

GRAHAM JACKSON

SELECTED POEMS

1967-1975



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Graham Jackson

Most of my writing between 1967 and 1975 was syllabic verse and the best of it is collected here. Acknowledgements are made to *Canberra Poetry*, *Prometheus*, *Westerly*, *Poetry Australia* and *Noumea Soir*, in which some of the poems were first published.

THE BOY

(on Christmas Eve)

On the road to buy the paper, grumbling, I glimpse a house between the trees; signs hammered here and there; the cabin where I buy a drink; toilets, monstrous, grey; the swings, the road, a yellow day.

With candles, children sing carols on Christmas Eve: I think about the trenches – rotting wood, rusting tin; the sea; a launch across the rocks, its cold owner struggling out.

On a stretcher slumped and narrow, I trail her, jump behind a tree to see the freckles on her cheek; a leaf disturbs my hair; I peer at a minnow nibbling on my line; I climb the water tower; the swings, the road, a blue flower.

MONDAY MORNING

Monday morning
at ten o'clock,
the view below
my office block:

in Civic, squat
department stores
conceal the crowd
behind their doors,

as motor cars
drive through the dust
to take the town,
or else to rust;

regimented
posts on the street
turn advances,
as they retreat

behind a blurred
paragraph, and
her commanding
photograph.

My feelings file complaint against the print of her
accustomed smile: *If I could caress her face, and find
it real, I would impress her lips on mine.* The town
thinks it matters less to know that she is gone.

It is not right that she should leave me who loves her;
her face is full of cruelty. If she cannot love me, there
is no remedy, and I will find another.

ABORIGINE

His parcel packed
a loaf of bread
inside the sheets
he couldn't read.

He slow-smiled as
he thumbed me by;
we didn't have
to wonder why:

we recognised
what had been done
to fear a black
burnt by white sun.

I BELIEVE

I believe in

Minos, born from
mortal woman
seduced by God:

he lived a
fantastic life,
the King of Crete,

died an ignoble death by
boiling water,

and departed
to judge the dead.

I believe in

Jesus, born from
mortal woman
seduced by God:

He lived a
fantastic life,
the king of Jews,

Died an ignoble death with
two criminals,

and departed
to judge the dead.

Whom shall I praise?

SALOME

(after Wilde)

Lust
for the prophet
who turned you down
in his madness;

hate
for the victim
in whose deep eyes
you saw your pride;

love
for the chopped head
whose lips you bite
now they are yours.

DEAR CAESAR

Did you hear about the fight
between the two Senators?
despite the suggestion of
drunkenness, no one's very

interested because the new
development in the war
is so exciting: the plan
is to blockade their country.

My brother is taking it
all in his stride, of course, still
absorbed in his study of
the Ysabel headhunters.

My own research is to show
why Jesus, in his wisdom,
was so unwilling to die;
but on sunny days I lie

here on the grass admiring
the National Library
and the House across the lake.
It could almost be your Rome.

CHRISTMAS DAY

Conceding to tradition
I play Father Christmas in
a resurrected cap,

distributing presents
mysteriously concealed
in multicoloured tissue.

I pretend to find a card
addressed to Christ fastened to
the aluminium tree,

but keep the joke to myself.
who would be interested in
my tasteless sense of humour?

Other children have been born
who clearly appreciate
the electric candlelight

illuminating Christmas,
1972. Christ
need not be implicated.

COUNTRY TOWN

Here let us sleep, country town,
on our electric blankets
spread in a foggy valley
on a still night in winter.

Here our bare religion
still covers the gumtree hills
and gives us security –

here on the valley side
where we cling to slopes worn smooth
and slippery in the past,
before we knew we loved them.

Here let us sleep and dream,
where the light of the present
reflects in the dark river
its colourful neon signs,

the red and yellow Shell signs
of the highway arched over
the water we must cross

in a dream of the future,
before the electric night
shortcircuits sleep and shocks us
with another vision.

MY FATHER

My father, who worked for Drug Houses of Australia,
has just retired.

He worked for fortysomething years so close to fifty
it makes no difference,

drove his company car around northern Victoria
and southern New South Wales

for almost half those years and never took a day off
on sick leave.

My father, who worked for Drug Houses of Australia,
remembers such things

as dead spanish flies in a jar, leeches in a jar,
opium in a jar,

while I myself have seen more recently ephedrine,
benzedrine, methedrine,

all in silver foil and all of which I despise –
but not

my father, who worked for Drug Houses of Australia.
I respect

my father because he did until his retirement
what he chose to do,

and for this reason I have chosen to write poetry
uncomplainingly

and without a day off on sick leave for fifty years –
just like

my father, who worked for Drug Houses of Australia
before he retired.

AUSTRALIA

You old bastard,
we ate your skinny skin
our teeth scraping the bone
leaving no scrap alone.

Your skull was split
eyes clawed out of your face
and if your lips were shocked
your bloody jaw was locked.

You old bastard,
now we eat gutlessly
I sometimes hear you groan.
Did you think we'd gone?

MR PAUL GREENE'S PAINTINGS

When a middleclass hero
decides to tour the South Seas
he must take with him visas
and vaccinations, passport
 and sunglasses.
If at all excitable,
he must also take with him

one of Mr Paul Greene's paintings,
a structure of polythene
 and
wax painted concrete and brick,
to remind him of home and
 help
keep his head on islands of
 excessive nature.
In a balanced state of mind,

he'll digest their beauty as
he would a finely grilled trout,
while contemplating a man's
 creation
of space in an order of
 atomic colour
outside the nature he feeds
 on and
which fishily feeds on him.

AN INSIGNIFICANT INCIDENT

("Land was sighted, however, as early as 4 September 1774 – it was the northern coast of the large island called New Caledonia, in appearance, so Cook thought, resembling no country so closely as New South Wales" – Beaglehole)

In New Caledonia
two centuries after Cook
I wonder if the captain,
after all, was right. And here

they are, the gums, scratchy grass,
red earth, and sunsets like those
above the hills ringing the
country town
in New South Wales I know so
well.

Only here the hills ring the
sea,
the bells of the Catholic
cathedral
still ring colonial hours,
and an islander cook nev-
-er saw

stands aside to let me pass
on the steps beside the church,
where her deference is known
to be appropriate, if
deadly.

THE ORIGIN OF THE MOON

Darwin was right.

The Moon came out
of the Pacific.

I saw it.

You can see this phenomenon,
too, any night of the week from
a beach in Efaté as long
as the trade winds blow their clouds fast
and low.

Out of a misty palm,
out of a bunch of bananas
which may or may not belong to
the native asking you for francs
with a machete in his hand –

out of this twilight you'll see Moon
ride flying the American
flag in peace for all mankind and
its delicate instruments will
measure solar wind while the trades
ruffle your salty hair at an
uncalculated rate of knots.

POINDIMIÉ

(for Bernard Robert)

The town rambles along the coast
hidden under humid leaf,
while beyond the wavering reef
on the Pacific horizon
nothing comes again of nothing.

I sit on your verandah
and consider your plan
to go on to Hienghène where,
you say, the coast is much more
beautiful and where the sense of
space is just as profound.

Here in your comfortable home
the twentieth century is
preserved in high fidelity.

In the loud rock and roll beat of
the Rolling Stones' latest album
I feel remarkably at ease,
here on the edge of the plastic
Pacific.

On any other
coast I would disintegrate.