FOUR QUARTETS

QUARTET ONE:

HILLS

(for John Blakeley)

PART  I - Coming Down

Earliest painters showed them as a blue smudge
on the horizon, beyond that river bend
where an unlikely black man posed
with a handful of spears and air of a friend.

But I first knew that range of hills
coming down through dark-boled files of forest,
down the old snaking ribbon of a road
from wheatbelt country, where the eye sees for miles.

Then the Lakes Corner at last. And soon
grandfather slows the Buick stately and square;
at Sawyers, swings into the gravel
in front of the tearooms there.

Dutifully we ‘stretch our legs’, trooping
into the table-crowded room, ordering ‘Pass
me more scones!’ Outside at the garage
a thin, old man cranks up amber petrol in the glass.
This was ‘the Hills’ our Darling Ranges
where the road looped under a railway line,
down through Mundaring’s mists,
through Mahogany Creek with its faded sign;

Parkerville, Stoneville well behind,
we see the fat Glen Forrest bus
in butterscotch and cream that has roared
all the way up the curving hill to meet with us.

And now we are leaning forward in our seats
calling to grandma, ‘Aren’t we there yet?’
Then we come to the crest, Darlington
on our left, and see the coast before us set.

Here at last, our journey’s end in sight,
we descend through Greenmount’s green hills
in search of the scents of the sea.
Behind us the whole skyline fills with a blue range.

PART II - Summer Holiday

The house was a baker’s oven
in that summer sun.
We crawled under splintered floors,
collected strange tarnished jars,
made ‘coffee essence’ concoctions
to drink in the stifling hours.
When night came with gelid air
blown in from the glittering sea,
we saw, like a soft reflection
of stars on the coastal plain,
dim beads of street lights
and the distant city’s glow.

Then the east wind raked across
the swaying forest crowns
where we camped on verandah beds -
its restless nagging probed our dreams
as would the wartime searchlights
seeking to destroy our haven of night.

Picnicking in the hills, collecting wood,
we rattled on tracks that led to the Weir,
its clear green of waters worth their weight in gold;
saw honeymooners gone out from quaint hotels
trooping back with mounting appetites;
our beady children’s eyes took note of adult life.

A city seen from its flanking hills
seems almost slumbering in its power;
and yet all roads lead down there
where commuters earn their daily bread.
A child counting the holiday span already
finds each day has left with the ‘workers train’
of those scarlet omnibuses
toiling down the steep-pitched grades.

Vacation ended, then we left the hills
and the bush closed in behind us.
drawing to itself the mystery
of its secret places and its hidden streams.

PART III - What did they really think?

And D H Lawrence said: ‘I often think
of Darlington,’ writing from Mexico,
‘Can see it in my mind’s eye
as plain as Lake Chapala here.’
But what did he really think?

And Molly Skinner said, ‘Just over the fence
the summer bush crouched down,
acid and harsh, with great granite rocks
thrusting between the prickly shrubs.’
But what did she really think?

And Katharine said, speaking of
Greenmount of course, ‘Dark in the forest
under the redgums and jarrah,
the wood-carter’s track a cicatrice
of an old wound through the bush.’
But what did she also think?
And Judah Waten said, looking towards these hills: ‘The shrunken moon sailed high in the sky: round me the trees stood like rigid sentries, their lips sealed.’

But what did he really think?

And what do I say? I recall fording a swart pool that hardly rippled, leaving only my two drying tracks on the gravel road. It’s all the trace we ever leave on our own patch of land: that’s what I really think.

PART IV - Darling Range, Darling Range

We may see the pattern of these hills - the smudged horizon stroke glimpsed by the immigrant, climbing high dunes. Or the neat and private backyards shown to the descending aircraft, so many with their tiny sapphire shapes of swimming pools.

But the real shapes are like reversed images of a camera plate: these ragged trees, these cunning valleys with their hidden creeks and the grey tor boulders poised - the antimatter of this antique earth. That’s why the first of us who came
knew we’d be possessed and
called this scarp the Darling Range.

1985.

QUARTET TWO:

AUTUMN

(Birthday wishes for 2007)

I

Copenhagen, where I stepped for hours
on cobblestones, protruding skulls
of baby dinosaurs, round old town
streets. And sadness for lost life
swept through me as the crowded
canals quietly moved their tidal
waters, passing in straight lines.

I did miss you by my side, for
I had imaged moments
when we might have paused
before the little mermaid—
one who (as it’s told) embraced
impossible dreams of a dual life.
II

Florence, and I saw goldsmiths bent over crowded benches on the Arno’s aged bridge. Stone arches reflected in the flat green water to become full circles like the wedding hopes of bride and groom. I could have sworn I felt then your hand swing in search of mine, seeking maybe certain assurance of fingers looped. And then the crowd flowed on, down narrow streets into city squares towards rich domes and towers where the bells of a baptistery rang out. True believers were hid now behind great closed doors, safe from the hedonism of the infidel.

No longer was your arm linked in mine. The gates of one sainted church after another clanged shut while the stalls of the street-sellers of florid trinkets were folded and wheeled away as cafés lit up.
I looked at the grime-marked steps
that climbed to the central station;
and the tumbled detritus of part-built
car park ramps and portals in the piazza.
Just then you were away in distant
destinations flying from my circling thoughts.

III

In Weston-Super-Mare’s morning murk
I woke to tripping hooves of donkeys
outside on road metalled promenade
that leads to the once Grand Pier—still stretched
out to advancing waters on its strait-laced
dark Victorian wrought-iron palisades.
The beach sands are dun khaki where
donkeys will load up with coated kids.

Later in the chill wind of morning
paddlers might try the grey gelid
ankle-deep sea, while gnawing at lollipops
of holiday rock as large as pingpong bats.
Clowns in soiled costumes may come
to tumble slowly, balance on planks
across star-spangled barrels. Dylan
could have known such a beach
with ‘cricket on the sand, and sand
in the spongecake’. At the squared panes
of the hotel, I hold the curtain aside
as middle-aged Bombay-bloomered
runners pass on the pavement with puffed chests and joggers immense as seven-league boots. It is still dawn’s grey light in the street where a man from West India swings plastic sacks into the back of a panting council lorry.

In a week your birthday will come round again. So three hundred or so more dawnings will have followed regular as tides which have seethed and retreated on the world’s beaches time after time. When I turn from these salt-caked British sands, I think of you far from me as some signal light across seas. And that always open arms can encircle love.

IV

We have seen moths dart around a candle’s searing flame in dark of night. Calls to difficult new numbers in foreign lands, emails frantic to and fro. So we lunge still at that ardent lamp, to cross and recross closer and closer to its blaze of light. Two moths blinded, we must circle into night.
QUARTET THREE:

AGEING

‘There is only one truth about life: we come from dust and will return to dust.’

(un-named Indian Guru)

I

My grandfather’s legs were parentheses
so he looked like and old time cowboy
bowed at the knees; but maybe it was
a touch of rickets from a boyhood
of poverty-farming on marginal lands
around Balaclava—saltbush country.

Day in day out he trotted to chores
on his Bally Bally farm, too impatient
to stroll from stables to forge, or back
again to the hayshed, or out fixing
a windmill, dragging silt from a dam; he
was always on the run, even feeding sheep.

I only knew him as an old man, upright
in his Chevrolet car with grandma beside;
wire-framed spectacles were pulled out
in the fading electric light some nights
as he pored over the accounts swearing
at the ‘guvmint’—“Put ’em all up against a wall…”
Much later drove the Chevrolet into
a york gum tree. The setting sun blazed
in a western sky and just there the dirt road
swung away and some say a farm boy
driving a tractor at that moment came
of a sudden from a farm gate. And he was done.

II

Someone told me they couldn’t write a word
for a year after a parent died. It was that vacuum
when of a sudden, there’s nowhere in the room
to speak your love for a mother you adored.
So this gulf is what nature really abhorred,
dependencies you thought you’d overcome
which haunt now, entering an empty home.
Memories come crowding as a spectral horde;
the curse of childhood is discovering shame,
discovering evil, for finally we are all the same,
and even to those we love we have been bad.
The curse of age is more and more those sad
moments to recall; clearer they’ll become
as present time dissolves in growing gloom.
III

Waking half frozen like a castaway spread-eagled with the covers thrown aside, I rolled back under the edge again. Beside me warmth beckoned to be embraced in foetal crouch.

IV

We know accidents are part of life to begin and end the piece of string that marks the ragged length of time allotted each. Ancestors of mine who met by chance on a steamer’s deck or fell before a bolting automobile in turn produced the accident of birth granted my house. Those who have strayed in my path and maybe tied one knot in my life cord, then moved on, were themselves as accidentally hewn from the clay and return, who knows when, to the welcoming dust. The world’s great cultures know that. And we should all sweep the graves of forebears tenderly. So those older or younger than I, whose rope span is loosed already, the knots untied, do leave.
a gulf of grief as the string trails through
my living fingers. Reason cannot re-tie
the slipped knot. Memory fashions its
monuments of past lives most of all,
for we do have them when we wake
in a freezing night staring into dark
yet find our coverlet is still warm.

2010.

QUARTET FOUR:

LOST ITEMS

I

At first I thought of dense forests,
some wild place, gullies deep,
full of dry rocks, dryandras and
grey-green bull banksias. You creep
through these clusters of zamia fronds,
and squeeze between rough burnt bark
of marri trees haemorrhaging gum
that drips red as wounds. Stark
whitegum groves bring us to hilltops
from where we can see more signs
of ironstone ridges, stretched ahead
as slate-blue shadows, marking lines
or barriers set to entrap, to spread
out and separate us until love’s death.
But the ground here, the forest floor
opens to bare scars of granite, grey
as the wind-flensed maelstroms or
storm waves of oceans. Hillsides may
confuse us with tor tumbling, lose us,
leave us bereft of home fires of young love.

Yet these were lands where Nyungars
walked barefoot through every shadowed vale
of their six seasons, aeon after aeon.
No, not here, we did not lose each other here.

II

I walked over
the brown lake floor
to where a rock island
stood alone. Climbed
a well-worn trail
past kunzeas with
withered, twisted wood
and paused on the last
quartz-strewn ledge. This
salt lake stretched for miles,
past headland after headland
bordering it. Someone
had built a fence part way
across it. Distance beguiles
the eye in such wastelands
in these cruellest months
with just a smudge of smoke
above the distant hills—maybe
from some mining plant—
leaving in this clear sky just
an upside down tear-stain.
Yet even at night here across
the lake bed, whisper of wind-driven
wild seeds in play tells
even in such darkness
we could not have lost our way.

III

Maybe a mountain landscape
miniatures us; shows us
to be so small in regions
where peaks, alps, mountains
rear up so high? Where a boatman
is belittled, turns back under
the lee of the land and from
the safety of the shore senses
forms huger than he knew.
Here, where mountain mists
descend, tempests wrack
the talus slopes of sliding stones
and snowdrifts melt slowly,
early in spring. Here you can
lose your way, walkers may
separate even among banks
of stella alpine, spring pasque,
columbines and clustered snow bells.
In the groves below the tree line
where rain pelts and torrents surge,
all can grow dark in minutes,
the landscapes turn monochrome.
Yet there aren’t there mountain refuges
for travellers; marked trails of
bi-coloured poles to surmount
snow banks? This cannot be
where we somehow lost the way.

IV

So it must be some other
continent, some other world;
perhaps another dimension
of time where the decades
stretch out as railroad ties
and in their inching progress
play vile practical jokes
between those who were lovers;
who travelled so long in fond
parabolas that they became
mere avatars each to each.
To be afflicted so, or cursed,
suggests our span of time was
merely plaything to the gods—
just as a sated animal aims
playful blows to toy with its weakened prey. 2010

HOMAGE TO OPHELIA

When you sang a sad song, humming:
‘Down-a-down, an you call him a –down-a’,
you thought of when you were a child
and how you looked on the wide world
in the grey half-tones, but with outlines clear.

Strange how sharp these images—
you even stopped your murmuring song,
‘Down-a-down, an you call him a-down-a’,
did grief touch those dry grass strands
with flame of images in your hands?

By barren hills an old home waits:
verandah floors of fluted boards, that lead
to brown Victorian doors.
In parlour there you now will find
the shadow woman half-reclined.

That perfumed couch she splays upon
is carried off on a muddied stream,
a bunch of wildflowers in her arms.
So then you sing the sad song humming:
‘Down-a-down, an you call him a-down-a’. 1975