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## Fourteen Stations to Southern Cross

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## Poems by Glen Phillips

### Fourteen Stations to Southern Cross

#### Stations: 1

##### Southern Cross

A coiling double steel spring  
over two hundred miles of scrublands,  
farmlands, salt marsh and granite domes,  
with the soil ever-reddening  
like poisoned flesh round a festered wound.

It was a cool grey morning  
at the 'Cross that Easter day  
when the black rocket of a loco  
came roaring up the line from Perth  
to grind steel against steel  
as it braked at the station platform  
and slid the last screeching yards  
with wheels locked and spark  
showers shooting out.

This was the Varischetti Special,  
pausing before its last rescue dash,  
bearing divers ready to go below,  
to try to pluck the entombed miner  
from his watery air-locked shaft;  
taking final refill for its boiler from  
O'Connor's timely water scheme pipe.

Nearly twenty years of trains would pass  
that station night and day until  
my summer birth in white heat.  
Strange station prelude for my own  
journeying, this singular mission out of night.

#### Stations: 2

##### Northam: The Shamrock Bar Before Apex Night, 1949

This was before the bands, when lady drinkers  
took to the bar parlour solicitously sucking  
gin and lemon, or a port, in mittened hands.  
In the proper bar, the saloon, middies  
stood in rows before serious drinkers, dusty  
in work clothes beneath glittering, ranked  
bottles of exotic scotches or vermouths;  
way before there were flickering blue TV screens,  
with callers droning results from Caulfield or Belmont Park.

We'd have a few drinks to begin with  
until the President and the rest came in;  
then it would be time for the dinner meet.

The pub set up the room for us each week  
same as the Rotary mob had used  
on other nights. We had our roast  
and three veg (not forgetting soup for a start)  
including a modest bread roll with the repast.  
Before the dessert (fruit salad and a scoop)  
the fines-master would be on his feet.  
Those days you didn't drink wine - just  
beer or a shandy for the Loyal Toast.  
That particular meeting night we won't forget  
because the President resigned and left.

Something at church he said. The boys drove  
him to the station with his bags for the night train  
to Perth. There was much shaking of hands  
and heads. The train steamed out  
with talk of legal challenges, courts.  
Serious stuff we understood from his pale  
face at the window. He's never yet come back.

**Stations: 3**  
**Mukinbudin**

The rails run on through Mukinbudin  
making for Bencubbin  
on the northern line.

Meanwhile from pristine white  
of wheatbins, A-class, monolithic,  
flocks of pink-and-greys rise  
and cluster again among spilt grain.

On, past modest picketed platform  
of WAGR standard station building,  
this railway leads out of the last  
of the northern wheatbelt, out to where  
grey salt-bush and grey-green mulga  
and spinifex dominate  
amid ringed salt-lakes of red-dirt plains.

Even now, for most white men,  
this way leads to deserts and death.  
It's the cross we bear for plunder  
of these lands that once felt  
only weight of respect of a dark  
and lightly placed bare foot.

**Stations: 4**  
**Lake Grace**

I looked at her ankles coming out  
of her old sandshoes as we sat  
on the back verandah of the schoolhouse  
that stands no more by the lake.

Daisie Mundi ate from her enamel plate,  
like a child's bowl, that we kept for her.  
and our oldest knife and fork,  
the brass showing on the worn prongs,  
the handle of the knife yellowed with use.

As the propped clothes-line flapped  
with her wash I looked and looked again  
at her ankle's silky black. Suppose  
after all she wore black stockings? For it was true  
the palms of her hands, as she scraped  
the last of sausage and mash, were almost white.

But it puzzled me. Just as the black  
beast of a train that had thundered from night  
into the prim little *eau-di-Nil* station  
(with its *marseille* orange-tiled roof,  
all *art nouveau* fashionably bespoke)  
had thrown me into confusion with its fuss.

There, as the blackness blazed into roaring light  
I was overcome. So I turned my face to the wall  
while my dad searched lighted compartments  
for sign of mother's best friend, come to help.  
In the morning Daisie Mundi was gone.  
I missed taking her dinner plate out.

**Stations: 5**  
**Mornington Mills**

When the rats ran through our mill house  
which was also the school house, running  
and running along joists behind the room's  
hessian lining, you could see bulge of bodies  
passing. It was a rough town  
this mill town. Rougher than we knew.

The big boys broke thorns from bouganvilleas  
and pressed them into us to hear our squeals.  
Like the rats fighting and mating at night.  
While down at the mill-owned tavern

men with only a thumb left on a hand  
broke beer bottles over their screaming wives.

Who were we to comprehend  
if an engine driver mourned,  
though twenty years had gone,  
those nine men dead under a mound  
of torn sleepers, rucked-up rails,  
and trucks piled high? 'The Jubilee'  
was hitting ninety miles an hour,  
they'd said, as it crossed the trestle bridge.  
The brakes were gone and the cutting  
coming up. Some jumped clear  
but when they found old Maggs  
he was just a mess of mince  
fit for a butcher's tray. Except his leg -  
pinned under two stacked trucks. The Doc  
cut it off to get the corpse out.  
Later, when they found the leg,  
it was buried by the railway line -  
memento to the milling company.  
After all, everything else was theirs!

When the picture-show man came with his van  
and backed up to the recreation hall door,  
we could watch the looming black  
and white images of Hollywood's zombies  
shambling through Limberlost glades,  
while comic wide-eyed black men ran  
and blubbered more than we did, afterwards,  
waking in nightmare rictus in our beds.

In light of day we bravely waved to the driver  
tugging a rake of green fresh-cut jarrah,  
bleeding in twenty-foot lengths, through  
the mill-owned siding which served, by grace,  
as mill-town station for the mill-owned populace.

**Stations: 6**  
**Perth**

Troop trains drew out of arched precincts  
where the mighty clock ruled over parallel  
platforms, where men with lamps and whistles  
waved flags and kept everything on time.

Mother shepherded our little flock  
fortified with penny ice-creams  
as bands played stirring wartime tunes,  
while girl friends and younger brothers

enviously ran beside moving compartments  
where khaki-clad soldier boys whistled and grinned  
and stowed their kit bags and rifles clumsily  
as their last train drew slowly out.

With surprise we saw real tears run  
down our mum's face into her ice-cream cone.  
Outside the station, horse-drawn wagons waited  
and the street photographer in thin and shabby suit  
flashed and handed us his ticket. Later  
when we viewed the family snap it was sad  
the only one missing the action was our dad.

**Stations: 7**  
**Beverley**

We always parked the car  
near the station, Saturdays.  
This was the day the shops  
stayed open 'til late. A market  
day, perhaps, in the English fashion  
that the settlers had brought  
like our rural habits  
when they named this Avon Valley  
and herded Aborigines away.

Though it's true some came back.  
We used to see them from the car  
in a circle squatting on the one  
patch of green grass that faced the town.  
It was slap bang beside the train line,  
near the railway station in fact.  
So we were told we must use  
the station lavatories, not  
the better ones erected in the park.

Once, I recall, bored almost  
to stupefaction, while elders  
dallied in pubs or tearooms  
my cousin and I got talking  
seated up high in the back  
of their 1938 Chev car.  
We talked on and on of favourite books,  
each in our final year of primary school;  
She of plans for high school. I of beyond.  
It was the first time I'd felt free  
of the combat zone of boys versus girls  
which the past seven years of school  
had always been. Neither noticed  
the shadows nor the car grow dark inside.

Until, warned by siblings, maybe  
parents sternly glanced through the glass -  
yet relieved, it seemed, and ordered us  
out, with boxed ears. I puzzled  
that peace after a seven years war  
should be greeted thus. And stumbled  
toward the station, crossed lines  
towards the platform to answer  
that other call of nature  
so inadequately named, perhaps.

**Stations: 8**  
**Bridgetown**

It was bitter cold these winters  
when the boy was sent at four a.m.  
to rouse the fireman from his iron-roofed home.  
The driver had at least a half-hour more  
while the fireman set and fired  
and built up full pressure of steam.

Later, passengers turned up, still  
pre-dawn, to stamp in overcoats  
and blow into fists. Bells ringing,  
telegraph battering in the station rooms,  
as luggage was stacked on trolleys  
under weak yellow of lighted lamps.

The fog confirmed its presence  
making shafts and cones and halos  
of the station's yard lights,  
as the locomotive inched out  
of its shed with a shuddering thrust  
of slipping wheels. And joined up.

Down the carriages the thudding of doors,  
now passengers hang out windows in farewell,  
the engine driver yanks the cord  
and wakes the town with warning whistle blast.  
The stationmaster hands over a brass staff,  
the guard looks at his fob watch. They depart.

Drawing its brown caterpillar out of dock  
the 'E Class' gathers way, whistles again  
at the street crossings and passes  
between the long apple-drying sheds,  
hiving steam pressure for the haul up Hester Bank.  
At the start you can never know the way ahead.

**Stations: 9**  
**Pingelly**

Pingelly just after the war  
was an odd sort of town.  
You could hardly believe  
they once had a flour-mill  
by the station. They'd even  
held the Pingelly Grand Prix  
in those heady pre-war years  
when all the pubs ran strong  
on a Saturday football night.

Pity Morambine lost out.  
It was marked out to be  
a new Avon Valley town.  
Then the railway bypassed  
by five miles to the west  
and Pingelly's chance had come.

I was old enough for doubts  
about a Christian life.  
The rector had sweaty hands  
and his unwashed cassock  
announced his unwanted nearness  
to his young cringing flock. So I  
skipped Sunday school often,  
agreed with rougher schoolmates  
to renounce God. Trouble was  
in a small town it gets harder  
to dodge. Parents backed up the church.

Our mother just then in hospital  
because of some nameless fate  
she was too grim to unfold, but  
we'd heard miscarriage spoken of,  
at any rate, cycling to bring  
a parcel of clean-washed things,  
I rode toward the railway crossing  
as always, in some haste. Christ,  
I had good brakes! And needed them,  
for the rector's Ford, bolt upright  
on its spindly wheels near got me  
at the crossroads, coming up on my left.  
He careered on like a locomotive  
for another fifty yards before he stopped.  
Then backed up furiously to where  
I stood, still shaking, holding up my bike.

'You come to church, young man!'



he barked, his face all purple  
with rage. But I with growing anger  
just stared him out.

Later at the hospital with mother,  
her hand on the Bible by her on the bed,  
she spoke tearfully that we  
should all be brave. Able to go on  
alone if need be and it pleased  
God to call her. Her mouth twisted,  
'Now be good!' she said, and asked  
if I was saying my prayers. 'No,'  
I joked, my mind still grasping  
how close the church had been  
to finishing me off fifteen minutes before.  
So I went home to my chores  
feeding the chooks, with that evil eye  
of an old rooster crowing over his brood.  
And all for the occasional warm egg  
and an ancient hen to sacrifice  
for dinner on Easter day.

**Stations: 10**  
**Mount Kokeby**

'Block it your way!' howled my aunt  
as the pet kangaroo sprang  
waywardly it seemed towards my face.  
So I fell back weakly as the joey  
made off for the open wide farm gate.  
Later someone brought it back after a chase  
and despite my aunt's shrill grief  
the joey survived. It was I fell from grace.

Another time, I drew in at the roadside  
station (where grandad had loaded wheat).  
Again harvest time, as trucks from farms  
queued and elevators rattled with the strain  
of shifting tonnes of the river of pale grain.  
Soon silos would be chock full; out of harm's  
way under blue plastic tarps the overflow.  
So bread would be baked and broken, stuff of psalms.

How many more times  
can I come down  
that long road  
from Mount Kokeby  
to Bally Bally Hall  
to where my mother married,  
where I was christened,

where the little school  
once rang with shrill  
children's voices?  
When you drive  
down a country road  
you can't easily  
tell yourself. 'This  
time may be my last  
run over the old track.'

**Stations: 11**  
**Karping**

This is the watershed where  
steam trains crossed from one  
river's system to another -  
Avon to Hotham. Just  
a raised loading shelf  
of local scree, laterite  
edged with jarrah lumber,  
with the sign Karping Siding  
and a standpipe for the train.

The Hotham here is salt now,  
where once deep ponds were clean  
and pure enough to pump up  
water for the Albany Express.  
Or maybe a mixed goods  
steaming on Collie coal. Karping  
where we lit a fire to cook breakfast -  
boys on cycling trip some fifty years ago -  
but one of us dropped our pocket knife

in the dirt. Unthinking walked away.  
Hours later pushing our bikes back  
we met the swagman. A devil!  
He was blackened as the billy  
swinging from his pack but stopped  
us on the road. We wondered  
whether he was set to rob us  
or something worse. But  
yellow teeth smiled: 'Boys,' he said,  
'one of you dropped a knife back there.  
I've wedged it in the fork of a jam tree,  
where you lit your fire. You'll see.'

**Stations: 12**  
**York**

The first thing the boy looked for on the road

was the squat white tower with cone-shaped roof  
and its three dark oblong windows, which showed  
on the same side, above the door. Aloof  
it stood in the parched paddock by the gate,  
a toy rocket waiting for its launch. That  
was his silo, unique, for which he'd wait  
eagerly each time. Once past it, he sat  
back as the road ran between salmon gums  
stretching up their elegant olive shafts  
among grey york gums, most with scar that comes  
they said, where Nyoongars, practising their crafts,  
had cut their bark shields, needed for a fight.  
At last Mount Bakewell, blue-black, loomed in sight.

**Stations: 13**  
**Moorine Rock**

I do remember our train  
stopping sometimes in the night.  
Glimpses of harsh-lit but empty  
platform and some rail worker  
slumping past. When the engine  
re-docked with its vertebrae,  
which was our train, it spasmed  
strange couplings in dreaming sleep  
for the passengers stretched out  
in stockinged feet.

Morning brought us to another stop.  
While officials fussed, we took  
time out at this little town  
called Moorine Rock. In the back  
of their pub the door was open  
to the bar. We crowded in  
and I got talking to a scrawny coot.  
Seems he was a fossicker,  
a local, who worked where he could,  
'specking' after rain, dollying  
a pot from this show or that.  
In between, he picked up work  
on farms. Seems he knew a lot  
about Goldfields history and such.

Told us a story about the big rock:  
years ago a hermit squatted there.  
He dammed up the winter run-off  
and started a summer garden.  
Stocked it with vegies and melons,  
a fruit tree or two, even date palms  
donated by passing Afghan camel men.

The man had come outback for gold,  
but found no gold, worked hard on farms  
and mines and kept to his plan. At last the ship  
was due so he packed up and took  
the train to the coast. But at the port  
he met his girl in another man's arms.

The trauma turned his mind, it seemed.  
Jumped the 'rattler' and headed back  
to the Fields. Shadow now of the man he'd been.  
Hair and beard gone white,  
he went bush. Disappeared.  
The next thing they knew he'd found  
this bit of ground, a soak, near the Rock.  
Applied to rent it from the State  
so he could grow his own garden, sell produce  
in exchange for what he couldn't make -  
matches, tea, candles and the like.  
Over many years he worked there, even  
grew a patch of wheat, milled flour  
between rough-carved stones. At last  
the Yilgarn Mining Warden told police  
to keep an eye out for the old bugger,  
drop off some rations now and again.

But some jumped-up government clerk in Perth  
reckoned he'd got behind with his rent  
and wanted to turf him off the place.  
Poor devil, he appealed, and the Warden  
saved him. Told the clerk to get off  
the hermit's back. They say  
he lived on until too old and frail  
to survive the hell of summers  
when heatwaves nearly melt the Rock,  
or winters when the ice at dawn  
shows a thick crust on any gnamma hole.  
He died in some old man's home  
by the coast, far from his rock-hole  
humpy in the mulga outback. They say  
you can still see the date palms  
and a big stone he used as a cave door.

But just then in the story, the train whistle  
blew. We men grabbed all the bottles we could hold  
and out of the pub and over the road  
we stormed. Piled into our dog boxes  
as the train puffed out of the little station.  
Soon we'd left the dust of Moorine Rock  
and the hermit's story far behind.

**Stations: 14**  
**Southern Cross**

Listening for trains was something we did  
as children. We would put our hands  
on the warm smooth rail, lower heads  
to lean an ear to this longest steel bell,  
listening for tremors of trains here  
in red desert, a mulga and mallee land,  
where lowland salt flats rise to ridges  
of quartz, mullock heaps and old poppet heads  
on skylines, crucifixes to folly of gold.  
We still do listen in this country for the next coming,  
in this place of skulls, of desert she-oaks,  
of spheres and melancholy  
with their tones and tunes.

Glen Phillips  
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