PLEASURE BOAT AT NIGHT
(in memory of SS Zephyr, a Swan River swaggerer)

drum bang and blare of saxophone
and clumping chords of piano
carry to us across water on the evening’s east wind

the sound flaring
and fading
and fading again
with the glow of strung lights
as the steamer threads black outposts
of the river’s salt bays and shallows
now near
now far
across the dark waters
passing and repassing shrouded banks

while thrilled parties stamp the decks
and whiffs of coalsmoke
mix with the swamp-reek
of river reeds coming to us
out of light and dark

laughter in crescendos
shouts and breaking of beer glasses
the steam-whistle’s toots
of festive human-kind

now fading into the night now surging
closer again with party voices

again
and yet again
the swirl of dancers
navigates estuarine waters
time after time

the onlookers on the shore
this oppressive summer evening
sit under the overhang of riverbank trees
endure the crush of human wishes
each ache of jealousy
doubt or desire for deliverance

if only trees could twist and fall
and sand-dunes slide down
to close over stifling lives
and deliver from unfeeling daybreaks
still to come

but jangle of piano notes
floating across water
interrupts again
and panting engine cruises
the lighted ark close to the watchers
one more time

insistent as the gusts of warm east wind
this heedless riotous press
beckons us to join
the dancing throng
and everlasting waiting arms

come back in
come back in

1971/2014