's my memory of it.

## *A Kind of Mystery*

*Unborn, not even embryo, are we somehow fated?*

*Round and round she goes, where she stops ...*

Voices rise in Albury, 1944: Time for Bob's party!

“Up the forgotten people, backbones and bread-winners,  
lifters and earners, decent and sober chaps,  
competition and more petrol, no more rationing, dirty  
Commies under every bed and leave those banks alone!”  
Solid stuff and enough to win back power!

*At last, after all that nothing! Here I am in Elwood,  
watching yellow ducks walk across a wall,  
sucking hard at life. I must be born. We start again.*

Bob is back in '49, surfing waves of fear. Under the bed.

There's one! Huge flags over China ruffle time.

Mao's journey of a thousand leagues

leaves his massive footprint in cold blossoms. The East is red.

(The Soviets rising, huge in song, on *their* first Atom Bomb.)

*But here I am again, making noises in a bassinette.*

Menzies declines to sing along: 1950, he sends the Air Force to Malaya;  
a drawl over jungle skies, vapour trails, then bivouac.

Australians wounded in Korea: 1200.

Killed in 'the forgotten war': 339.



*In my playpen in the yard, I am making friends with cats.  
No such thing as history. No words, no time.  
All just colour, movement, sun!*

Wealth rocks like froth; we want it all: a clockwork  
dream house, where work is automatic, the cocktail hour,  
ice from our new fridge and miracles of plastic –  
every flower is everlasting.

*I watch dust motes, afloat in sunlight,  
run wet grass in my new gumboots  
where flying saucers clang like saucepan lids.*

Vietnam splits along the faultlines. New puppets for Iran.  
Warsaw Pact and tit for tat. There's no détente, *Nyet!*  
when tanks clunk into Hungary. When Stalin dies,  
a collective sigh, heard round the world, still premature.

*More years of 'first times' as a dream leads  
my pony by a flower, I learn I'm going to die then break my  
nose under a toppling tricycle, and oh the pretty lights do spin.*

Did Menzies build department stores, or the whole world  
soar on the same upswing, post-war? History flows down  
time's stumbling grains, millions of unexceptional little lives,  
and those lives much richer, did not care. We surfed the wave.  
Our leaders toed the nose, with cash to splash and credit  
(squeezed much later!) *she-bob-she-bop life could be a dream!*

*Murray Simpson pooped his pants.  
I look for the Easter Bunny.*

*El Quijote de la Farola* sits on a lamppost  
in Havana, watching Caribbean carnival below:

*Fidel! Fidel!* A red mouse off Miami, soon to roar!

*There are insects in a jar  
and my leather schoolbag bounces  
on my back as I run and run downriver.  
If you hold time up to light,  
rainbows burst from every shell.*

New car, TV and radio, JFK rising on the dawn.  
We shouted JO'K, the brightest sputnik stars were *The Meteors*.

*Fritz barks flat-out because his legs are small!*

We saw the wars spread on TV,  
electrons shot at homes. Still, everyone comfortable thank you  
except Menzies on TV, who feared this new medium  
would cheapen grave debate, replace oratory with spectacle.  
Surely not! TV was our new world's body politic.

- Switch off.
- *Click!*

## *Cut to Barbers*

It was a cool feeling, with bright scissors clipping and cold spray from a bulb he squeezed across your neck and ears as you went up and down in the air, with a lever he worked on the back of the barber's chair, the coolness spread and shivered up goose bumps. *"How are you, Master Felix? Just a trim, young sir?"* The barber's shop was in Five Ways, where five streets met, near Wattle Park and the last tram stop. He had cool hands that touched you in a way some men touched you: calm and just doing his job. A bit like Dad, without the extra love. Neat and very quick with a sort of white jacket-coat with lots of pockets and slits for combs and pens that flicked up and back. *"I'll just finish off Mr Smith, be with you soon young man."* I liked to look through magazines – at the swagman jokes and pictures of Australia. My turn in the big chair, and he would crank it up, so I sat higher. He stretched the sheet around, tucked tight, down my neck. Level with a mirror on a ledge with a bottle full of blue, more bulbs of spray. Everything was sharp, bright metal smells, white powder sprinkled at the end. *"And now you're done young man! Look at all that wool!"* And swept it across the floor. You felt lighter, like the air that rushed away outside into leafy summer shimmers of Wattle Park, all light.

## *Broken Bridge*

When it rained, the ground went sippy beside the creek  
you had to slosh through it near the old concrete bridge  
near the Deaf School and Drive-in where I walked  
and mucked about all by myself it was just a single  
white slab broken in the middle across the water where

I sat or took off my shoes and socks watching patterns  
in the water with my mind blank for hours just watching  
water swirl it made the day seem longer and bigger  
it took so much time but was over quickly when  
you stopped all that time was gone and that was time.

## *Larry's Vanishing Trick*

Larry Poath has a box of matches and pack of Tally-Ho cigarette papers for "*Wanna see my new 'vanishing trick'?*" He takes a single paper sliver by the corner, delicately pinched between thumb and index. Strikes match, lights the bottom edge, blows out flame. Our heads frame a thin red line of smoulder crawling up the filament he tweezers. Then drops its acrid smoke wisp as it floats up a whisper of nothing. Then air and gone.

## *Place*

There was nothing much to this place but it was all its own place and to one side, back a little, were pine trees and sometimes a seed from pinecones way up high and you watched them twirl right down slowly whirling round and round on one stiff wing.

Back from the pines and further back was the playground of the Deaf Kids School behind a wire fence where kitchen slop was dumped each day rotting compost full of brown lettuce leaves and if you kicked the tomatoes burst and really stank.

*Under the Bridge*

*Gardiners Creek, Station Street*

One of our special places was under  
a bridge near Burwood Golf Club, where the creek  
was cool and shaded in summer. Steep banks  
of bluestone lined a hollow below the road:  
underside of poured concrete where swallows  
flew to mud nests on the bridge ribs ... Cars banged  
overhead every five seconds ... You could  
set your watch, if you had one. Approaching  
slush of white noises rose in pitch as cars  
closed then *boong* they hit outer bridge supports,  
and *whap whap whap* over boards, amplified  
in the sound box of the hollow ... Then go quiet  
again the soft constant water threading  
rubble and bits of busted-up stone blocks  
thrown down below. We chuck stones that go  
*plonk* in this clapped-out little creek or sometimes  
just do nothing. Just stand there. Dark and cool.







Put lippy on                    get a move on!  
it was just a skit, a take-off on that picture  
with thingumabob in it

A tizz a tizz a tizzy, she's always in a great big tizz  
do widdles, dear  
Don't slam the fly-wire door!

roast chook and some spuds for tea . . .  
chuck them in the pot, dear  
had cocky rellies from the bush . . .  
I just bought some bread and savs  
take a sickie, no!      I said, '*You'll come a gutser!*'

She said, '*He's a real no-hoper!*'  
Yep, stark in the nuddy!  
Reffos and Balts next                    poor buggers  
Dear Old Mr Bear!

don't skite . . .                    or whinge  
he mucks about with shovels in the shed  
he's doggo in the sleepout  
. . . more gravy on your spuds?  
Another cuppa dear?                    I love you."

## *Lead*

Me and the kids up the road tore strips of lead from the roof of the Scout Hall, melted it in an old paint tin on the gas and poured it down our concrete steps so it froze in step-shapes, then bent it back into the tin and did it all again. We watched storms and it snowed once. We saw electrical flashes, and ran through storms to get wet. We saw my Dad pissing in the garden once in summer, while he was watering with a hose. He didn't see us look, and must have been *busting*, as he shook it on his boots, still watering our rosebush. He had a real big dick. Larry Poath and me played in the old caravan in our back yard. There was a vacuum cleaner and we sucked each other with the nozzle. Dad came past and hosed the window, so it pelted hard, I think to make us stop but he said nothing, just hosed. The splash went like a crash.

## *Blue Flames*

I had a chemistry set in the shed, my ‘laboratory’.  
I distilled real brandy from potato peelings  
and fermented it with sugar and with yeast.  
Packets arrived from *H. B. Selby, Laboratory Suppliers*. When I ran out, Mum ordered more  
for me. You had to be an adult, and sign  
the order form. You could get pure charcoal for gunpowder  
plus potassium nitrate. You could get magnesium  
strips, metal burning with an intense blue flame,  
it threw sparks everywhere. Also potassium,  
a soft and unstable metal that came in a jar full  
of oil. It oxidised (burnt) instantly when exposed  
to air. It had its own life – to put bits of it on water  
and watching the silvery, white flecks splutter and dance  
into smoke and flames, pattering across the surface  
of a bucket of water. I got sulphur too. Then made  
rockets, and some even lifted off. I had lots of flasks,  
curly glass pipes and bulbs and distilling tubes –  
anything you could think of. Mum did not know  
what all this was for. Dad thought it was “*just beaut*”.  
There were stinks and bangs sometimes, and he said,  
“*Don’t you start fires!*” He said, “*What I did as a kid would  
make your hair curl!*” I started brewing beer, and Dad  
said “*not bad*”. But my ‘cognac’ was horrible.  
He wouldn’t drink it. He always spat it out.  
It burnt blue flames. We tipped it down the sink.

*I Say:*

“Chrome dome said            cacky  
                                      cark it            he’s a real bald iggle!  
                                      I caught yabbies  
Only a deener left . . .        crash hot  
                                      felt crook        got the cuts  
                                      three of the best  
                                      on lollies            sweets?  
Same diff        a trey a dozen        deadhead!  
I double-dinked her on my bike  
we sneaked into the flicks            big deal!  
Do you think I’m filthy rich?        scored a big duck egg  
no dosh left    last zack        bot it?        drop dead!

Those kids chucked yonnies at us  
                                      a big goosebump came up  
It’s grouse fun        you dill  
Icy poles        flick sticks        rat fink        no fizzer  
double bungler        flaming hell!

We climbed trees at Old Mar Johnson’s place  
Aw, get lost!            go fly a kite  
I won’t crawl to you        gravel rash        like fun!

Tried to fix that clapped-out heap  
Spat up green gorbies        slagged on it        a squib  
Hard cheese            So what!

Old as the hills        Naah, for heaps more!

That jigger        thingumabob        he whacked it off



## *Summer*

### *1.*

I don't like my new teacher in Grade Four.  
Mr Gorman is a young 'film star'. He wears  
his hair in a cow's lick combed up with oil,  
and a pale blue cardigan with small pockets  
for his cigarettes, so the flip-tops stick  
out, and cream slacks and tan shoes. He has cold  
blue eyes and is very fond of himself.  
He sends us kids to get more fags for him,  
from the shops, 10 minutes away by bike.  
He taught my sister, Jasmin, before he  
met me. He didn't like her, and she 'loathed'  
him, because he made 'fat jokes' about her –  
he see-saws the rest of his dislike of her  
onto me. I hide from him behind my  
desk lid, he calls it my 'drawbridge', and sneers!  
Jasmin is a 'big kid' now, with breasts.  
She's in Grade 6, and good at basketball,  
swimming and belting up the bullies who chase  
me to her, and she whacks them for me!  
She's f . . . Well, kids have stopped shouting,  
*'Jasmin, Jasmin, the big fat red raisin.'*

2.

I ride my bike to school, already late.  
Then I stop half way, and cry. I feel sick.  
I don't know what to do. Go back home or  
keep going, later and later, to school?  
I am caught in it. Time is like a trap.  
The longer I stand crying, with the weight  
of the bike against my legs, the later  
it gets. I take the chain from my bike, smearing  
grease on my face. This is 'evidence',  
a really good excuse. '*The chain came off  
my bike, sir!*' Mr Gorman says, '*I bet*', but  
doesn't give me detention or the strap!



3.

My friend is Robert Mitcherie, and he is half Egyptian. Dark, with a pudding basin haircut and small face. His father works on road gangs, and ‘lost’ an eye (blinded, that means) when a bolt snapped on a tractor and flew up into his face. Our other friend is Robert Chung or *Chungie*, Chinese and good at sports. He strips to his bare chest one very hot day with a strong north wind, and makes all the boys in the playground take off shirts and singlets too, so we are all bare-chested, and run round and round the school shouting to the girls, “*We are the bare chests, come and join us! The bare chests are the best!*” My other best friend is Douglas Goss, from Scotland. He is small and quiet, with a slight accent. He has seen ghosts, in a castle, and lives near me, so I visit his house: he has lots of comics and picture books. The ghost was on a stair, in armour, in a haunted castle. Douglas said he saw it walk straight through solid walls. In ‘Other Countries of the World’, Holland is the best. There really are giant windmills, dykes and kids with wooden shoes called clogs.

4.

Our shelter shed is cool in summer heat,  
full of shadows, sandwich smells and voices  
of the kids playing far away. It has  
two high steel gates, folded back on hinges,  
wire woven in a diamond mesh, I stare  
at, so it looks blurry, diamonds slip past  
each other and elongate. Dad says this  
is 'an optical illusion'. I stare at them  
at lunchtime and think of ghosts a lot.

5.

I have just seen Dad in a new light, not a good one, for the first time. He was left some money, but not enough. He wanted “*To get the rent office from around my neck,*” and pay off his own house. He went to borrow more from a bank, and sat us all down, Mum and me and Jasmin – like ‘evidence’ or his stuff – in front of a man behind some desk who made notes and stared down at us. Dad looked weak and powerless. We knew it, but smiled in a crawling way. Dad wanted a loan. I was angry all the way home, ashamed and embarrassed, so ready to please this sour bloke. But Dad smiled. “*Now bugger the rent!*”

6.

One night, I woke up in my room. She was staring. She stood at my door, staring right through me, towards the end of time, a place only she saw. Awake, and creeping down, slowly down, beneath the bedclothes, trying not to breathe, I hoped she didn't notice.

I peeped out again. Still there, exactly as before, as though 'froze' in front of me, staring into distant spaces behind my bed. Just hovering, not moving, her legs fading above the floor – transparent – *scary!* until I must have gone to sleep.

My second ghost appeared soon after her, another woman, very fat, her head tipped back, mouth open. I look very closely. She gets stranger. She is sleeping, dreaming me now, as though I am not really in this room, but in her space. Would Mum be with me. Anyone. Is forever big or small?

7.

Dad has a relative, he calls 'Auntie Dolly', who lives alone in a big, old house in Box Hill North. She's over 80. "The old girl has no one left." It smells like age. It's very strange. Like living in her memories, even the sunlight on her paths and garden is old. She pats my hair, looks distant with me, but still friendly. There's another feeling at Auntie Dolly's that I love. A gentle, faded mellowness and her garden is full of old vines and orchard trees, some with ripe fruit. Dad is fond of her and talks for hours, while I played in the garden, about when he was a boy. When she died, her house was sold. It was stacked with dark, heavy furniture and ornate vases. That we inherit. Out of place at our place, in our bareness. It had no summery feelings any more. And one high, mirrored sideboard was slightly creepy. I stared into it for ages. And I stared right back, in another time.

8.

The other house was Old Ma's, who killed her own goats for meat, butchered on a hook beside her shed, and had about 10 dogs that yapped around the old pram she wheeled out each week, down to the shops for shopping. Old Ma Johnson lived alone. She said her place was a farm, before new streets spread around it. She wore layers and layers of old clothes, none matched. Tea-cosy hats and dishcloth scarves, the wind blew rags about her. She was nice but wouldn't talk or hang about with kids. Paid us thruppences for bags of acorns. One day, she was gone – so were all her goats and dogs. Mum said she had a daughter who *"Put her in an old home, for her own good"*. House falling down, just as she left it. One day, the doors were opened and windows smashed. All around, in the mud and ripped up, were hundreds of books, hardbacks and musty. I took a few books home, and still hope she doesn't mind. The poems of Tennyson in my schoolbag and German woodcuts heavy as hell. Dad said, "Don't go back there or take any more books." Then someone burnt her house down. All gone. One big black patch is all that's left.

9.

Larry Poath's backyard is just bare dirt or long grass never mown and one dry lemon tree, then paling fences hanging off their nails. There's a clothesline and an empty back shed, but the best place is an old car where we sit, 'learning about mechanics'. But there's no engine, so it's not much to learn. We try taking it apart sometimes, add new bits. We start her up, making *brmm brmmm* noises. "Where do ya wanna go?" "Dunno." (Nothing happens.) "Tocumwal again?" "Where's that?" "You know where it is." We always go there. "Tocum what? Is it far?" "Dunno." "Alright, let's go." *Brmm brmmm* . . . It doesn't move an inch – just burnt smell of curling vinyl. The seats are soft, low-slung-comfy, and a slide-out ashtray and busted radio we play with makes us feel grown-up. "How far we come?" Speedo says zero. "Ahh! Go on! Give her more juice!"

## *Cocky Mr Craig*

There's a cocky at the flats called Mr  
Craig. *Craaaaaaaaaaaa-iig!* He screeches from his perch at  
Old Tom and Ma, his owners, when the kids  
up the road visit them. Tom has long, white  
whiskers, face like a crumpled paper bag.  
*"Say hello to our ancient cockatoo,  
called Craig."* Ma smiles. *"Like some buttered scones boys?"*  
*"Craaaaaaaaaaaa . . .!"* Walking up and down his perch, crest rising  
as he screeches, nibbles seeds. *"How old's that?"*  
*"A century, at least! Watch him dance on  
my sleeve now."* Craig weaves and bobs there, beside  
their tumble-down laundry fence, a dented cage  
with scattered sunflower seeds and little bowl  
with mirrors. Craig preens, much older than me,  
or ever likely to be. Always sorry  
when we leave. *"Another scone boys?"* *"Craaaaaaaaaaaa-iig!"*



*Fire, Medusa and Blake*

We make cracker guns with sawn-off iron pipes,  
penny bungers and a marble stuffed  
down the lethal length! Ignite summer days,  
*bang!* There goes the last Rent Office window.  
Dad makes a rag Guy, and it all goes up,  
and the whole neighbourhood turns out to watch.  
The next day, beside the burnt-black bonny  
I find a single page torn from a book.  
When I first look, I feel a chill a black  
electricity goes through me. She's wild,  
has snakes instead of hair, spitting venom  
as they coil out from her head, boiling up  
in the air to strike. Her eyes are staring.  
She's just a bloody raw stump of a neck.  
The caption says something like: *'Medusa  
turned men to stone who looked straight at her face,  
a rage frozen in timeless marble masks,  
hissing heads dart at he who lifts her veil  
and unblinking eyes reflect the looker's  
death and future fate. But Perseus saw  
her face in his shield, and hacked her head off.'*  
The words and picture are thrilling and strange.  
Sparks jump again when I find a picture  
by William Blake nearby in blackened grass,  
of God creating the world in a blast  
of light, holding a pair of dividers,  
like a wand, in his right hand. Where did these  
pictures come from? Why did someone burn great  
books in our bonfire? Dad says: *"They were pinched!"*

*My Sister Says:*

“I won’t crawl to you, you crawler!  
Get that, like a dear                      darl  
                    I wouldn’t be seen dead with you!  
Don’t dob me in                      don’t be a dobber  
                    Seen it, that doodledad on my dresser?  
a fat lot of good that will do you  
                    like droopy drawers  
You need your head read                      little sir echo!

‘Hay?’ ‘Ay?’ What’s this ‘Ay?’  
                    Don’t say, ‘Aaaay?’  
It’s not proper. Don’t say, ‘Whaaaat?’.  
                    Say, ‘*I beg your pardon*’

old face-ache    face-fungus    like some old hatchet face  
not this little ducky  
                    falsies                      lippies flatties                      teasing combs  
shut your gob                      garbage guts

a real sort  
gave me a big smacker, right on the moosh  
                    with all the knobs on  
a pash                      and preggers

be a dear then                      you little sook  
you’d be a nice one, wouldn’t you . . . ?  
he’s wrapped in himself                      men in white coats

I’m rapt                      don’t rubbish me                      he’s just a yobbo  
that sheila said!”

*School Photo, 1*

The tallest stand straight-backed,  
shoulder to shoulder,  
in the back row, composed  
that way. The shortest placed  
in front, kneel or sit with hands  
clenched on their knees. I cannot  
see me from here. Not yet

join these pairs of eyes again,  
all looking to the future  
out from an amber frame

we all seem to want something  
more of our future selves,  
not just *remember me*, but *care!*

can't see the future yet,  
just dark school trousers  
and striped dresses, our faces set  
within a frame. One kid has  
stick-out ears. He makes cross-eyes  
and a joke of it

now, curl up with time,  
in a dusty album.  
It says, *all this has  
something important  
still to say to us.*  
Something to do with light

the sun took us, in that moment  
you blinked. There was light,  
for an instant. *Now!*

## *School Photo, 2*

Please, just look ahead.  
Just a little more, and we will get there.

A photograph of children  
smiling out  
from their faded backgrounds.

Get where?  
One for each year,  
in a flood of otherness.

Worlds out of focus  
over there, back there,  
beyond all this.

The pictured plane  
has real depth, even though  
the moments are just  
dots in patterns.

One pokes out his tongue, out  
to the side – just the tip.  
We look at the camera,  
so it looks at us  
allowed a world to enter.

Please try not to giggle  
at the cheese. The teacher by  
our side holds up a little slate  
it says *Grade Five*.

1960

The decade swings to Stan the Man's radio patter, and this means endless days sitting on the floor of my sister's room, while she sprays her hair, *True Confessions* scattered everywhere. Kiss and tell, to the acrid smell of nail polish and remover, as she sits at her mirror above her scratched black varnished dresser and makes faces at her

reflection, teasing her beehive coif up ever higher, cemented with lacquer from a can. Both listening to Stan spin disks, '*The Daddy-O of the Rad-di-O*', then play forty-fives on her pink turntable. The dresser top is a nest of bright and coloured mess maggied from friends or pinched from shops. *Come here*. She combs my mouse

forelocks into stiff licks, a real bodgie. I'm just eleven, but she's thirteen. Over and over, it's 'The Big O': "*Close my eyes and I drift away, into that magic night, I softly say . . .*" he's dying, of torn longing in his dreams, only the lonely know. We both love Roy, his big voice, almost as much as Elvis. It brings

us together in this room full of bright lipsticks and girly stuff. We listen for hours, not saying much, happy for the love we share, and sing along. Outside, Dad builds

a boat in the garage, and I wander  
out to see how it's going. Sharp smells  
are lifting up from varnish as he brushes  
the first coat, over fine white wood planed

and sanded to a bright mirror finish  
on the gunwales – fish-skeleton ribs bent  
in drums of hot water, curve up in turn  
from the frame, ply hull in its place.

I'm amazed at the pace of progress, thrilled  
that he knows how to do this. It's perfect.

*“Will it float?” “Hand me those pliers. I hope so.  
What do you think?” “It looks great. ”* Whisks sawdust

from his sleeve. There is a cup he won, years  
ago, on a ledge in his shed. It says:

‘Elwood Sailing Club, President’s Trophy,  
won by ‘Sprite’, F. T. Hayes, 1940.’

*“The best years of my life, when I first met  
Dot, we sailed and danced before the War, then . . .”*

Shavings fragrant on the floor; new wood lifts.

Mum said, *“He didn’t want kids!”* She nagged him

for them, threatening to leave: lifts his brush.

*“Hand me that plane.”* The oldest boy of eight,  
his own father died, and he raised them with  
his mother. Too much poverty, too young.

In The Depression, tramping for a quid,

all over the Riverina, fruit-picking,

send the money back to my grandma, Hazy.

Why should the dancing ever end? Rare taste

of freedom for him. He didn't want us.  
But couldn't go back when we came,  
though always something sad, a wariness:  
the cloth always cut against his grain: patched  
up a life that might have been otherwise . . .  
*"Hand me down, son . . ."* The boat exciting,  
a freshness of timber, of paint, the brine to  
come – his expectations sailing out.



## *Father and Son*

Today, I hate him. First, he runs his hand over the table and says I've scratched it with a cup. I look. Not scratched much, just an almost invisible hair has dropped onto the polish. But he won't stop rubbing his hand over, as if willing it gone. He cares more for this old stuff than people! Then we pack the roof rack high on the car, and rope on a stack of wood. He make me tie all the ropes, and I do it really tight. Then he tests them, one by one, with all his might. No good! This is how it should be done son, until my work is all undone lying in long, loose ropes all around the car. I stand watching as he ties them up again. He always takes my work apart, after asking me to help him, just to rub it in, then starts an argument. *"A rocky beach can erode in just a few short years. Evolution! You don't need the millions and millions they're always going on about."* *"What about the dinosaurs, fossils down in layers, carbon dating?"* *"Carbon what? God made it all like that, to test your faith."* It's no use, I walk away. He's trying to wear me down, because we don't agree. He can't stand that, because I'm already much taller than him, still growing. 'The small man view of history' I've read. Combative. Napoleon on a stick. Aggressive!

Won't ever relent. In the bathroom is  
his razor strop. When I'm late, he meets me  
at the gate, and pins me down. Red welts on  
my legs, until I'm bawling. So he wins,  
his stroppy God that must be right, or else.

## *A Scent of Pine*

The 'pencil pines' grow in a single row  
on the other side of school, where I meet  
'the kids up the road' sometimes, to climb  
for sparrows' eggs. The pine trees grow very  
close, with thick, dry branches all the way to  
the top, their tips covered with frizzy leaves.  
Stay close to the trunk as you climb, balanced  
on a high mast that swings in wind, unseen

from ground. The needles at your face, swept from  
side to side by every breeze, a tangled  
cool, dark and dusted with a strong pine scent –  
light fractured through cracks and brittle clumps,  
from the outside world. High above, you saw  
dots of nests, made from dry grass and down.  
Swaying above the ground, you hang on tight  
to reach them, burrowing down each entrance

with your hand, to feel slowly down the softer  
centre, where the smooth, warm eggs lie. If they  
were cold, it was an old nest and abandoned,  
or chicks chirped from inside, you left that nest  
alone. Lean out, the whole tree tips and sways,  
so you edge back to stop your heart thumping.  
It's as long way down. Take one egg from each  
nest, warm in your mouth, to bring down, hands free.

Bite by mistake, and your mouth is swarmed,  
full of sticky yellow yolk and shell bits.  
Down below, 'blow' them – a pinprick in both

ends and spit the white and yolks out. If there's a chick, the egg will break, with threads of blood and half-formed eyes and beak, yolk sack full of veins, small heart beating briefly. That was sad. I love egg colours and their perfect shapes.

## *Something Bad*

Something bad has happened. I don't know what,  
but my sister's in trouble with the cops  
and has to go to children's court. She was  
caught climbing through windows. She ran away  
from home, to meet some bodgies in Burwood.  
Dad's fuming all day and Mum sits sobbing.  
But she has to go away, to a home  
for bad girls, some joint, 'Winlaton'. Mum says,

*"Those heartless old prigs, those puritan swine!"*  
*"Is Jasmin having a baby?" "Of course*  
*not!"* And she starts to sob. *"Your father just*  
*signed the forms. So they're taking her away.*  
*I tried to stop it, but they bullied him.*  
*He thinks he's doing the right thing, 'for her*  
*own good', for her protection, for a while."*  
Their rows get louder: slammed doors, silences.

*Dad Says:*

“I was bit cheekier back then            argued the toss over it  
he’d talk you blind            blow hot and cold all day  
jumped like a cat        on a hot tin roof  
   that chappie    chewed it over  
gutless wonders        run round like headless chooks

That old codger        cleaned me out        clobbered – hit!  
Old Johny was a cluey cove  
kicked me in the coit        a real donnybrook  
got the collywobbles        conked on the nose

Scarce as hen's teeth then        those two, thick as thieves  
another little squeaker        face like a bum-faced monkey  
Nut it out        or end up in the drink

Just quietly, between me and you        I left the Big Smoke,  
looked for work        Got my Walking Papers  
   had a bad trot        beggared

Now you’re doing that all arse-about!  
   A real dog's dinner    drongo  
get your eye in first.        don’t fiddle-arse around  
   nut it out        or you’re left up the spout  
Mozzies got me     a real no-hoper

Try hoeing into that!            get your hooks in it  
you’ve got eggs,        what more do you want?!  
put hairs on your chest        just for fun and fancy  
   happy as Larry  
you’ve got toast, what more do you want?  
   You’ve got tea and butter.  
All your Christmases have come at once!



live on the smell of an oily rag  
for the umpteenth time      took my port, my suitcase  
It's Rafferty's rules      take shank's pony  
like old Snookalorum      by the skin of me teeth  
let's have a yarn      in a pig's ear!

Stand out like a sore toe      stand out like granny's tooth  
kick up a stink      go like greased lightning  
get stuck into it      there's no two ways about it  
   not by a long chalk!

You could have knocked me down with a feather  
go like the billy-oh      a tin-pot show      to the toot  
argue the toss      just a twerp!  
mad as a two-bob watch      check the waterworks  
whoops-a-daisy      gives you the willies!

Kero, turps and metho in the shed      spent hours fossicking  
it's gone walkabout      wigwam for a goose's bridle!

A toot on the flute!      Got my best strides on  
flash as a rat with a new gold tooth  
   it's just for fun and fancy  
Now look at Widow Cafferty, she's leaping like a hare!  
   Curl of the mo now!  
more fun      than a hatful      of arseholes!  
you never know      you never know your luck  
you never know your luck      in a big city!  
   Bob's your uncle!"



## *Six O'clock Swill*

Mr Menzies takes me by the hand, glancing at the clocks of Flinders Street Station. It's ten to six. He eyes the display of hats at the corner, picturing himself in dove-grey Akubra, but shakes his head. We cross, and stand outside the doors of *Young & Jacksons*, unseen by the working men who reel from every door to leave their pile of steaming sick retched into the gutter, spit and stagger, then barge a way back in, through blasts of beer fumes and drinkers pressing forward, elbow-tight, back to the bar. "Ahem, young man, this is not a pretty sight, yet salutary. Do you know that word?" (I nod.) Menzies melts straight through two big plate-glass doors, and I follow; his hand is cool in mine. Though we are invisible to it, the crowd falls back from us. "Just as well, or they might make a fuss, seeing their PM in this unseemly den." The reek of men in singlets and boots erupts. Summer air, sweet with nausea and foam. "The sweat of many backs built pyramids," he notes. Adrenalin awash with slops, at five minutes to the hour. Everything floats and erupts at once. The hubbub is immense, rising like the hands that ferry 'shouts' above a stale gloom, liquid gold drips down backs, from the jump back to knots of men with tongues like unrolling carpets, a sip or gulp to hit the back throat. And one more. And again. Big hands grab and spill with clunk and clutter at the glasses, shake in racks and dash them under handles filled in rows and rows, two minutes left and gulping down. Mr Menzies frowns. "This," he says, "is the very picture of insobriety. What is the answer? Encourage savings, or church leaders might exhort them, good influence of wives, a thin line between them and complete ruin – six o'clock! That is when the pubs shut." (I nod again.)

“My boy, stay away from this. A whisky by your fireside, or lager on a hot day at the picnic races. But do not blight your life with intemperance.” The crowd rocks. Suddenly, it’s six o’clock. Then I tell him my idea. “Why not keep the pubs open, so they don’t swill?” “Ah, sweet innocence of youth!” His indulgent smile. “If we did that, these chaps would drink all night. Drink, until they could not stand, or walk, or work. They would be paralytic.” I tell Mr Menzies I don’t know that word. “Ah, *stonkered!*”

## *Gog and Magog*

Dad is back from hospital, after a fish  
bone stuck down his throat. *“He nearly choked on  
it and died. Bible Bashers”* (her words)  
always at our door, leaving pamphlets and  
coming back for more: Dad’s huddled with them  
for hours in our lounge room, around felt boards  
with bits of Bible quotes. He gives them money.  
Mum says, *“You’re just scared, because of that bone!”*

And, *“That lot are mad Yankee parasites!”*  
Dad gets so carried away. Try to change  
the subject! Nagging at us to Believe.  
He makes me sit with them and read their stuff  
for kids. I don’t like it or them, and Mum  
just won’t: *“It took years for me to throw off  
the priests,”* she says. *“I’m not going back to  
some pale imitation of the true church.”*

Mum and my sister want separate rooms,  
so I sleep in Dad’s now, where nightmares can’t  
follow. It’s comforting to have him near,  
breathing in the dark, the sparks of stars close  
and far away, and moonlight, as he sleeps  
with the blinds raised, and I see huge corners  
of night sky and branches mesh beyond glass,  
on my side of our double bed. He wakes

early, and is brisk and off to work. He  
whistles and clatters, moving quickly, dressed  
and shaved, his car leaves from the driveway.  
On weekends, we have tea in bed and turn

papers into the crisp smell of news. He reads  
and I draw and colour-in the cartoons page.  
One night, he tells me not to tell any  
one about what he saw one night, looking

at the starry dark, his vision. A point  
of light that seemed to speak to him, to his  
mind, speeding closer and growing larger  
until its rays hit and dark window glass lit  
up and a giant pair of wings, of pure light  
appeared and a voice – a real voice – said . . .  
but couldn't say what. A divine messenger,  
and now he's always reading the Bible.

Mum buys science books for me, on dinosaurs  
and astronomy. They are fighting for  
my mind. But it's already mine, not theirs.  
The Bible is not true, like two and two  
makes four. It's a book of stories I enjoy,  
rather than believe. I try to explain  
this to Dad, but it always makes him mad.  
I wonder, is this stubbornness, or am

I more intelligent? Could I be? I'm  
just a kid. Mum *does* understand this, though.  
She doesn't worry any more that he's  
*"filling the boy's head with superstitious  
rot,"* though Dad reckons UFOs are real,  
sent to save 'the elect' from Armageddon.  
She says, *"There is a basic, universal  
human need for ethics and the good."*

## *The Appointment*

*Memo: To do about Rylah?*

How to break the luncheon appointment, without seeming rude? That was the question. One cannot always pick and choose one's political allies, but must one's friends.

(He would make amends at some future time.) Menzies looked at some remove, down at the newspaper beneath his saucer, then rang his secretary.

"Hello. Yes. Please contact Arthur Rylah's office and say something has just come up, to which I must attend. We will have to cancel lunch. Or say 'postpone', perhaps. Yes. That's a good chap, thank you."

And put the heavy, black receiver down. Well, he was being courted, that much was clear. By one who now needed to be nearer betters.

But he, for his part, *did not like to be liked by one whom he, quite flatly, did not like.* (Playfully Shakespearean, he noted, but far too convoluted for effective stump oratory.)

Menzies painted Arthur Rylah frankly in his mind:

once an urbane city lawyer who sipped dry ginger at his desk and drove a stylish, midnight-blue, three-litre Rover.

Rylah, now obsessed with smut! Of course, it brings in votes, but something salacious in the way the chap's eyes roll back, spittle on his lips when he says 'smut', no fair luncheon companion!

The blind hypocrisy. Well, Bolte nipped him for Premier!

Still, The Vice Squad is efficient under him,

and we must rid the rot from our nation's moral

fibre, and etc. Homosexuality, and your Communist creeps in, through the back door, as it were. (Winces slightly,

thinking of what secret talk ... what hidden mistress ...?)

Rylah pricks on his vengeful puritans, carnivorous developers.

And the new man at the police helm, Arnold, alright he's a crook.

(Talk is.) Rylah's vice brouhaha masks a deep corruption.

(Menzies sighs.) He reads on, as the paper editorialises:

"What is needed is the recognition that the context  
in which the allegedly obscene word . . . so policemen might  
be less prone to rush into theatres, shorthand notebooks  
poised, ready to play their awkward parts of ex officio censors . . ."

*'The Age'*, he noted, here struck a new, strident note.

*Old Haughton Brick Works, Box Hill*

See pushed-under places in the cyclone wire fence,  
torn and re-patched, where kids squeeze through.  
Quick, out of the light, across broken floors.  
It's echoing underfoot. A clatter  
of wings whirring, where pigeons preen  
on a high steel beam. Cooing nests  
above shit-dripped walls.  
Pairs joust, beak to beak.  
Climb a spiral ladder to the roof –  
a sheer drop below each monkey swing  
over perforated metal and ruined stair.  
We tried to snatch them on the fly –  
threw heavy bolts from the gutted  
winches and toppled treadle carts.  
Stalked rails around corners to a central  
furnace topped with one vast mast.  
The whisper is like history,  
leaving each moment in its footprint.  
Feel cool air amidst the rust,  
doors hanging with hinged shade inside  
and sun flaring out beyond.  
Crunch of glass on concrete floors.  
Listen for the slightest sounds,  
a security guard makes imagined  
taps, and footpads closing up escape.  
Pigeons stuffed down jumpers,  
so quick to scamper off to hide  
in sun-slant-shadows or push back out  
again through the sagged-in wire fence.

## *False Voices*

When strangers came, all too rarely, to the ‘unsocial’ house – the doctor and the minister, Dad’s work friends, and relations – all their voices changed to a stab at posher, he called ‘*the false voice*’.

He played along and spoke *proper*.

An ironist already: perhaps a greater danger, he knew, was really to be seen; as if people had souls worth guarding. Eyes might twinkle behind the slits, and give it all away – his father outside with his plants, sweating in his shorts, pissing secretly on radishes or swearing at a broken rake, his mother with her hair awry, chasing ‘*Naughty dog!*’ in circles with a hose. Much worse – real cries at night, when they shouted over money, picked old hurts over, picked all the scabs off:

“*Your rotten relations!*” “*Stupid piggy eyes!*” “*Bitch!*”

“*That shitty day with So-and-so!*” old grudges with first names and a provenance he did not know, from years ago, but shaping the next insult.

The crash, the sudden sob, the bloody nose.

Heart sick with impotent rage, he lay ‘asleep’, in bed – or tried to shut it out with nightmares.

He would never fight about money! Never!



## *The Calm One*

The role surprised him – he became ‘the calm one’.  
It was an act: his usual, wry, amused, appraising nod,  
his silence, when they made him their mediator.  
At night he cried. Could he really be so more *piercing*  
than his parents? Why couldn’t they see the best thing  
was to forget, just get on with their lives? If not for them,  
at least for him. They couldn’t really love him, then?  
Or could they? The scary logic, watertight.  
It didn’t seem right, that he would have to break things  
in his mind, and explain all this to himself in bed.  
He was just a child, *who saw through things too much*.  
The dreams went on. ‘The calm one’, they said.

*After the Second Scotch*

Schools and Universities. He was passionate about them,  
he saw them put down root. Turn the soil, plant the little tree:

*Education my doublet legacy. I grant my grant, quadrangles  
of a nation, I incline my thistle to your betterment!*

Menzies, take a gown, then a bow. Universal prosperity flows from this timely  
investment in mortar, tar, glass. Arise, the Carslaw and the Fisher!

Arise. With this honey, thus endow Macquarie of our founding pride.  
Soar high, Oh New England, open your bright doors to floods  
of studious souls. La Trobe, an ornament of lakes with moats,  
persuades reflection. Flinders, you navigate degrees.

There is cleverness in sandstone and in pre-fab  
scholarships too, where smarter thoughts will set us free!”

Oh, era of massive education. Menzies cannot count his honorary degrees.  
Our headroom swells. The intellect is never bored.  
We must agree. At last, embrace amity!

## *Weekends*

At the fish pond at Wattle Park, there were  
seats set in a rocky wall, where creepers grew.  
An ornate fountain on an island in  
the middle of the pond was dreaming rain.  
We loitered here, watching the living gold  
revolve, the waters splash. A creeklet wound  
into a golf course, weed-fringed under shade  
where we waded, finding golf balls with bare  
toes, selling them at the Pro's shop. One day,  
we found a big bag full of bullets  
and a pistol in a bush. (Dad still had  
brass shells and an old grenade from the war  
in our shed, we played with sometimes). The police  
took them away. Clues to a robbed bank.

An Alsatian dog kept me up a tree for hours  
in the park. Till dark, slavering through  
his perfect teeth. White and sharp.

We fired our slug guns down a drain at rats,  
made a cubby in a council van, drank beer  
and divied up the balls and cash. The creek  
ran fast in winter, so we launched tin boats  
bashed together out of metal packing  
crates, dragged from the back of the Vulcan Plant.  
Most buckled under you, bumping over  
snags and rocks, spouting leaks. No steering, just  
balance and a stick. I fell in and was sick.

Jimmy Watson killed cats, whirled by the tail  
round his head, then pitched straight into a wall.  
It was cruel. I wouldn't speak to him, but  
he just laughed. Tough kid! He lit all the fires.

## *Hope an Anchor*

The sky had fallen lower, low and dark above the sea,  
the ebb tide running at the entrance to the Heads,  
strong and deep along the serious shipping channels  
where our toy outboard churned, making less and less  
headway than before, until we pushed at full  
throttle to just stand still. Now too far out to get back,  
against that massive flow taking us out further,  
Dad's soft voice said, "*Hope the anchor holds,*"  
quietly, though afraid now. He knew what to do.  
Rods and reels neatly stowed, below the decks  
of our Sunday boat he'd made himself, 'The Swift',  
then let the hastily tied-together and extended line  
out, until 'the pick' hit bottom and caught down there,  
at last. Loops and loops ran through his hands,  
the motor coughed, burning up and labouring.  
A loose sinker danced on the whining motor plate,  
our little lives vibrating to its high pitch drift.  
It was full tide, the current winning now,  
the boat sucked back into mounds of higher  
seas breaking into hard, cold spray, the wind lifting  
out of sick, relentless troughs of grey-green water,  
rising to each spill and peak to buffet us away.  
At last, the very last loop but one, we hit bottom  
and the line sprung up taut, flinging jets of water  
from tight rope tied off against the bow rail.  
Then a sickening moment when it dragged,  
slewed about, at last held firm. Rain began to fall,  
soft rain, and the wind dropped, as bits of livid  
sun edged between dissolving clouds, corroding  
with far seabird calls. We turned off the engine,  
with just enough fuel left to get us back, and sat

out slippery fields of waves, sitting pretty, until it turned!  
And surfed the flood to safety and to friendship,  
hearts singing like fair weather, shore lights deepening.

## *Brainy Kids*

My friends were the class dunces. Mr Stafford says, “*I’ll move you out of that – I’ve noticed what you’ve been reading. Way above your age, but emotionally you’re still just twelve.*” And sat me with Irene Stott, in ‘A-Row’.

For the first time in my life, I’m sharing desks with a girl. I love her! She has perfume smell, and her name is Irene Stott. She’s very clever and grown-up. *Sophisticated* would be the right dictionary word.

I can’t explain, how *nice* she is. Every thing has changed for me! She’s very friendly and cheerful. And her skin smells like sweet soap, and crisp linen. She’s so well-dressed and neat, and even keeps a little bunch of fresh flowers stuck in the white ink-well. She has

good manners, but really likes me! Mum says, “*Irene has ease and self-confidence – so sweet, and such a little lady!*” She says her father is a hypno-therapist!

What’s that? Irene tell me, smiling, and it’s so interesting. I tell her, Dad has hypnotised our chooks. And she laughs. Now I shoot with Irene to the top of the class, and she shows me how to talk the way she does – so easy, light and lively. She is from a whole new different place. *Elsewhere!*

## *Everything Changes*

School's out. The year basks in a summery spell that's all a moody feeling, as much as warmth, the sun lifting all it touches now, amazed to have come this far. At our last assembly, I was named as one of the most improved. It was sparkling, as I looked up across the playgrounds and school blocks, shelter sheds and paddocks across this growing world, knowing this was the end of primary school. It was such a good feeling to have come so far and this day crowns it all . . . I start happy

but wake crying from a dream that's so sad.  
I am walking down the road near here,  
looking for my friends who've all gone away.  
I can't find them. Nothing is the same here.  
Where are Mum and Dad? And I can't keep up.  
Time is taking us away, all of us,  
to a sad feeling like eternity.  
I touch your arm, as you turn around, what  
can we do? Nothing. It's another face  
I search but cannot find anything that's  
me or you, or won't change, or hold on to.  
This sad feeling of living is just true.



*Freshness*

*Goodbye 1950s*

The tired suit sags upon its hook, cuffs frayed  
How does an era change, circling for landing?  
Had masters their apprentices, tongues eloquence?  
Young bodies loosed sweet peel of selves  
It rained  
Stomp in the thirteenth year  
The new bands in meaningless gyrations new meaning  
Becomes the animal that comes, animated in light  
Over the century's red drift, white rainbows ahead  
Wild one and lucky star, sighs flowed down fretted gold

The artist dreams and every seed is rising  
The minerals gleam beneath red sands  
As if new friends could withstand death and life again  
Slip through the dangerous ore or grain  
It rained  
Like new wealth and industry  
They made many goods, cars, heaters, stoves and lawn mowers  
Like a booming in the sky worries many clouds  
Come in the fourteenth year to this  
Attraction and raising hopes again our worry  
Hearts on sleeves, desert daisies rise through tired laughter

Shall we cast warm bread upon this freshness?  
Our people have a choice and new ties  
Beyond our company and shores  
Let's surrender any tragic ownership  
It rained  
As if a self was owned in love beyond  
The herons lifting from a flooded lake  
At fifteen, smoke circles like slippage, drift is common good

We turn decades that rained down time on us that time  
It rained  
We did not know ourselves beside the smoking birthday cakes  
Old ache of spring, cut lawns, that freshness

## *Odd Dance Partners*

We jived to rock and roll, holding hands with  
a venetian blind cord, turn and loop around  
then kissing practice with my sister till Dad  
thunders suds onto the window from a hose  
outside, from the garden. We're not allowed  
to do that! I keep finding snakes, sunning  
on the tracks to school. Dad said: "*Thou shalt bruise  
the serpent's heel.*" Something loopy in '*Scripture*',  
as he calls it. Sundays are boring times  
with cousins in Balwyn. Perfect clipped lawns  
and shrubs pruned down to sticks. Comparing their  
cars and kids. Why did we always have more  
photos? Lined up in wooden rows for hours  
while they step back and forth, squinting focus.

Fishing trips were much better, with Dad's sole  
mate, old Jack Rodder. Sun blazing through clear  
water, fish darting from the crystal, with  
coiled swirling reeds below. At sea, Jack said,  
"*Fuck this! Frig that!*" Dad spoke to him. "*Not near  
the boy, please Jack*". I just grinned. Jack said, "*Fuck!*"

I read a play by Shakespeare, called *Macbeth*.  
The words are incredible. A Medusa!  
It's reaching down into a well of black  
electricity, full of deep echoes  
and magic, painted with lightning against  
a crag. Some bits are very hard. Old words twist  
around themselves like clever jewellery  
strung with pearls, ideas, rare golden twine.

I hear it after I stop reading. I'm amazed!  
Then T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas  
ignite my library. Gee whizz! – Dostoyevsky!

With the kids up the road, travel further,  
to Croydon market to buy guinea pigs.  
Soon, breed hundreds in a cage Dad builds for  
me, and sell them all at school. Squeaks erupt  
when you feed them lettuce leaves. We travel  
on the train to Luna Park, upside down  
in the Rotor, screaming in the Mad Mouse.

On South Melbourne Pier, you fish flatheads with  
garden worms, buffeted by the salt bay winds.

On the Yarra, we meet 'The Rooker', who  
sells tickets on a boat for river trips  
then cancels them, and won't give our dough back.

My friend Billy is hit in the head by  
a golf ball while scunge-ing for them down  
in the creek, near the final green. He bleeds  
over me, and they take him off to hospital.

My new vest is black, with the arms cut off.  
I get drunk on beer with Terry Moffat,  
who does things with his girlfriend, Sheila, in  
the grass while I chuck, sick as hell, nearby.

My new 'Hot Socks' are glowing in the dark!

## *End of an Era*

You go from pudding basin to Beatles mop,  
your chin firms and hope is that toothpaste smile.  
Everything changes, including your school.  
Now it's *forms* not *grades*, and there's a fuzzy  
line along your upper lip. In between the blink  
of fine reasons for the world being exactly as it is,  
your voice drops down pitch, like new balls.  
Your friends all swap around, cards with faces

that once meant everything, most lost forever  
now in streaming grass of summer. You will  
live forever. Grow new ones. Everything still  
expendable. At night, I sleep with my transistor  
pressed to an ear, as rock and pop drifts from  
great Motown soul hits to a new Mersey Beat.  
One sunny summer's day, back from the beach  
with a caramel tan and sun-bleached attitude,

I hear a smoother voice on the ABC. "*It's Arch  
McKirdy here*", and Miles takes off, miles high  
with *So What* on Blue Note, the surprise so –  
I can't believe hearing's still believing.  
His arabesque of blue gestures smears  
finger-paint all over the air. My ears  
stand up like scissors. He's cutting through  
all the dark knots of an era, all at once! Go Miles!

So freedom's real, not just a stale cracker in a TV  
speech, in front of a bookshelf and a flag, not just  
Jet Jackson's star-spangled tights? Yes, and quiet

nights of quiet stars is next, so let's take five  
on a night of burning embers! I sink back into  
the whole wild music of the summer night,  
try taking forty winks, try to sleep. Ears burning!

## *Our Golden Years*

Menzies positively glowed, the sun almost at its zenith.

“‘The clouds that gloomed about’ (*above?*) ‘our house were in the bosom of the deep sea,’ *what?*, ‘now quite dissolved’. Was that the quote?”

Anyway, there was a thaw, a warming. Though not the dawning of new amity. Certainly, more a plateau born of stalemate.

The messages from Washington, from London, all of the one import, which he, at first cautiously, was now inclined to believe. They would still be vigilant, opposing Communism, but nuclear war, the whole sorry prospect, was less and less a possibility, for both sides of the Iron Curtain. With ‘rich and powerful friends’, tentacles of the menace in Korea could be lopped, yet not finally destroyed. Stalemate. Yet the West, meanwhile, raced ahead. Domestically, we had boom times and post-war prosperity. Menzies studied crisp documents in his box, each awaiting signature. He was shrewd enough to be pragmatic. Australia on the sheep’s back, oil and gas, tariff walls for mill and farm, full employment, higher wages all meant Australia Felix. Why should the devil have the best tunes? He had a vision of ‘soft’ socialism, never mind the *make-do* rhetoric. Had signed the refugee convention in 1954, and newcomers would embrace our shores and build a strong Australia. He would invest massively in education. Primary wealth would pay for it, while kicking the Commo can still rattled Labor! So he would punt-kick that useful can all the way to glory and the next election. Menzies made small flourishes in copperplate, affixed his name in deep blue script. An aide waited in the wings. There, it was done! Behind him, a stately clock said *tick tock*. The journey home that night was smooth. White gravel lined the drive. Menzies extended his slippers before a crackling fire, sipped a triple malt and, casually, twiddled with his wireless.

“Blast!” An odd din harried him: ‘*Rock, rock, rock!! Around the clock!*’

*Sunbathing, Box Hill Baths*  
*(Puberty is liquid)*

This space beside your head advance-recedes  
so throw a limp arm aside and drift back down

I see one eye up is open the other ink  
down on pine needles blurring now

I hear a constant liquid babble in the background  
prinked by calls of adults in cicada whirr

This summer crowd-mix sound rolls round me half asleep  
on fresh towels in hot sun breathe evenly, a drift-away away

I squint up, see swirls of gums pattern-shot in sunlight arcs  
chirping birds over changing sheds and tuck-shop signs

This sunlit tree reflects from every leaf into light on water  
into drifts of time and shifting pump machinery

I hear shreds and liquid splash over surfaces of ripples  
towel mats flap and water babies testing highest vocal chords

This water dance with chlorine is at ear-level where feet slip  
as pooled throngs of thongs slap-shuffle, slopping past

I am merging with found conversations drift away  
under gum shade and fir-pines beside this pool

I'm part of what all the others hear, also stretched out here  
I follow insects, more rapid rising cicadas glissando



I see bodies sunbathing reflecting gestures of sheen  
on turning backs and legs then all stretch out flat again

My head-down in my crooked arm and blood  
beating at all points across the scalp of me is me

I am a tiny conscious being afloat here in the hot static buzz  
this splashing is washing over floating plastic lane markers

This rippled, watery voice is many leaps and yells and echoes  
looping into textures of an incidental accidental music

I am blah-blahed by announcements  
woofing from a public speaker box

I can hear small pleasures everywhere on mown grass  
and sap-spill summer smell, a generator hums behind the day

This sudden bomb-splash implodes air pockets left by a body plonked  
sucks the whoosh down to resurface air in slow-motion bubble fizz

This sparkle of blue-lined champagne kisses  
rise through its shimmering skein-drips

I hover over water, topple slow off balance into  
chopped-out chunks of fresh splashes erupting all around me

Spray is pushed up out of gelid chunks of water  
as I churn-stride out further to the far end

I feel sharp cold rise on shock-rings of tiny  
tongues that lap my sun-stung nipples

Back on the towel again the drip-dry evaporates it's the slow  
playback of almost slip to catch myself back from slip

I drift away to almost sleep, where cool air flirts the pool  
into its fresh, clean vanilla wash

This sun is summer honey over my cooling body.  
Hear leaf crunch where resin rises up from sun-bake.  
Smell scented drifts of sunburn cream on skin.

This shoosing glided green above dark shadow-fasts.  
I feel glare thrown down to thrones of sunlight, flattening.  
This dapple water-drift behind my eyes, light-drift.

I'm a thousand miles away beside my warm arm thrown.  
This tiny wave is in the big weave that rolls over me as I roll over.  
I squint sidelong see close-up edges of some sticks, grass.

Roll front-up. Back-down. Pressure leaves shadows of its flat cool buzz.  
I am wet-slicked with sweating folds weeping under hot armpits.  
This sexual warmth rising is just the sunlight beating down.

This dancing heat and fragrant gum-leaf time against bare backs.  
Yawning, I am so easily letting go to more splash-shrieks  
with erratic constant tempo also tempting sleep

slip, slip back, catch myself serene-floating  
in liquid sonics of laid-back endless summer's  
blissful blood-warm and then drift-off . . .

## *The Surrey Dive*

At its summit, was the mighty Crows Nest –  
red badge of courage for a hundred boys  
with new lip fuzz, and rare insouciant tomboys  
who put every timid kid to shame. It was a test,  
and you did your breezy best to just jump,  
and not look down a cliff of ironstone  
ridges projecting from all sides of erosion channels:  
24 yards straight down.

Under-aged, you sneaked in and loitered  
at the circular pavilion, gradual steps  
down to the water. You screwed your courage up,  
basking on a pontoon raft. Finally, you climbed  
in an off-hand way, straight up to the Crows Nest.

The Dive attendants yelled: “*Get down! It’s illegal!*”  
Just a game, of course. They’d all jumped before you.

As the whole cliff-edge crumbled, spilling crumbs  
below, you calculated a straight drop through ‘the air pipe’,  
past blunt rocks and projecting bits to splash-down.

Panic, then elation bursts up through  
your water-smash to triumph, up through deep cool  
and gelid fizz, rising to the sun-warmed layers,  
then nonchalant swim back. Only two had ever drowned:  
floating underground through fear and legend,  
and bobbing up again, miles later, in Blackburn Lake.

## *Birds on the Roof*

I didn't feel the same about the rats, because they were *filthy vermin*, Dad said. One day, we climbed to the bare rafters of a house that was being wrecked, to strip lead sheets from its gutters and brick chimney. I was with Larry and Willy, in late spring. Just a chill of winter in the air.

No tiles on the roof, just rafters where starlings had made their nests of rotten grass and droppings, the wind and workers had half wrecked: left cold blue eggs and one with chicks still alive. They didn't cheep. They were ugly and helpless, with big heads and plump, warm bodies. No feathers yet, just threadbare skin. You could feel their hearts beating just below their ribs as they struggled in your palm.

They crawled with tiny lice. Larry said, "*Let's put them out of their misery*", but he enjoyed it.

I didn't, nor Bill. Larry also said *vermin*, and I knew they really were – they robbed fruit trees and spread germs to native birds. So we killed them.

We took a chick each and screwed its neck. Tiny, transparent veins pulsed behind their eyes; their tongues hung from their beaks. Not a sound. Cold afternoon sun. Larry pulled one's head off, and chucked it way down.

*Sir Arthur Rylah*

*Victorian Attorney-General, inspects Winlaton remand centre for girls aged 10-17, a state-run institution, long demolished.*

Sir Arthur Rylah rises from his ruin,  
over the barbed-wire coiled on Winlaton's rim.  
Between each wall and ward, where  
little girls are wards of state, his ghost noses  
at his works, shade in a shaded building  
full of cries and crying. An old sign awry:  
*opened 1954*. Where only 45 should be,  
120 lives crammed in corners, on mattresses  
in 'recreation' rooms, broken dolls in broom  
cupboards. The youngest, 'the baby', is just 14,  
the hardened prostitute and crim of 18  
protects her: "*Jazzi's our little mascot!*"  
Girls taken from abusive parents, or in remand,  
share lives with criminals, learn new tricks  
and all the arts of bitterness. One holds a flower  
to her heart, or draws that heart on Christmas cards,  
cards and hearts float to an insubstantial ceiling;  
a double-breasted shade floats after, consuming them.  
The ghost of Sir Arthur Rylah nods his approval,  
and his voice like an old scratched record skips its  
grooves, repeating; "*We will nip every budding  
of illicit sex and delinquency.*" His cops presided  
over kickbacks from backyard abortions.  
His duplicity also nods now, both heads  
nodding in slow motion to *Wonderland  
by Night*, Bert Kaempfert and his Orchestra,  
seeping like a gas from the wireless in a waiting  
room where visitors are cold islands,

guiltily offering gifts of cakes and futile  
cards to their imprisoned roses. The ghost  
of Sir Arthur Rylah conducts the deadening  
and dreary instrumentals of the Fifties still  
washing over 1961, lonely *Strangers On the Shore*  
by Acker Bilk, elongating each dull chord to years.

## *Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*

*A screaming comes across the sky.* In 1962, it does.

A football field, an oval with freshly mown grass,  
zinc-coated iron rails and then black bitumen  
of the southern assembly area, before a motley  
of hoppers, parking bays and the first squat  
rectangle of the school buildings. It was my sky.  
Now jets are screaming overhead, flying very low  
and fast. The sky seems to flatten down to earth

and you want to throw yourself down there too,  
safe to ground. The colours seem to change, clouds  
flash from blue to black, to red, at shutter speed.  
I'm 13 and there is a boy beside me, his glasses  
askew, and he *does* throw himself down hard,  
shock waves in his wake, a roaring boom etched  
against a darkened sky, wing to wing, three abreast,  
fighter jets in readiness over Melbourne and roofs

flattening out to suburbs, spilling off to the fringes  
and beyond, new schools melting in their wake.  
So many faster miles away now, deadly  
and precise, full of purpose: their speed and menace  
still robs that boy of breath. It's shocking. "*This could be  
the end of the world!*" the boy cries. He gets up,  
shaking. "*We are that close,*" holding his long  
foreshortened hand before my nose. An inch of sky

is pinched between his thumb and index finger.  
He's a stranger, much older than me, from a senior grade.  
We have never met before. This is the only time

he ever talks to me, in five years at my junior high.  
My heart pounds for a moment, but can't believe.  
I am 13 and still invincible. "*Just this much!*" He twists  
his wrist, violently turns off the sky, which now  
goes blue again, and there is birdsong and just day.



*Mr Menzies Shows Me My File*

In my dream, Mr Menzies is leading me down dark corridors. “Of course, there are facts, secrets too, but everyone sees them through the prism of their own interior life,” he says, and pats me on the head. “History is always like that, and political necessity must never try to overstep the impossible.”

He looks comical, a cartoon spoof of himself. He seems to enjoy this, and makes his eyebrows curl up, shinily mascara-ed, high above his head. “I will get your file,” he whispers. “Now, where are we?”

Then we find The Room, and he takes a huge ledger down from the wall and opens it. “Whacko the billy-oh! Your dossier! And what have you! Just for fun and fancy, eh? First, show me my glass.”

I hand him a mirror on a stand. He takes a comb, and teases one eyebrow up, humming ‘Rule Britannia’.

“I refuse to clip them. ‘Vanity, sayeth the Preacher!’

Now, what was I saying just before? Ah yes, history is split through the prism of individual lives, and no two the same, all are different, yet united and the same, in their difference. It’s a paradox, I warrant. We must all improvise our fates, happiness and fortune. Some thrive, some fall. But the caravan . . .”

He adjusts himself, then crashes open a storage cabinet door.

“As the head of the head of ASIO, at the head of all, as it were, I have rightful access to these files.” He skims his fingers across the entries: “‘Academics; Abo Stirrers; Artists; Balts; Bolsheviks; CPA’ – I tried to ban it!; ‘Commo Intellectuals; Fellow Travellers; Pinkos’ . . . Ah, here’s ‘Jews’ . . . I admit, the labels are deplorable. Still, these chaps here call a spade a spade.” He reads on . . .

“Now, where are you?” He peers at it. “Alas, my lad,

it's empty. You are still too young for a file! Don't worry, you will generate a fat dossier, given time."

Behind him, there's a sound of smashing water.

"We plan to have the whole of Australia here, eventually!

Imagine. Your very own file, finger-prints and all phones tapped! These people . . ." he goes on. The rushing sound behind him

now a deafening boom. "These people," he shouts, "are now

'more distant and more solemn than a fading star', to quote

a modern. All these souls, now gone, fast receding in the wake of history!" A rushing tide already fills the room, carrying him

away with it. His eyebrows reach out like hairy hands, anchoring him to doorways, clutching at the cabinets that all topple over.

"No, please don't go, sir!" "Remember me," he says, "and care!"

Shouting, as he's swept out: "All just dots in the vast night sky,

my boy. Even me! Forever! Only for a brief time! Even with

these exquisite brows. We are made of light and memory

and sad and fading stuff, my boy . . . It lasts or doesn't last.

Who knows? Write this down now. Take a message.

Tell them I was proud and even haughty. I was ambitious

and opinionated, not always right, though of The Right!"

And, he's gone.

## *Form 2 Rag*

Surviving all the way to 1963, and now Form 2 is not so bad. The first Nuclear Test Ban Treaty has been ratified. Not that we would notice here, as the Fifties wash across a line dividing decades, pushing the Sixties into years later. I have my own worries: caught dinking girls on bikes, perched on the crossbar, skirts tucked up. I get a severe talking to from Mr Rustle, the music teacher.

At the Drive-in we pile out of a new bodgie van, driven by the oldest boy we know, called 'Letty', short for 'Lettuce', but no one ever knew why. I sneak my hands down Mary Black's jumper. Wow! find two smooth, warm breasts. What else, stupid! She lets me take her up the hill, behind the drive-in screen, takes down her pants. Night warm and close, with giant stars flickering

in blue velvet all around us. But I'm too excited and my nose bleeds all over both of us. She gives me up, in disgust. Worse, tells my mates. And this, my big chance. Letty had set it up with her. So I'm 15 and still a virgin! Shit! Shit! Fuck! Just my luck! Where was I? In my bedroom, listening to the radio. But wasn't moved a bit to tears, or cared that much. Still, I *was* amazed that such a thing could happen!

After all, he was the flaming President! How could he be shot? Who would do such a thing, and why? The shocked American voices, over and over,

on all the news. Slumps to one side. You can't see where he's hit. Rifle shots and exit wounds, *'the many trajectories of conjecture'*. I remember writing that, and pleased my English teacher. But it was like some bizarre movie that ripped

up the USA, did a double twist and made fact fiction and fiction fact. Then Mum inherited some money, and packed us all off to Manly, for a big holiday. I loved Sydney. It was brilliant! And flew in an aeroplane for the first time. Even stayed for a night, when we got back, at the brand new Southern Cross Hotel. Mum took all the soaps and sugar things as souvenirs. The moon was

still six years away, but you could already feel that everything had changed. The years now had less gravity, close to zero. A giant step . . . All this was new, starting the era we're still in. Sir Robert Menzies must have known this, too, because he bowed out just three years later, in 1966. Of course, Dad and Mum were glad to see him go, but said – though grudgingly –

*"Who would ever hold a candle to Pig-Iron Bob?!"*

To me, he was a funny face with a plum voice and eyebrows, and a sort of uncle. It was strange. I booted him too, when he came on TV, but never thought these days could end, or we would ever change.

*A Summer's Job, 1966*

Down silvery paths across the paddock  
a boy is walking to a railway station,  
and for one long moment floating up  
from fatigue, the backs of factories vanish.  
Only his feet look back: still aching,  
and leave part of him still standing there.

Sorrow's eyes at 17 see every bit  
of rubbish on a path, chewing gum and wire  
ends poking up from yellow grass.  
He's had enough of this *today*: after a 12-hour  
shift where rubber fumed and oozed from  
a clever, dancing anus onto hallucinating  
steel knitting. A bone-cold floor,  
a trance on legs, in Cable Extrusion.

His downcast head sweeps a broom  
across the bad-sketch afternoon where  
dust puffs up under work boots and his hair  
trails oil, metal shavings, wet concrete,  
scorched rubber, bringing all this being into  
an inward pool of self-light, with a face too young  
for his age. But that means fresh hope, new  
starts, for his future is, surely, middle class.

No giant statue here, bold arm against the sky,  
he barely registers as a cipher, with a common  
railway station, paddocks, a factory on waste ground,  
as his background. Flat paddocks with no sheep,  
parched industrial estates in a far far-flung suburb.

The littoral is dry: one leaning storm-wire fence  
is ramshackle when your train speeds past.

You are the stranger who glances — just then!  
and sees everything he is, his entire being, situated,  
in that glance. It will be real, too, because incomplete,  
printed on another face, a fast sheet of glass.

The day falls softly on your eyes,  
a scene slips into view and out again,  
in the lassitude of a summer's afternoon.  
My memory of this hardly interrupts your  
thoughts, random beats of a train, your  
expectation to get off when you depart.

For now, your station is ahead, at the end  
of enjambling rails, and there's time to kill  
as dust flies up from them and floats about  
your assigned compartment. This thumbnail sketch  
blurs past. There is a factory, burning rubber,  
lights on day and night — once at the waste fringe,  
now the other side. Some world is always going past.

So your train speeds past this station,  
and something hits your eyes,  
but there's no memory. You leave the train,  
melt into another crowd. The sunlight dances on  
the leaves and everything goes quiet.

The boy is still back there, hatching  
his redemption. He thinks: One day I will re-make this —  
this exact moment, because the world needs it.

## *Distancing*

Rain, listen to the rain. There has always been rain to remember. Rain, as a figure for time, the raindrops are like seconds, moments, years brushed from overhanging leaves and dreaming on your gray school jumper, soaking in.

That smell of wet rabbit fur, as the steam rises from school clothes before an open fire, when you get home. You were secure in a warmth full of cooking smells and fire.

The rain was outside and you hear it wash, patters on a window, glimpsed like moments through curtains across the glass. Bent over homework, hear time's patter now.

Here it comes again, just like it goes again, overhear my memory of this.

Now it's drumming on your hands, like time on roofs again, of shelter sheds in school playgrounds again. Then rain clears suddenly and it's sun when we walk back across the grass together, my arm across your back, to swings and slides against the stark cement. Their curves catch up all this light, the world is washed anew and fresh with rain. Quieter now, and far away across the day are tiny voices yelling to come back. Small voices over playgrounds.

You walk away from this, step over puddles left everywhere by rain. Are you still warm?

The wet creeps through holes in your shoes, and you don't know what to do with yourself,

when rain starts again, a fine mist across *theese*  
trees, the wind says *treeesss*. And rain falls  
down sums and sentences of the page you  
left open there, forgotten in the grass,  
the blue ink smudges merge. Now one of these.



## *Script and Postscript*

Approaching the tiny Wimmera town of Jeparit, by road,  
south of Lake Hindmarsh, you might notice a stone spire rise  
above the nondescript of country life and flat sheets of water.  
It aspires to blue sky and ambition, to celebrate  
the Lord Warden of our childhood, or bored youth.

Far from the Cinque Ports, it commends to piss-stop tourists  
a small town's pride in its most famous son, their Constable.  
Looking up from dust, from cows and grass, to the cream of recognition.  
Many loved him as a father, or did not. Some hated him.

Middle name Gordon, after the General, hero of Khartoum,  
and world now utterly gone. You can read about it there,  
in brassy script: "*Born in 1894, fourth child of Kate and James . . .*"

When he joined the 200 other white souls in Jeparit, Victoria was  
an imperial colony, and his storekeeper parents the basic hub  
of Ballarat. Back then, a few Koori faces still seen in town.

A life-long avid reader, young Robert steeped himself  
in the British classics, and histories of glorious deeds of empire,  
those lands and proud red borders on the map: the sun unset  
but setting, and felt pages of an era turning; and we would turn  
to him, in time, to take a stand against its dissolution.

*“This spire symbolises” . . . A caricature in cartoons,  
an Empire sunk? “the rise to world recognition of a boy . . .  
born in Jeparit who rose by his own efforts to Prime Minister  
and statesman . . . honoured throughout the world.”*

His family moved to Melbourne in 1909, ripe at the century’s head.  
Young Menzies was educated at Wesley College, then obtained  
a brilliant degree in law, from Melbourne University.  
He was soon noticed: first, as a scholar; then shrewd  
debater; and King’s Counsel.

Intellectual ornament of the United Australia Party followed,  
when Menzies took the seat of Kooyong in 1934.  
But there was more: Attorney General and Minister for Industry,  
before his first term as Prime Minister, not yet in his prime,  
but seasoned, between 1939 and ’41.

Ming, still in embryo, forced to resign after ‘*Pig-Iron Bob*’.  
Cringed at the taunts – his supplying Japan with scrap,  
while she was still neutral, technically.

He learned all the orator’s art himself, and of retort and ridicule  
was master. *“There is an old saying of the desert,”*  
he countered those who heckled. *“The dogs may bark,  
but the caravan moves on!”*

It lurched, at first. Painstakingly, he re-built political fortune  
with his Liberal Party and returned to power in 1949,  
his grand caravanserai. He won seven consecutive elections  
at a snap, retiring undefeated in 1966. (This second period  
the true ‘Menzies Era’, hardcore.)

Some recall this time as airless, dull and backward-looking,  
and more than just a little too British for independence.  
Others still imagine his Golden Dream, sans rot – stability,  
certainty and prosperity on a vanilla atoll, God Save the Queen.

Certainly, he enjoyed many years at the top. Time after time,  
Robert rolled out the old red scare and wrapped up the ballot.  
He bowed out in 1966, on Vietnam's brink – after inflaming  
the Americans to stake their tragic, mistaken stand there:

they were unmanly, chided guns to fire, to fulfil the colonial  
vacuum and check the tilt of dominos, the Viet Minh's hard  
national assertion, mis-painted as a yellow stain upon the map.  
And how much the mincemeat, in Korea and Malaysia?

Still, in '66 our Knight was timing to a fault.  
It might be wise to call a Halt before an era changed –  
replaced by young boatswain Harold, still sinking in  
this widening wake, without a trace.

Now his spire crows, and he would have had it higher.  
Of personal ambition he declared: "This appointment of myself . . .  
as I may perhaps describe it . . . I cannot pretend that I am as fit . . .  
as a Wellington or Pitt . . . but a man's reach should exceed  
his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"

I look up and imagine the eyebrows lift, as he speaks to me,  
in an absurd new voice: "My boy, you have visited me again –  
all these years! I still overhang your thoughts, do I?  
Well, I will answer – as you question my derring-do –  
with a little motto of my own. It might prove useful,  
should you ever share my fortunate ambition:  
'One must always dare, my boy, and the daring always *do!*'"