



The
B I P L A N E
H O U S E S

POEMS BY
Les Murray

The Biplane Houses

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Published by Black Inc.,
an imprint of Schwartz Publishing Pty Ltd
Level 5, 289 Flinders Lane
Melbourne Victoria 3000 Australia
email: enquiries@blackincbooks.com
<http://www.blackincbooks.com>

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The National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Murray, Les A. (Les Allan), 1938- .

The biplane houses.

ISBN: 9781863952149 (paperback)

ISBN: 9781921866128 (ebook)

I. Title.

A821.3

Book design: Thomas Deverall

To the glory of God

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Poems in this collection have appeared in the Adelaide Review, the Age, Agenda, Antipodes, Ars Interpres, Australian Small Farmer, the Bridge, Canberra Times, Carquinez Review, Commonweal, Daedalus, Evansville Review, Glasgow Herald, Harvard Review, Literary Imagination, Manhattan Review, Meanjin, London Magazine, The New Yorker, Poetry Chicago, Poetry London Review, PN Review, Poetry Review, Poetry Scotland, Quadrant, Quarterly Essay, The Reader, Rialto, Southerly, Subtropical, Threepenny Review, Times Literary Supplement, Vallum and the West Australian. The Newcastle Rounds were commissioned by the Song Company for the Newcastle Festival, and several poems had their first airing in *The Full Dress*, National Gallery of Australia Publications, 2002.

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.

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 whish 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.

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.

*

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.

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 fire 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.

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.

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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