



*The*

BIPLANE  
HOUSES

POEMS BY

*Les Murray*

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*To the glory of God*

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# *The Averted*

The one whose eyes  
do not meet yours  
is alone at heart  
and looks where the dead look  
for an ally in his cause.

---

# *Early Summer Hail with Rhymes in O*

Suddenly the bush was America:  
dark woods, and in them like snow.  
The highway was miles of bath house,  
bulk steam off ice shovelled over blue.  
It was parallel shoals of Mikimoto,  
glazy, banked, inching with pocked cars,  
blindsided with vans slewed on water.  
Had I not stopped off to buy plants  
just back, mine could have been similar.  
With unpredictable suns evaporating  
I drove by guess in ancestral country  
threading the white dark of afternoon.  
Hills west of hills, twigs, hail to Dubbo,  
all dunes of pursed constraint exhaling Ohh.



---

# *Post Mortem*

I was upstaged in Nottingham  
after reading poetry there  
by what lay in the porter's room above:  
ginger human skeletons. Eight of them.

Disturbed by extensions to the arts centre  
and reassembled from the dozer's shove  
some might have been my ancestors, Nottingham  
being where my mother's people fled from

in the English Civil War.

These were older than that migration,  
crusty little roundheads of sleep,  
stick-bundles half burned to clay by water.

Their personhoods had gone, into the body  
of that promise preached to them. What had stayed  
in their bones were their diseases, the marks  
of labour in a rope-furrowed shoulder blade,

their ages when they died, and what they'd eaten:  
bread, bacon, beer, cheese, apples, greens,  
no tomato atoms in them, no potatoeines,  
no coffee yet, or tea, or aspirin

but alcoholic curds horn-spooned at a fair  
and opium physic, and pease porridge.  
The thought that in some cells their  
programmes might persist, my far parentage,

attracted me no more than re-building  
faces for them with wire and moulding.  
Unsatisfied to go as a detective  
to the past, I want the past live

with the body we have in the promise,  
that book which opens when the story ends.

Being even a sound modern physique  
is like owning an apartment in Venice.

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# *The Hanging Gardens*

High on the Gloucester road  
just before it wriggles its hips  
level with eagles down the gorge  
into the coastal hills

there were five beige pea-chickens  
sloping under the farm fence  
in a nervous unison of head-tufts  
up to the garden where they lived

then along the gutter and bank  
adult birds, grazing in full serpent.  
Their colours are too saturate and cool  
to see at first with dryland eyes

trained to drab and ginger. No one here  
believes in green deeply enough. In greens  
so blue, so malachite. Animal cobalt too  
and arrow bustles, those are unparalleled.

The wail lingers, and their cane  
surrection of iridium plaques. Great spirits,  
Hindoostan in the palette of New Zealand!  
They don't succeed at feral.

Things rush them from dry grass.  
Haggard teeth climb to them. World birds,  
human birds, flown by their own volition  
they led us to palaces.

---

# *Leaf Brims*

A clerk looks again at a photo,  
decides, puts it into a file box  
which he then ties shut with string  
*and the truth is years away.*

A Naval longboat is rowed upstream  
where jellied mirrors fracture light  
all over sandstone river walls  
*and the truth is years away.*

A one-inch baby clings to glass  
on the rain side of a window as  
a man halts, being led from office  
*but the truth is years away.*

Our youngest were still child-size when  
starched brims of the red lotus last  
nodded over this pond in a sunny breeze  
*and the truth was years away.*

---

# *Airscapes*

The sky in flood. Marshalled on  
by pressure, over the many-angled  
windows of property far below.

The air has states, not places.  
On the outer of Earth, the  
sky above darkens to blue matter.

Lower than where Space streaks in,  
risen scents and particles plateau,  
diffusing to go worldwide.

The chill slates of that year  
which, blown out of Iceland volcanoes,  
famined up the French Revolution  
hung and globed out on these levels.

Cloud wisps are an instructor  
chalking to proof! And here it's true:  
everyone has to have to.

These plunge lands being water dusts  
that take colour from the Sun: gold cobble,  
diaphanous frolic, optical liqueur.

A Thailand of cloud-dance,  
cobalt gold-cracked cyclone Rumba  
that raged half a province down its river  
is now ten minutes' swell under wings.

The bubble-column of a desert whirlwind  
fails, and plastic-bag ghosts  
stay ascended, pallid and rare.

Over simmering wheat land,  
over tree oils, scrub growing in rust  
and way out to the storeyed Forties.

Here be carbons, screamed up  
by the djinn of blue kohl highways  
that have the wish of the world  
for this scorch of A.D.

---

Tropopause, stratopause, Van Allen –  
high floors of the world tower  
which spores and points of charge  
too minute to age climb off the planet.

A headlong space rock  
discovers fiery retro jets  
and adds to the earth above Earth.

---

# *The Statistics of Good*

Chaplain General (R.C.)  
Archbishop Mannix of Melbourne,  
he who had a bog-oak footstool  
so his slipper might touch Irish soil  
first, when alighting from his carriage

saved, while a titular Major General  
in the Australian Army, perhaps half  
the fit men of a generation  
from the shrapnelled sewer landscapes  
of Flanders by twice winning close  
referenda against their conscription.

How many men? Half a million? Who knows?  
Goodness counts *each* and *theirs*.  
Politics and Death chase the numbers.

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# *Twelve Poems*

That wasn't horses: that was  
rain yawning to life in the night  
on metal roofs.

\*

Lying back so smugly  
phallic, the ampersand  
in the deckchair of itself.

\*

Fish head-down in a bucket  
wave their helpless fan feet.

\*

Spirituality?  
she snorted. And poetry?  
They're like yellow and gold.

\*

Being rushed through the streets  
at dusk, by trees and rain, the  
equinoctial gales!

\*

The best love poems are known  
as such to the lovers alone.

\*

Creek pools, grown top heavy,  
are speaking silver-age verse  
through their gravel beards.



\*

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Have a heart: salted land  
is caused by human tears.

\*

Tired from understanding  
life, the animals approach man  
to be mystified.

\*

A spider walking  
in circles is celebrating  
the birthday of logic.

\*

To win me, they told me  
all my bad attitudes  
but they got them wrong.

\*

Filling in a form  
the simple man asks his mother  
*Mum, what sex are we?*

---

# *Too Often Round the Galleries*

Blokes and sheilas, copping lip,  
walk the national comic strip.  
Whitefellow art is half cartoons  
and satire a picket-line of goons.  
Ridicule trumps justice, possums!

---

# *Travelling the British Roads*

Climb out of mediaeval one-way  
and roundabouts make knotted rope  
of the minor British roads  
but legal top speed on the rocketing  
nickel motorway is a lower limit!  
I do it, and lorries howl past me.

Sometimes after brown food  
at a pub, I get so slow  
that Highland trackways  
only have one side  
since they are for feet  
and hoofs of pack horses  
and passing is ceremony.

Nor is it plovers  
which cry in the peopled glens  
but General Wade's chainmen  
shouting numbers for his road  
not in the Gaelic scores  
but in decimal English.

Universal roads return as shoal  
late in the age of iron rims.  
*Stones in the top layer to be  
no bigger than would fit in your mouth,*  
smiles John McAdam. *If in doubt  
test them with your lips!*

Highwaymen, used to reining in  
thoroughbreds along a quag of track,  
suddenly hang, along new carriageways  
or clink iron on needy slave-ships,  
but wagon horses start surviving  
seven years instead of three  
at haulage between new smoke towns.

Then railways silence the white road.

A horseman rides alone between villages;  
the odd gig, or phaeton;  
smoke and music of the *bosh*  
rising out of chestnut shade:  
Gypsies, having a heyday.  
Post roads, drying out, seem strange  
beaches, that intersect each other.

When housemaids uncovered their hair  
at windows, and a new fangled  
steam roller made seersucker sounds  
there were swans on the healed canal,  
and with the sun came the Queen's  
Horse Artillery in tight skeleton coats  
to exercise their dubbed teams  
watched by both fashionable sexes  
in bloomer-like pedal pants.

I knew to be wary of the best dressed,  
decent with the footsore,  
but frontier-raffish with all  
because the scripts they improvised from  
were dry and arch, but quickly earnest.

From that day, and the audible  
woodwind cry of peafowl, it was half  
a long lifetime till jerked motors  
would ripple the highroad  
with their soundwaves, like a palate,  
and kiss its gravel out  
with round rubber lips  
growling for the buckets of tar

and another life to the autobahn  
nothing joins, where I race the mirror  
in a fighter cockpit made posh  
under flak of Guy Fawkes eve  
over the cities of fumed brick.

---

# *The Test*

How good is their best?

and how good is their rest?

The first is a question to be asked of an artist.

Both are the questions to be asked of a culture.

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# *The Kitchen Grammars*

The verb in a Sanscrit or Farsi  
or Latin or Japanese sentence  
most frequently comes last,  
as if the ingredients and spices  
only after collection, measure and  
even preservation might get cooked.  
To all these cuisines renown attaches.

It's the opening of a Celtic sentence  
is a verb. And it was more fi re and pot  
for us very often than ingredients.  
Had we not fed our severed heads on poetry  
final might have been our fame's starvation.  
Upholding cuisine for us are the French  
to be counting in scores and called Gallic.

In English and many more, in Chinese  
the verb surrounds itself nucleus-fashion  
with its subjects and qualifiers.  
Down every slope of the wok they go  
to the spitting middle, to be sauced,  
ladled, lidded, steamed, flipped back up,  
becoming verbs themselves often  
and the calm egg centres the meatloaf.

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# *Winter Winds*

Like appliqué on nothingness  
like adjectives in hype  
fallen bracts of the bougain-  
magenta-and-faded-villea  
eddy round the lee verandah  
like flowers still partying  
when their dress has gone home.

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# *The Tune on Your Mind*

*Asperges me hyssopo*  
the snatch of plainsong went,  
*Thou sprinklest me with hyssop*  
was the clerical intent,  
not *Asparagus with hiccups*  
and never *autistic savant*.

*Asperger, mais. Asperg is me.*  
The coin took years to drop:

Lectures instead of chat. The want  
of people skills. The need for Rules.  
Never towing a line from the Ship of Fools.  
The avoided eyes. Great memory.  
Horror not seeming to perturb –  
Hyssop can be a bitter herb.



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