

Classic Poetry Series

Kenneth Slessor
- poems -

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Kenneth Slessor(27 March 1901 – 30 June 1971)

Kenneth Slessor was born in Orange, New South Wales. He published his first poetry in the Bulletin magazine while still at school. He worked on the Sydney Sun newspaper from 1920 to 1925, and for a while on the Melbourne Punch and Melbourne Herald. He returned to Sydney in 1927 to work on Smith's Weekly, where he stayed until 1939.

In 1939, at the outbreak of the Second World War, Slessor was appointed as an official war correspondent, and spent time with Australian troops in England, Greece, the Middle-East and New Guinea.

At the end of the war he returned to the Sydney Sun as a leader-writer and literary editor until 1957. He then worked for the Daily Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph. During this period (from 1956 - 1961) he was also editor of the literary magazine Southerly.

Kenneth Slessor died in 1971.

A Bushranger

Jackey Jackey gallops on a horse like a swallow
Where the carbines bark and the blackboys hollo.
When the traps give chase (may the devil take his power!)
He can ride ten mile in a quarter of an hour

Take horse and follow, and you'll hurt no feelings;
He can fly down waterfalls and jump through ceilings,
He can shoot off hats, for to have a bit of fun,
With a bulldog bigger than a buffalo-gun

Honeyed and profound in his conversation
When he bails up Mails on Long Tom Station,
In a flyaway coat with a black cravat,
A snow-white collar and a cabbage-tree hat.

Flowers in his button-hole and pearls in his pocket,
He comes like a ghost and he goes like a rocket
With a lightfoot heel on a blood-mare's flank
And a bagful of notes from the Joint Stock Bank

Many pretty ladies he could witch out of marriage,
Though he prig but a kiss in a bigwig's carriage;
For the cock of an eye or the lift of his reins,
They would run barefoot through Patrick's Plains.

Kenneth Slessor

A Sunset

THE old Quarry, Sun, with bleeding scales,
Flaps up the gullies, wets their crystal pebbles,
Floating with waters of gold; darkness exhales
Brutishly in the valley; smoke rises in bubbles;
Suddenly we stop at the meeting of two trails.
'Do you remember?'
'But now everything is changed—
Trees ringed with death, the creek with its bells clanking
Dried like white bone.' Even our voices are estranged.
Darkness chokes the river; so nearly what I am thinking
It echoes, the whole thing might have been arranged!

Kenneth Slessor

A Surrender

WHEN to those Venusbergs, thy breasts,
By wars of love and moonlight batteries,
My lips have stormed—O pout thy mouth above,
Lean down those culverins twain, and bid me spike
Their bells with kissing, and their powder steal,
And by night-marches take their garrisons—
No blood shall stain those battlefields of lace
But all their snows run dappled with deep roses,
And thou, I trow, sweet enemy of love,
Shalt find a conquest in capitulation!

Kenneth Slessor

Adventure Bay

SOPHIE'S my world . . . my arm must soon or later
Like Francis Drake turn circumnavigator,
Stem the dark tides, take by the throat strange gales
And toss their spume to stars unknown, as kings
Rain diamonds to the mob . . . then arch my sails
By waterspouts of lace and bubbling rings
Gulfed in deep satin, conquer those warmer waves
Where none but mermaids ride, and the still caves
Untrod by sailors . . . aye, and with needle set,
Rounding Cape Turnagain, take up my way,
And so to the Ivory Coast . . . and farther yet,
Port of all drownéd lovers, Adventure Bay!

Kenneth Slessor

Advice To Psychologists

YOU spies that pierce the mind with trenches,
Feasting your eyes through private panes,
Who, not content with Heavenly stench,
Insist on taking up the drains,
For you I've only two suggestions,
Who prowl with torches in this Bog—
Small good you'll get from asking questions;
Walk on your nostrils, like a dog.

Kenneth Slessor

An Inscription For Dog River

OUR general was the greatest and bravest of generals.
For his deeds, look around you on this coast—
Here is his name cut next to Ashur-Bani-Pal's,
Nebuchadnezzar's and the Roman host;
And we, though our identities have been lost,
Lacking the validity of stone or metal,
We, too, are part of his memorial,
Having been put in for the cost,
Having bestowed on him all we had to give
In battles few can recollect,
Our strength, obedience and endurance,
Our wits, our bodies, our existence,
Even our descendants' right to live—
Having given him everything, in fact,
Except respect.

Kenneth Slessor

Beach Burial

Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs
The convoys of dead sailors come;
At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,
But morning rolls them in the foam.

Between the sob and clubbing of the gunfire
Someone, it seems, has time for this,
To pluck them from the shallows and bury them in burrows
And tread the sand upon their nakedness;

And each cross, the driven stake of tidewood,
Bears the last signature of men,
Written with such perplexity, with such bewildered pity,
The words choke as they begin -

'Unknown seaman' - the ghostly pencil
Wavers and fades, the purple drips,
The breath of wet season has washed their inscriptions
As blue as drowned men's lips,

Dead seamen, gone in search of the same landfall,
Whether as enemies they fought,
Or fought with us, or neither; the sand joins them together,
Enlisted on the other front.

German Translation

Strandbegräbnis

Ergeben und sanft zum Golf der Araber
Kommen die Konvois der toten Matrosen;
Nachts irren sie schwankend im Wasser tief unten,
Doch der Morgen läßt sie im Schaum rollen.

Zwischen dem Schluchzen und Knüppeln von Geschützen
Hat jemand, so scheint es, die Zeit gefunden,
Sie an seichten Stellen aufzusammeln und in Reihen zu begraben
Und den Sand über ihrer Nacktheit festzutreten;

Und jedes Kreuz, ein getriebener Pfahl aus Treibholz,
Trägt die letzte Unterschrift eines Mannes,
Geschrieben mit solcher Bestürzung, mit solch verwirrtem Mitleid,
Die Worte ersticken, sobald sie beginnen -

“Unbekannter Seemann” - der gespenstische Stift
Zittert und verblaßt, das Purpur tropft,
Der Atem der nassen Jahreszeit hat jede Inschrift
Blau wie die Lippen der Ertrunkenen gefärbt,

Tote Seemänner, fort, denselben Landfall zu suchen,
Wo sie sich als Feinde bekämpft,
Oder mit uns kämpften, oder keines davon, im Sand jetzt zusammen,
Angeworben an der anderen Front.

Kenneth Slessor

Burying Friends

BURYING friends is not a pomp,
Not, indeed, Roman:
Lacking the monument,
Heroic stone;
Nor is it an obscuring parasol,
The pad of customary gloves and cries
And a black leather mourning-carriage
Hung between death and the beholder's eyes.
This little bin of cancelled flesh
Strode the earth once,
Rubbed against men—
But that's all done.
A gentle elegy, a tear or two,
May charm the grave-diggers, no doubt,
But nothing can count to these incongruous ruins.
Their commercial value is not worth speaking about.
Only it seems not a burial
Of irrelevant sods,
But a lopped member
From this my body;
Almost, in fact, a tiny amputation,
A paring of biography, thrown in there.
And he has thieved his own life away
And something from mine. Farewell, thou pilferer!

Kenneth Slessor

Cannibal Street

'BUY, who'll buy,' the pedlar sings,
'Bones of beggars, loins of kings,
Ribs of murder, haunch of hate,
And Beauty's head on a butcher's plate!'
Hook by hook, on steaming stalls,
The hero hangs, the harlot sprawls;
For Helen's flesh, in such a street,
Is only a kind of dearer meat.
'Buy, who'll buy,' the pedlar begs,
'Angel-wings and lady-legs,
Tender bits and dainty parts—
Buy, who'll buy my skewered hearts?'
Buy, who'll buy? The cleavers fall,
The dead men creak, the live men call,
And I (God save me) bargained there,
Paid my pennies and ate my share.

Kenneth Slessor

Captain Dobbin

CAPTAIN Dobbin, having retired from the South Seas
In the dumb tides of , with a handful of shells,
A few poisoned arrows, a cask of pearls,
And five thousand pounds in the colonial funds,
Now sails the street in a brick villa, 'Laburnum Villa',
In whose blank windows the harbour hangs
Like a fog against the glass,
Golden and smoky, or stoned with a white glitter,
And boats go by, suspended in the pane,
Blue Funnel, Red Funnel, Messageries Maritimes,
Lugged down the port like sea-beasts taken alive
That scrape their bellies on sharp sands,
Of which particulars Captain Dobbin keeps
A ledger sticky with ink,
Entries of time and weather, state of the moon,
Nature of cargo and captain's name,
For some mysterious and awful purpose
Never divulged.
For at night, when the stars mock themselves with lanterns,
So late the chimes blow loud and faint
Like a hand shutting and unshutting over the bells,
Captain Dobbin, having observed from bed
The lights, like a great fiery snake, of the Comorin
Going to sea, will note the hour
For subsequent recording in his gazette.
But the sea is really closer to him than this,
Closer to him than a dead, lovely woman,
For he keeps bits of it, like old letters,
Salt tied up in bundles
Or pressed flat,
What you might call a lock of the sea's hair,
So Captain Dobbin keeps his dwarfed memento,
His urn-burial, a chest of mummied waves,
Gales fixed in print, and the sweet dangerous countries
Of shark and casuarina-tree,
Stolen and put in coloured maps,
Like a flask of seawater, or a bottled ship,
A schooner caught in a glass bottle;
But Captain Dobbin keeps them in books,

Crags of varnished leather
Pimplly with gilt, by learned mariners
And masters of hydrostatics, or the childish tales
Of simple heroes, taken by Turks or dropsy.
So nightly he sails from shelf to shelf
Or to the quadrants, dangling with rusty screws,
Or the hanging-gardens of old charts,
So old they bear the authentic protractor-lines,
Traced in faint ink, as fine as Chinese hairs.
Over the flat and painted atlas-leaves
His reading-glass would tremble,
Over the fathoms, pricked in tiny rows,
Water shelving to the coast.
Quietly the bone-rimmed lens would float
Till, through the glass, he felt the barbèd rush
Of bubbles foaming, spied the albicores,
The blue-fined admirals, heard the wind-swallowed cries
Of planters running on the beach
Who filched their swags of yams and ambergris,
Birds' nests and sandalwood, from pastures numbed
By the sun's yellow, too meek for honest theft;
But he, less delicate robber, climbed the walls,
Broke into dozing houses
Crammed with black bottles, marish wine
Crusty and salt-corroded, fading prints,
Sparkle-daubed almanacs and playing cards,
With rusty cannon, left by the French outside,
Half-buried in sand,
Even to the castle of Queen Pomaree
In the Yankee's footsteps, and found her throne-room piled
With golden candelabras, mildewed swords,
Guitars and fowling-pieces, tossed in heaps
With greasy cakes and flung-down calabashes.
Then Captain Dobbin's eye,
That eye of wild and wispy scudding blue,
Voluptuously prying, would light up
Like mica scratched by gully-suns,
And he would be fearful to look upon
And shattering in his conversation;
Nor would he tolerate the harmless chanty,
No 'Shenandoah', or the dainty mew
That landsmen offer in a silver dish

To Neptune, sung to pianos in candlelight.
Of these he spoke in scorn,
For there was but one way of singing 'Stormalong',
He said, and that was not really singing,
But howling, rather—shrieked in the wind's jaws
By furious men; not tinkled in drawing-rooms
By lap-dogs in clean shirts.
And, at these words,
The galleries of photographs, men with rich beards,
Pea-jackets and brass buttons, with folded arms,
Would scowl approval, for they were shipmates, too,
Companions of no cruise by reading-glass,
But fellows of storm and honey from the past—
'The Charlotte, Java, ',
'Knuckle and Fred at Port au Prince,'
'William in his New Rig,'
Even that notorious scoundrel, Captain Baggs,
Who, as all knew, owed Dobbin Twenty Pounds
Lost at fair cribbage, but he never paid,
Or paid 'with the slack of the tops'l sheets'
As Captain Dobbin frequently expressed it.
There were their faces, grilled a trifle now,
Cigar-hued in various spots
By the brown breath of sodium-eating years,
On quarter-decks long burnt to the water's edge,
A resurrection of the dead by chemicals.
And the voyages they had made,
Their labours in a country of water,
Were they not marked by inadequate lines
On charts tied up like skins in a rack?
Or his own Odysseys, his lonely travels,
His trading days, an autobiography
Of angles and triangles and lozenges
Ruled tack by tack across the sheet,
That with a single scratch expressed the stars,
Merak and Alamak and Alpherat,
The wind, the moon, the sun, the clambering sea,
Sails bleached with light, salt in the eyes,
Bamboos and Tahiti oranges,
From some forgotten countless day,
One foundered day from a forgotten month,
A year sucked quietly from the blood,

Dead with the rest, remembered by no more
Than a scratch on a dry chart—
Or when the return grew too choking bitter-sweet
And laburnum-berries manifestly tossed
Beyond the window, not the fabulous leaves
Of Hotoo or canoe-tree or palmetto,
There were the wanderings of other keels,
Magellan, Bougainville and Cook,
Who found no greater a memorial
Than footprints over a lithograph.
For Cook he worshipped, that captain with the sad
And fine white face, who never lost a man
Or flinched a peril; and of Bougainville
He spoke with graceful courtesy, as a rival
To whom the honours of the hunting-field
Must be accorded. Not so with the Spaniard,
Sebastian Juan del Cano, at whom he sneered
Openly, calling him a fool of fortune
Blown to a sailors' abbey by chance winds
And blindfold currents, who slept in a fine cabin,
Blundered through five degrees of latitude,
Was bullied by mutineers a hundred more,
And woke and found himself across the world.
Coldly in the window,
Like a fog rubbed up and down the glass
The harbour, bony with mist
And ropes of water, glittered; and the blind tide
That crawls it knows not where, nor for what gain,
Pushed its drowned shoulders against the wheel,
Against the wheel of the mill.
Flowers rocked far down
And white, dead bodies that were anchored there
In marshes of spent light.
Blue Funnel, Red Funnel,
The ships went over them, and bells in engine-rooms
Cried to their bowels of flaring oil,
And stokers groaned and sweated with burnt skins,
Clawed to their shovels.
But quietly in his room,
In his little cemetery of sweet essences
With fond memorial-stones and lines of grace,
Captain Dobbin went on reading about the sea.

Kenneth Slessor

Chessmen

CHAFING on flags of ebony and pearl,
My paladins are waiting. Loops of smoke
Stoop slowly from the coffee-cups, and curl
In thin fantastic patterns down the room
By cabinets of chinaware, to whirl
With milky-blue tobacco-steam, and fume
Together past our pipes, outside the door.
Soon may we lounge in silence, O my friend,
Behind those carven men-at-arms of chess
Dyed coral-red with dragon's blood, and spend
The night with noiseless warfare. Queens and rooks
With chiselled ivory warriors must contend
And counter-plots from old Arabian books
Be conjured to the march of knights and pawns.

Kenneth Slessor

City Nightfall

SMOKE upon smoke; over the stone lips
Of chimneys bleeding, a darker fume descends.
Night, the old nun, in voiceless pity bends
To kiss corruption, so fabulous her pity.
All drowns in night. Even the lazar drowns
In earth at last, and rises up afresh,
Married to dust with an Infanta's flesh—
So night, like earth, receives this poisoned city,
Charging its air with beauty, coasting its lanterns
With mains of darkness, till the leprous clay
Dissolves, and pavements drift away,
And there is only the quiet noise of planets feeding.
And those who chafe here, limed on the iron twigs,
No greater seem than sparrows, all their cries,
Their clockwork and their merchandise,
Frolic of painted dolls. I pass unheeding.

Kenneth Slessor

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Kenneth Slessor

Cock-Crow

THE cock's far cry
From lonely yards
Burdens the night
With boastful birds
That mop their wings
To make response—
A mess of songs
And broken sense.
So, when I slept,
I heard your call
(If lips long dead
Could answer still)
And snapped-off thoughts
Broke into clamour,
Like the night's throats
Heard by a dreamer.

Kenneth Slessor

Country Towns

Country towns, with your willows and squares,
And farmers bouncing on barrel mares
To public houses of yellow wood
With '1860' over their doors,
And that mysterious race of Hogans
Which always keeps the General Stores....

At the School of Arts, a broadsheet lies
Sprayed with the sarcasm of flies:
'The Great Golightly Family
Of Entertainers Here To-night'—
Dated a year and a half ago,
But left there, less from carelessness
Than from a wish to seem polite.

Verandas baked with musky sleep,
Mulberry faces dozing deep,
And dogs that lick the sunlight up
Like paste of gold – or, roused in vain
By far, mysterious buggy-wheels,
Lower their ears, and drowse again....

Country towns with your schooner bees,
And locusts burnt in the pepper-trees,
Drown me with syrups, arch your boughs,
Find me a bench, and let me snore,
Till, charged with ale and unconcern,
I'll think it's noon at half-past four!

Kenneth Slessor

Crow Country

GUTTED of station, noise alone,
The crow's voice trembles down the sky
As if this nitrous flange of stone
Wept suddenly with such a cry;
As if the rock found lips to sigh,
The riven earth a mouth to moan;
But we that hear them, stumbling by,
Confuse their torments with our own.
Over the huge abraded rind,
Crow-countries graped with dung, we go,
Past gullies that no longer flow
And wells that nobody can find,
Lashed by the screaming of the crow,
Stabbed by the needles of the mind.

Kenneth Slessor

Crustacean Rejoinder

TAKE your great light away, your music end;
I'm off to feed myself as quick as I can.
You're perfectly impossible to comprehend,
I'm such a busy man.
Good God, haven't you got a circumference?
There's not a moment I can call my own—
My clocks, my keys, my wheels and instruments
And that fierce Ethiop, the telephone.
No doubt, it's very charming out in the sun,
But there are other things, you know. In any case,
I've got no time, no time. There's much to be done.
Thank God for this, my faithful carapace!

Kenneth Slessor

Earth-Visitors

(To N.L.)

THERE were strange riders once, came gusting down
Cloaked in dark furs, with faces grave and sweet,
And white as air. None knew them, they were strangers—
Princes gone feasting, barons with gipsy eyes
And names that rang like viols—perchance, who knows,
Kings of old Tartary, forgotten, swept from Asia,
Blown on raven chargers across the world,
For ever smiling sadly in their beards
And stamping abruptly into courtyards at midnight.
Post-boys would run, lanterns hang frostily, horses fume,
The strangers wake the Inn. Men, staring outside
Past watery glass, thick panes, could watch them eat,
Dyed with gold vapours in the candleflame,
Clapping their gloves, and stuck with crusted stones,
Their garments foreign, their talk a strange tongue,
But sweet as pineapple—it was Archdukes, they must be.
In daylight, nothing; only their prints remained
Bitten in snow. They'd gone, no one knew where,
Or when, or by what road—no one could guess—
None but some sleepy girls, half tangled in dreams,
Mixing up miracle and desire; laughing, at first,
Then staring with bright eyes at their beds, opening their lips,
Plucking a crushed gold feather in their fingers,
And laughing again, eyes closed. But one remembered,
Between strange kisses and cambric, in the dark,
That unearthly beard had lifted. . . . 'Your name, child?'
'Sophia, sir—and what to call your Grace?'
Like a bubble of gilt, he had laughed 'Mercury!'
It is long now since great daemons walked on earth,
Staining with wild radiance a country bed,
And leaving only a confusion of sharp dreams
To vex a farm-girl—that, and perhaps a feather,
Some thread of the Cloth of Gold, a scale of metal,
Caught in her hair. The unpastured Gods have gone,
They are above those fiery-coasted clouds
Floating like fins of stone in the burnt air,
And earth is only a troubled thought to them
That sometimes drifts like wind across the bodies

Of the sky's women.
There is one yet comes knocking in the night,
The drums of sweet conspiracy on the pane,
When darkness has arched his hands over the bush
And Springwood steams with dew, and the stars look down
On that one lonely chamber. . . .
She is there suddenly, lit by no torch or moon,
But by the shining of her naked body.
Her breasts are berries broken in snow; her hair
Blows in a gold rain over and over them.
She flings her kisses like warm guineas of love,
And when she walks, the stars walk with her above.
She knocks. The door swings open, shuts again.
'Your name, child?'
A thousand birds cry 'Venus!'

Kenneth Slessor

Elegy In A Botanic Gardens

THE smell of birds' nests faintly burning
Is autumn. In the autumn I came
Where spring had used me better,
To the clear red pebbles and the men of stone
And foundered beetles, to the broken Meleager
And thousands of white circles drifting past,
Cold suns in water; even to the dead grove
Where we had kissed, to the Tristania tree
Where we had kissed so awkwardly,
Noted by swans with damp, accusing eyes,
All gone to-day; only the leaves remain,
Gaunt paddles ribbed with herringbones
Of watermelon-pink. Never before
Had I assented to the hateful name
Meryta Macrophylla, on a tin tag.
That was no time for botany. But now the schools,
The horticulturists, come forth
Triumphantly with Latin. So be it now,
Meryta Macrophylla, and the old house,
Ringed with black stone, no Georgian Headlong Hall
With glass-eye windows winking candles forth,
Stuffed with French horns, globes, air-pumps, telescopes
And Cupid in a wig, playing the flute,
But truly, and without escape,
THE NATIONAL HERBARIUM,
Repeated dryly in Roman capitals,
THE NATIONAL HERBARIUM.

Kenneth Slessor

Five Bells

Time that is moved by little fidget wheels
Is not my time, the flood that does not flow.
Between the double and the single bell
Of a ship's hour, between a round of bells
From the dark warship riding there below,
I have lived many lives, and this one life
Of Joe, long dead, who lives between five bells.

Deep and dissolving verticals of light
Ferry the falls of moonshine down. Five bells
Coldly rung out in a machine's voice. Night and water
Pour to one rip of darkness, the Harbour floats
In the air, the Cross hangs upside-down in water.

Why do I think of you, dead man, why thief
These profitless lodgings from the flukes of thought
Anchored in Time? You have gone from earth,
Gone even from the meaning of a name;
Yet something's there, yet something forms its lips
And hits and cries against the ports of space,
Beating their sides to make its fury heard.

Are you shouting at me, dead man, squeezing your face
In agonies of speech on speechless panes?
Cry louder, beat the windows, bawl your name!

But I hear nothing, nothing...only bells,
Five bells, the bumpkin calculus of Time.
Your echoes die, your voice is dowsed by Life,
There's not a mouth can fly the pygmy strait -
Nothing except the memory of some bones
Long shoved away, and sucked away, in mud;
And unimportant things you might have done,
Or once I thought you did; but you forgot,
And all have now forgotten - looks and words
And slops of beer; your coat with buttons off,
Your gaunt chin and pricked eye, and raging tales
Of Irish kings and English perfidy,
And dirtier perfidy of publicans

Groaning to God from Darlinghurst.

Five bells.

Then I saw the road, I heard the thunder
Tumble, and felt the talons of the rain
The night we came to Moorebank in slab-dark,
So dark you bore no body, had no face,
But a sheer voice that rattled out of air
(As now you'd cry if I could break the glass),
A voice that spoke beside me in the bush,
Loud for a breath or bitten off by wind,
Of Milton, melons, and the Rights of Man,
And blowing flutes, and how Tahitian girls
Are brown and angry-tongued, and Sydney girls
Are white and angry-tongued, or so you'd found.
But all I heard was words that didn't join
So Milton became melons, melons girls,
And fifty mouths, it seemed, were out that night,
And in each tree an Ear was bending down,
Or something that had just run, gone behind the grass,
When blank and bone-white, like a maniac's thought,
The naphtha-flash of lightning slit the sky,
Knifing the dark with deathly photographs.
There's not so many with so poor a purse
Or fierce a need, must fare by night like that,
Five miles in darkness on a country track,
But when you do, that's what you think.
Five bells.

In Melbourne, your appetite had gone,
Your angers too; they had been leeches away
By the soft archery of summer rains
And the sponge-paws of wetness, the slow damp
That stuck the leaves of living, snailed the mind,
And showed your bones, that had been sharp with rage,
The sodden ecstasies of rectitude.
I thought of what you'd written in faint ink,
Your journal with the sawn-off lock, that stayed behind
With other things you left, all without use,
All without meaning now, except a sign
That someone had been living who now was dead:
"At Labassa. Room 6 x 8

On top of the tower; because of this, very dark
And cold in winter. Everything has been stowed
Into this room - 500 books all shapes
And colours, dealt across the floor
And over sills and on the laps of chairs;
Guns, photos of many different things
And different curios that I obtained..."

In Sydney, by the spent aquarium-flare
Of penny gaslight on pink wallpaper,
We argued about blowing up the world,
But you were living backward, so each night
You crept a moment closer to the breast,
And they were living, all of them, those frames
And shapes of flesh that had perplexed your youth,
And most your father, the old man gone blind,
With fingers always round a fiddle's neck,
That graveyard mason whose fair monuments
And tablets cut with dreams of piety
Rest on the bosoms of a thousand men
Staked bone by bone, in quiet astonishment
At cargoes they had never thought to bear,
These funeral-cakes of sweet and sculptured stone.

Where have you gone? The tide is over you,
The turn of midnight water's over you,
As Time is over you, and mystery,
And memory, the flood that does not flow.
You have no suburb, like those easier dead
In private berths of dissolution laid -
The tide goes over, the waves ride over you
And let their shadows down like shining hair,
But they are Water; and the sea-pinks bend
Like lilies in your teeth, but they are Weed;
And you are only part of an Idea.
I felt the wet push its black thumb-balls in,
The night you died, I felt your eardrums crack,
And the short agony, the longer dream,
The Nothing that was neither long nor short;
But I was bound, and could not go that way,
But I was blind, and could not feel your hand.
If I could find an answer, could only find

Your meaning, or could say why you were here
Who now are gone, what purpose gave you breath
Or seized it back, might I not hear your voice?

I looked out my window in the dark
At waves with diamond quills and combs of light
That arched their mackerel-backs and smacked the sand
In the moon's drench, that straight enormous glaze,
And ships far off asleep, and Harbour-buoys
Tossing their fireballs wearily each to each,
And tried to hear your voice, but all I heard
Was a boat's whistle, and the scraping squeal
Of seabirds' voices far away, and bells,
Five bells. Five bells coldly ringing out.
Five bells.

Kenneth Slessor

Five Visions Of Captain Cook

I

COOK was a captain of the Admiralty
When sea-captains had the evil eye,
Or should have, what with beating krakens off
And casting nativities of ships;
Cook was a captain of the powder-days
When captains, you might have said, if you had been
Fixed by their glittering stare, half-down the side,
Or gaping at them up companionways,
Were more like warlocks than a humble man—
And men were humble then who gazed at them,
Poor horn-eyed sailors, bullied by devils' fists
Of wind or water, or the want of both,
Childlike and trusting, filled with eager trust—
Cook was a captain of the sailing days
When sea-captains were kings like this,
Not cold executives of company-rules
Cracking their boilers for a dividend
Or bidding their engineers go wink
At bells and telegraphs, so plates would hold
Another pound. Those captains drove their ships
By their own blood, no laws of schoolbook steam,
Till yards were sprung, and masts went overboard—
Daemons in periwigs, doling magic out,
Who read fair alphabets in stars
Where humbler men found but a mess of sparks,
Who steered their crews by mysteries
And strange, half-dreadful sortilege with books,
Used medicines that only gods could know
The sense of, but sailors drank
In simple faith. That was the captain
Cook was when he came to the Coral Sea
And chose a passage into the dark.
How many mariners had made that choice
Paused on the brink of mystery! 'Choose now!'
The winds roared, blowing home, blowing home,
Over the Coral Sea. 'Choose now!' the trades
Cried once to Tasman, throwing him for choice
Their teeth or shoulders, and the Dutchman chose

The wind's way, turning north. 'Choose, Bougainville!
The wind cried once, and Bougainville had heard
The voice of God, calling him prudently
Out of a dead lee shore, and chose the north.
The wind's way. So, too, Cook made choice,
Over the brink, into the devil's mouth,
With four months' food, and sailors wild with dreams
Of English beer, the smoking barns of home.
So Cook made choice, so Cook sailed westabout,
So men write poems in Australia.

II

FLOWERS turned to stone! Not all the botany
Of Joseph Banks, hung pensive in a porthole,
Could find the Latin for this loveliness,
Could put the Barrier Reef in a glass box
Tagged by the horrid Gorgon squint
Of horticulture. Stone turned to flowers
It seemed—you'd snap a crystal twig,
One petal even of the water-garden,
And have it dying like a cherry-bough.
They'd sailed all day outside a coral hedge,
And half the night. Cook sailed at night,
Let there be reefs a fathom from the keel
And empty charts. The sailors didn't ask,
Nor Joseph Banks. Who cared? It was the spell
Of Cook that lulled them, bade them turn below,
Kick off their sea-boots, puff themselves to sleep,
Though there were more shoals outside
Than teeth in a shark's head. Cook snored loudest himself.
One day, a morning of light airs and calms,
They slid towards a reef that would have knifed
Their boards to mash, and murdered every man.
So close it sucked them, one wave shook their keel.
The next blew past the coral. Three officers,
In gilt and buttons, languidly on deck
Pointed their sextants at the sun. One yawned,
One held a pencil, one put eye to lens:
Three very peaceful English mariners
Taking their sights for longitude.
I've never heard
Of sailors aching for the longitude
Of shipwrecks before or since. It was the spell

Of Cook did this, the phylacteries of Cook.
Men who ride broomsticks with a mesmerist
Mock the typhoon. So, too, it was with Cook.

III

Two chronometers the captain had,
One by Arnold that ran like mad,
One by Kendal in a walnut case,
Poor devoted creature with a hangdog face.
Arnold always hurried with a crazed click-click
Dancing over Greenwich like a lunatic,
Kendal panted faithfully his watch-dog beat,
Climbing out of Yesterday with sticky little feet.
Arnold choked with appetite to wolf up time,
Madly round the numerals his hands would climb,
His cogs rushed over and his wheels ran miles,
Dragging Captain Cook to the Sandwich Isles.
But Kendal dawdled in the tombstoned past,
With a sentimental prejudice to going fast,
And he thought very often of a haberdasher's door
And a yellow-haired boy who would knock no more.
All through the night-time, clock talked to clock,
In the captain's cabin, tock-tock-tock,
One ticked fast and one ticked slow,
And Time went over them a hundred years ago.

IV

SOMETIMES the god would fold his wings
And, stone of Caesars turned to flesh,
Talk of the most important things
That serious-minded midshipmen could wish,
Of plantains, and the lack of rum
Or spearing sea-cows—things like this
That hungry schoolboys, five days dumb,
In jolly-boats are wonted to discuss.
What midshipman would pause to mourn
The sun that beat about his ears,
Or curse the tide, if he could horn
His fists by tugging on those lumbering oars?
Let rum-tanned mariners prefer
To hug the weather-side of yards;
'Cats to catch mice' before they purr,
Those were the captain's enigmatic words.
Here, in this jolly-boat they graced,

Were food and freedom, wind and storm,
While, fowling-piece across his waist,
Cook mapped the coast, with one eye cocked for game.

V

AFTER the candles had gone out, and those
Who listened had gone out, and a last wave
Of chimney-haloes caked their smoky rings
Like fish-scales on the ceiling, a Yellow Sea
Of swimming circles, the old man,
Old Captain-in-the-Corner, drank his rum
With friendly gestures to four chairs. They stood
Empty, still warm from haunches, with rubbed nails
And leather glazed, like agèd serving-men
Feeding a king's delight, the sticky, drugged
Sweet agony of habitual anecdotes.
But these, his chairs, could bear an old man's tongue,
Sleep when he slept, be flattering when he woke,
And wink to hear the same eternal name
From lips new-dipped in rum.
'Then Captain Cook,
I heard him, told them they could go
If so they chose, but he would get them back,
Dead or alive, he'd have them,'
The old man screeched, half-thinking to hear 'Cook!
Cook again! Cook! It's other cooks he'll need,
Cooks who can bake a dinner out of pence,
That's what he lives on, talks on, half-a-crown
A day, and sits there full of Cook.
Who'd do your cooking now, I'd like to ask,
If someone didn't grind her bones away?
But that's the truth, six children and half-a-crown
A day, and a man gone daft with Cook.'
That was his wife,
Elizabeth, a noble wife but brisk,
Who lived in a present full of kitchen-fumes
And had no past. He had not seen her
For seven years, being blind, and that of course
Was why he'd had to strike a deal with chairs,
Not knowing when those who chafed them had gone to sleep
Or stolen away. Darkness and empty chairs,
This was the port that Alexander Home
Had come to with his useless cutlass-wounds

And tales of Cook, and half-a-crown a day—
This was the creek he'd run his timbers to,
Where grateful countrymen repaid his wounds
At half-a-crown a day. Too good, too good,
This eloquent offering of birdcages
To gulls, and Greenwich Hospital to Cook,
Britannia's mission to the sea-fowl.
It was not blindness picked his flesh away,
Nor want of sight made penny-blank the eyes
Of Captain Home, but that he lived like this
In one place, and gazed elsewhere. His body moved
In Scotland, but his eyes were dazzle-full
Of skies and water farther round the world—
Air soaked with blue, so thick it dripped like snow
On spice-tree boughs, and water diamond-green,
Beaches wind-glittering with crumbs of gilt,
And birds more scarlet than a duchy's seal
That had come whistling long ago, and far
Away. His body had gone back,
Here it sat drinking rum in Berwickshire,
But not his eyes—they were left floating there
Half-round the earth, blinking at beaches milked
By suck-mouth tides, foaming with ropes of bubbles
And huge half-moons of surf. Thus it had been
When Cook was carried on a sailor's back,
Vengeance in a cocked hat, to claim his price,
A prince in barter for a longboat.
And then the trumpery springs of fate—a stone,
A musket-shot, a round of gunpowder,
And puzzled animals, killing they knew not what
Or why, but killing . . . the surge of goatish flanks
Armoured in feathers, like cruel birds:
Wild, childish faces, killing; a moment seen,
Marines with crimson coats and puffs of smoke
Toppling face-down; and a knife of English iron,
Forged aboard ship, that had been changed for pigs,
Given back to Cook between the shoulder-blades.
There he had dropped, and the old floundering sea,
The old, fumbling, witless lover-enemy,
Had taken his breath, last office of salt water.
Cook died. The body of Alexander Home
Flowed round the world and back again, with eyes

Marooned already, and came to English coasts,
The vague ancestral darkness of home,
Seeing them faintly through a glass of gold,
Dim fog-shapes, ghosted like the ribs of trees
Against his blazing waters and blue air.
But soon they faded, and there was nothing left,
Only the sugar-cane and the wild granaries
Of sand, and palm-trees and the flying blood
Of cardinal-birds; and putting out one hand
Tremulously in the direction of the beach,
He felt a chair in Scotland. And sat down.

Kenneth Slessor

Fixed Ideas

RANKS of electroplated cubes, dwindling to glitters,
Like the other pasture, the trigonometry of marble,
Death's candy-bed. Stone caked on stone,
Dry pyramids and racks of iron balls.
Life is observed, a precipitate of pellets,
Or grammarians freeze it into spar,
Their rhomboids, as for instance, the finest crystal
Fixing a snowfall under glass. Gods are laid out
In alabaster, with horny cartilage
And zinc ribs; or systems of ecstasy
Baked into bricks. There is a gallery of sculpture,
Bleached bones of heroes, Gorgon masks of bushrangers;
But the quarries are of more use than this,—
Filled with the rolling of huge granite dice,
Ideas and judgments: vivisection, the Baptist Church,
Good men and bad men, polygamy, birth-control. . . .
Frail tinkling rush
Water-hair streaming
Prickles and glitters
Cloudy with bristles
River of thought
Swimming the pebbles—
Undo, loosen your bubbles

Kenneth Slessor

Full Orchestra

MY words are the poor footmen of your pride,
Of what you cry, you trumpets, each to each
With mouths of air; my speech is the dog-speech
Of yours, the Roman tongue—but mine is tied
By harsher bridles, dumb with breath and bone.
Vainly it mocks the dingo strings, the stops,
The pear-tree flying in the flute, with drops
Of music, quenched and scattered by your own.
So serving-men, who run all night with wine,
And whet their ears, and crouch upon the floor,
Sigh broken words no man has heard before
Or since, but ravished in the candleshine,
Between the push and shutting of a door,
From the great table where their masters dine.

Kenneth Slessor

Glubbudubdrib

IN the castle of Glubbudubdrib
How spendidly we dine
On flesh from magic potagers
And cups of dead men's wine,
Dead men who run with bottles,
Lackeys of silent air,
A ghost in gilded livery
Fawning behind each chair.
Beckon, and flunkey Caesars
Bring us their phantom bread.
Once they were gods and emperors;
Now, of course, they are dead.
The governor of Glubbudubdrib
(Two ghosts cringe on each side)
Bows to congratulations,
Filled with a careless pride.
"Really, the servant problem
You mean that Roman youth?
Catullus. Oh, yes, brisk enough,
But—you know—so uncouth.
"There's Plato in the passage,
They tell me he's quite droll.
He says some devilish clever things;
A heathen, though, poor soul"
The governor of Glubbudubdrib
Resumes his drinking-cup.
As for the guests and visitors,
They hadn't even looked up.

Kenneth Slessor

Gulliver

I'LL kick your walls to bits, I'll die scratching a tunnel,
If you'll give me a wall, if you'll give me a simple stone,
If you'll do me the honour of a dungeon—
Anything but this tyranny of sinews.
Lashed with a hundred ropes of nerve and bone
I lie, poor helpless Gulliver,
In a twopenny dock for the want of a penny,
Tied up with stuff too cheap, and strings too many.
One chain is usually sufficient for a cur.
Hair over hair, I pick my cables loose,
But still the ridiculous manacles confine me.
I snap them, swollen with sobbing. What's the use?
One hair I break, ten thousand hairs entwine me.
Love, hunger, drunkenness, neuralgia, debt,
Cold weather, hot weather, sleep and age—
If I could only unloose their spongy fingers,
I'd have a chance yet, slip through the cage.
But who ever heard of a cage of hairs?
You can't scrape tunnels in a net.
If you'd give me a chain, if you'd give me honest iron,
If you'd graciously give me a turnkey,
I could break my teeth on a chain, I could bite through metal,
But what can you do with hairs?
For God's sake, call the hangman.

Kenneth Slessor

Heine In Paris

LATE: a cold smear of sunlight bathes the room;
The gilt lime of winter, a sun grown melancholy old,
Streams in the glass. Outside, ten thousand chimneys fume,
Looping the weather-birds with rings of gold;
The spires of Paris, pricked in an iron spume,
Uprise like stars of water, and mail the sky.
Night comes: the wind is cold.
La Mouche has lit the candles, cleared up the mess.
She is talking, this merry little girl, of the new clown,
Mercutio in red spots, and Miss Nellie, the Equine Princess,
Who can ride three terrible horses upside-down
'Mon dieu, quelle cirque!' . . . and Madame Stephanie's dress..
'As true as I live' . . . the clear little voice trickles on,
All over the Circus, on and on, and all over the town.
Now she has creaked downstairs. Heine is left alone,
Knees hugged in bed, the drug purring in his brain,
And the windows turning blue. He can see some clouds being blown,
Scraping their big, soft bellies on the pane:
'Take me, O Clouds!'—but in a puff they've flown.
So once they fled in Eighteen Twenty-Nine
From—Hamburg, was it?—in a damp disdain
Hamburg—those roofs of tulip-red, those floating trees,
Those black masts clotting the air, and swart cigars,
And puffed old bankers panting along the quays,
And Uncle Solomon shouting amongst the spars,
And Uncle Solomon's cargoes, coffee and cheese,
And Uncle Solomon's face, like a copper moon,
And Uncle Solomon's daughter, and the stars, the stars.
O, Hamburg and Amalie—the stars and dung—
He remembered suddenly that night he stood below,
Dark in the street, with stinging heart and helpless tongue,
And her face passed in the pane, like paper to and fro.
But in a thousand songs that song was never sung.
Amalie, Amalie, who was only a foaming of thought,
A thing thought of, and forgotten, long ago.
And Louise, Diana, and Jenny, and all those bright,
Mad girls who had scrawled their names inside his mind—
All vanished, all gone; and all of them forged in a night,
Conspired of dreams, and leaving no dream behind,

Ungrateful for their dreaming—flight after flight
Of musings wrapped in satin, fancies in silk,
And a thousand thoughts of naked roses and milk,
By love and the moon designed.
But now it seemed that these were only one thought,
One stone of Venus, cut with a hundred sides,
One girl revealed ten thousand times, and caught
Ten thousand times from out those amorous tides.
Now she was gone. They were all gone, those girls that he had sought,
All gone, or paunched in marriage, or crushed in graves,
Or promised for other men's brides.
And it was only a ghost's hair that had spilt,
Fur of the night, in kissing dark and strange,
To choke his lips. And all of those worlds he'd built,
The girls he'd conjured before his dreams took mangle,
The rogues he'd stamped on, harlot, trollop, and jilt,
The fools he'd blistered—all of them passed and forgotten;
But that—that did not change.
Men crumbled, man lived on. In that animal's face,
'Twas but a squirt aimed at the moon, to fling contempt.
Meyerbeer, Borne, and Klopstock vanished, but in their place
New Klopstocks, Meyerbeers blown again, and Bornes undreamt,
Sprang up like fungi, and there remained no trace
Of lashings past. Men, men he could flog for ever,
But man was still exempt.
That did not change—always the world remained,
Breathing and sleeping; loving and taking in love;
Fighting and coupling; life by the belly constrained,
Stupid in roads of flesh; eating, but never enough;
Ravaging, never to cease; warring, but nothing gained;
Babbling to silent Christs; climbing to heavens of the brain
Unknown, unanswering, above.
All these remained, words passed. The paper he'd filled,
Deep to the lips in bitter salt, with fury and tears,
No man remembered; anger and fools were stilled
In dust alike—and out of those roaring years,
What now was left of all the passion he'd spilled,
The fire he'd struck? A cadence or two of love,
A song that had stroked men's ears.
All wrong, all wasted. Now, in this winter snow,
In the black winds from Russia, and the printed mane of night,
Heine looked out, and gazed at the world below,

Thick with old chemicals, breaking far out of sight
With ageless tides of man—ah, granite flow,
Eternal, changeless flux of humanity,
Undying darkness and light!
Not treading those floods could save him—not striking stone,
Not damning the world could serve—only to fly,
Careless of men and their shouting—untouched—alone—
Snatched by his own gods from a falling sky,
And singing his own way—clutching his own, his own,
Blind to the world—yes, that was the road of Heine—
Up to the sun, solitary, a speck in the ether—
'Ha, now, Christ Jesus and Jehovah, I choose to die!'

Kenneth Slessor

In A/C With Ghosts

You can shuffle and scuffle and scold,
You can rattle the knockers and knobs,
Or batter the doorsteps with buckets of gold
Till the Deputy-Governor sobs.
You can sneak up a suitable plank
In a frantic endeavor to see—
But what do they do in the Commonwealth Bank
When the Big Door bangs at Three?

Listen in the cellars, listen in the vaults,
Can't you hear the tellers turning somersaults?
Can't you hear the spectres of inspectors and directors
Dancing with the phantoms in a Dead Man's Waltz?
Some are ghosts of nabobs, poverty and stray bobs,
Midas and his mistress, Mammon and his wife;
Other ones are sentries, guarding double entries,
Long-forgotten, double-dealing, troubled double-life.
Down among the pass-books, money lent and spent,
Down among the forests of the Four Per Cent.,
Where the ledgers meet and moulder, and the overdrafts grow older,
And the phantoms shrug a shoulder when you ask 'em for the rent.

They are bogies of Grandfather's cheques,
They are spectres of buried accounts,
They are crinoline sweethearts with pearls on their necks,
Demanding enormous amounts.
They are payment for suppers and flowers,
For diamonds to banish a tear,
For sweet, pretty ladies in opulent hours . . .
And tombstones . . . and bailiffs . . . and beer . . .

Down in the bowels of the bank, the ledgers lie rank upon rank,
The debts of the ages come out of their pages,
The bones of old loans creak and clank—
Oh, if you could peep through the door
To day at a Quarter Past Four,
You'd find all the ghosts at their usual posts,
And you wouldn't sign cheques any more!

La Dame Du Palais De La Reine

SOPHIE, in shocks of scarlet lace,
Receives her usual embrace
Beneath a hedge, behind a curtain,
Or in the chambers of His Grace.
Whether a kiss be worth the care
Five minions wasted on her hair,
Sophie herself is half uncertain,
Paused in adorable despair.
When past beseeching Man she floats
In golden-coasted petticoats,
A shaft of irritation passes;
Like colic; but with antidotes.
Then serious doubts occur of Love
That spoils the Peacock, sours the Dove,
And mixes up the lower classes
So hopelessly with those above.
Is the bird Passion worth the lime?
Can the small Amor turn to crime
By ruining skirts—and the digestion?
Such problems occupy her time.
But often these objections thaw
To counts with viols—or grooms with straw—
And Sophie, giving up the question,
Bends to some strange but natural law.
With books of music, diamond rings,
Spaniels and roses, fireworks, swings,
Her lovers come. But Sophie sighs,
Whose thoughts are fixed on Higher Things.
Between the sleepy kisses given,
Her mind by grave debate is driven,
Perplexity distracts those eyes
Which, lovers vow, are lost in Heaven!

Kenneth Slessor

Last Trams

I

THAT street washed with violet
Writes like a tablet
Of living here; that pavement
Is the metal embodiment
Of living here; those terraces
Filled with dumb presences
Lobbed over mattresses,
Lusts and repentances,
Ardours and solaces,
Passions and hatreds
And love in brass bedsteads . . .
Lost now in emptiness
Deep now in darkness
Nothing but nakedness,
Rails like a ribbon
And sickness of carbon
Dying in distances.

II

THEN, from the skeletons of trams,
Gazing at lighted rooms, you'll find
The black and Röntgen diagrams
Of window-plants across the blind
That print their knuckleduster sticks,
Their buds of gum, against the light
Like negatives of candlesticks
Whose wicks are lit by fluorite;
And shapes look out, or bodies pass,
Between the darkness and the flare,
Between the curtain and the glass,
Of men and women moving there.
So through the moment's needle-eye,
Like phantoms in the window-chink,
Their faces brush you as they fly,
Fixed in the shutters of a blink;
But whose they are, intent on what,
Who knows? They rattle into void,
Stars of a film without a plot,
Snippings of idiot celluloid.

Kenneth Slessor

Lesbia's Daughter

LESBIA'S daughter, I shall tell no lie,
Here's no fit amber for such a dainty fly.
Let them embalm your beauty whoso can
In boastful odes, I'm a more honest man.
Lovers' abodes with poets' words are paved,
But prudent girls would get those vows engraved,
For brass than paper being something stronger
May last, it's more than like, a fortnight longer.
Where's the fine music that the fossil men
Of lost Lemuria brandished on a pen?
All tossed in earth—men, music, lovers gone—
And where's the lust a skull has for a bone?
If joy can turn a moment to a year,
Why take to Then and There what's meant for Here,
Or nurture for a cemetery tense
The curious pleasures of impermanence?
Look for no lovers on that later scene,
Let it avail you Are, who shall have Been,
Burnt utterly the stick you had to burn,
Lived once, loved well, gave thanks, and won't return.

Kenneth Slessor

Mangroves

These black bush-waters, heavy with crusted boughs
Like plumes above dead captains, wake the mind....
Uncounted kissing, unremembered vows,
Nights long forgotten, moons too dark to find,
Or stars too cold...all quick things that have fled
Whilst these old bubbles uprise in older stone,
Return like pale dead faces of children dead,
Staring unfelt through doors for ever unknown.

O silent ones that drink these timeless pools,
Eternal brothers, bending so deeply over,
Your branches tremble above my tears again...
And even my songs are stolen from some old lover
Who cried beneath your leaves like other fools,
While still they whisper "in vain...in vain...in vain..."

Kenneth Slessor

Marco Polo

READING how Marco Polo came
By bridle-path to Kanbalu,
Forgotten fibres wake to flame,
And smoke old memories anew
For in a bygone life of mine
I watched the carven rampart shine,
Where Kublai's five-clawed dragons glowed
Like painted wyverns, line on line.
And past those plaster dragon-heads,
Those frescoes cut with curious flowers,
In verdigris and lilac-reds
Old tiles gleamed on the crusted towers,
While bridges cleft of serpent-stone
Bowed by their side, like branches blown
From some high granite Tree of Life
Whose roots were coiled round Kublai's throne.
O myrtles on the Jasper Mount,
O forest-towered elephants,
And fire-fish in the topaz fount
With red fins blown like water-plants,
And green cornelian tortoise-rows
Below the aqueduct, and those
Gold-feathered cranes, I saw them all,
How many ages gone, who knows?
I saw tall gilded Tartars pass
Behind their marble balustrades,
With maces made of beaten brass
And turquoise-hafted sabre-blades.
I heard the little golden bells
Blow faintly down the citadels,
And spied those ivory courts within
Through windows of transparent shells.
But past the fountain-pools I peered,
Beyond the birds, to that divan,
Where, fingering his tawny beard,
In silence dreamed the splendid Khan.
Green china bowls of wine were there,
And oranges and milk-of-mare,
While, stamping on his jewelled wrist,

A falcon climbed with eyes aflame.
He's gone; and with him, flowers and birds,
And old Venetians too, have died;
Yet burnt in Marco Polo's words,
Those unforgotten splendours hide . . .
And, tired of life's new-fashioned plan,
I long to be barbarian.
I'm sick of modern men, I wish
You were still living, Kublai-Khan!

Kenneth Slessor

Mephistopheles Perverted

(Or Goethe for the Times)

ONCE long ago lived a Flea
Who kept such a fine, fat King,
Not that he held with royalty,
But more for the appearance of the thing,
And gave his Majesty to hold
(Such pageantries are far too few)
A sword of ruby-hilted gold
That possibly might hack a cheese in two;
But lest this glory might begin
To prove the regency too far,
His thunderbolt they made of tin,
And changed his godship for another Star.
Thus when the Monarch drove abroad,
With stars like buttons round his chest,
God-fearing Fleas would all applaud,
And alien Lice be grudgingly impressed.
Such relics every Flea must flaunt,
If only as the final trump
That mocks Materialism's taunt,
Proving there's more in life than Suck and Jump.
Once long ago—but not so long—
A King went curing scrofula . . .
The chorus of this charming song,
I'm told reliably, is Ha, Ha, Ha.

Kenneth Slessor

Metempsychosis

SUDDENLY to become John Benbow, walking down William Street
With a tin trunk and a five-pound note, looking for a place to eat,
And a peajacket the colour of a shark's behind
That a Jew might buy in the morning. . . .
To fry potatoes (God save us!) if you feel inclined,
Or to kiss the landlady's daughter, and no one mind,
In a peel-papered bedroom with a whistling jet
And a picture of the Holy Virgin. . . .
Wake in a shaggy bale of blankets with a fished-up cigarette,
Picking over the 'Turbird's Tattle' for a Saturday morning bet,
With a bottle in the wardrobe easy to reach
And a blast of onions from the landing. . . .
Tattooed with foreign ladies' tokens, a heart and dagger each,
In places that make the delicate female inquirer screech,
And over a chest smoky with gunpowder-blue—
Behold!—a mermaid piping through a coach-horn!
Banjo-playing, firing off guns, and other momentous things to do,
Such as blowing through peashooters at hawkers to improve the view—
Suddenly paid-off and forgotten in Woolloomooloo. . . .
Suddenly to become John Benbow. . . .

Kenneth Slessor

Music

I

MUSIC, on the air's edge, rides alone,
Plumed like empastured Caesars of the sky
With a god's helmet; now, in the gold dye
Of sunlight, the iron cloak, the Tuscan stone,
Melt to enchanted flesh—a voice is blown
Down from the windy pit, like a star falling.
Men think it is a lost eagle calling,
But the fool and the lover know it for Music's cry.
He is running with the Valkyrs on a road of manes,
Darkness draws back its fur, the stars course by,
Fighting the windy beaks of hurricanes
To keep their stations in the sky—
Away, away! The little earth-light wanes,
The moon has drowned herself, cold music rings,
The battering of a thousand Vulcanals
Hammers the blood; a thousand horsemen fly
Belly to air, away! Now Music sings
Harshly, like horns of Tartars blown on high.

II

A SHIP in hell marooned;
He lies under the mast,
Caked with the sticky unguents of the sun.
Sluggishly at his wound,
The rat Pain, biting with bloody teeth
And broken nails, is fed at last,
The tale is done.
Let the shell of bleeding flesh remain,
This crusted finery is nothing worth.
He flings his body carelessly to Pain,
Meat for the earth.
Trumpets of godhood! The voice of Music sings,
Lost in the dark forest, riding out,
Louder and nearer, with triumphant wings,
Music and his eternal cavaliers—
Now Tristan rises with a mighty shout.
Nobody hears.

III

O, SILENT night, dark beach,

Drowning like lovers, each in each,
Uncharge thy musky boughs, unbend
Thy mouths of air, and give them speech—
Then, like a nest of thieves,
The golden, tattling leaves
Will sell their mask for bravo's love,
Or cry their fruit to stranger Eves,
And voices ride
By foam and field
Of drowsy lovers, lips unsealed,
Blown to the lazy tide—
'With love we put the planets out,
With kissing drowned the bells,
And struck the clambering moon to ice;
Now we shall sleep and hide . . . '
I sang with Nonie, side by side,
Sunk in a drift of tumbled laces,
Till Music breathed his enormous flute
Over our small, upturned faces.

IV

IN the pans of straw-coned country
This river is the solitary traveller;
Nothing else moves, the sky lies empty,
Birds there are none, and cattle not many.
Now it is sunlight, what is the difference?
Nothing. The sun is as white as moonlight.
Wind has buffeted flat the grasses,
Long, long ago; but now there is nothing,
Wind gone and men gone, only the water
Stumbling over the stones in silence—
Nothing but fields with roots gone rotten,
Paddocks unploughed and clotted marshes.
Even the wind that stirred them has vanished,
Only the river remains with its water,
Shambling over the straw-coned country.
Nothing else moves, the sky lies empty,
Only the river remains with its water,
And droughts will come

V

IN and out the countryfolk, the carriages and carnival,
Pastry-cooks in all directions push to barter their confections,
Trays of little gilded cakes, caramels in painted flakes,

Marzipan of various makes and macaroons of all complexions,
Riding on a tide of country faces.
Up and down the smoke and crying,
Girls with apple-eyes are flying,
Country boys in costly braces
Run with red, pneumatic faces;
Trumpets gleam, whistles scream,
Organs cough their coloured steam out,
Dogs are worming, sniffing, squirming;
Air-balloons and paper moons,
Roundabouts with curdled tunes,
Drowned bassoons and waggon-jacks;
Tents like flowers of candle-wax;
'Buy, buy, buy, buy!
Cotton ties, cakes and pies, what a size, test your eyes, hairdyes,
candy-shies, all a prize, penny tries, no lies, watch it rise,
buy, buy, buy, buy!'
So everybody buys.
Gently the doctor of magic mutters,
Opens his puppet-stall,
Pulls back the painted shutters,
Ruffles the golden lace.
Ha! The crowd flutters . . .
Reddened and sharp and small,
O, Petroushka's face!

VI

TORCHES and running fire; the flagstones drip
Like a black mirror, wet from killing. Smoke goes up,
Clouding the gilded rafter-birds, and the flying cup
That floats with magic wine to Konchak's lip.
Then the Khan claps his beard, and harps are brushed
Clear in the darkness; dancers' bells far off
Blab at their ankles. Now, from the gold trough,
We have dipped bowls of mare's milk; all is hushed.
Suddenly, dull bubbling drums uprise, grow thicker,
Split with a scream of metal—glazed in the flare,
Tartar girls rapidly whirl in storms of animal hair,
Spinning in islands of movement, quicker and quicker.
In the middle of the dance, smiling at his whim,
Khan Konchak rose, and left the golden hall.
Soon there was silent darkness over all.
One of the dancers was sent after him.

VII

IN the apple-country, in the apple-trees,
The boughs are bubbling with pink snow
To frost the fields. A thousand birds fall crying,
Sharp and sweet, like morning-stars, in seas
Deeper than air. A thousand blossoms blow,
Drops of gold blood, like flowers gone flying,
Drowning with foam the drowsy girls below.
These country-girls, in hats of straw,
Take kissing as a natural law,
Put up their cheeks, like rosy saucers,
Gravely on tiptoe waiting.
They plainly do not know the dangers
This practice breeds from courteous strangers,
Who find, on airing their politeness,
Such local customs captivating.
As for my part, under the trees,
I found a girl with tawny knees,
Pretty enough, at a hurried view.
We lay on blossoms, glassed with dew.
I didn't notice her till we kissed.
How pleasant, a sentimentalist!

VIII

OPEN! It is the moon knocking with fists of air
To break thy doors down, it is the lusty moon
More clamorous than hunting-cries, come tramping
With lanterns to uprouse thee, drown the fields
In drifts of crystal, waken the farms with light,
And lovers call to buffet the rough smoke
From valleys rising up—then, like the juice
Of Juno's apples, the rich, Indian glow
Shall cast them out of Time, and all be running,
Dancing and kissing, in this headlong, breathless moon,
This moon pulling at old hinges, bawling through keyholes,
Crying out 'Siegmond! Siegmond! Siegmond!'
The door flies open.
In this house, there is anger, in the forest, night,
But love is under my laughter, and under my cloak, flight.
O, hast thou not yet woken?
In night, there is bitterness, in sorrow, tears to weep,
But love is under my music, and under my cloak, sleep.
O, Lady, hast thou spoken?

In tears, there is remembering, in memory, no release,
But love is under my kissing, and under my cloak, peace.
O, hide beneath my cloak!
So shall we steal into the deeps of Spring,
Clasped each to each, and swim the merry tide,
Rounding the world, on the green floods astride,
Till, drowned in a bubble of flowers, too dazed to cling,
We're thrown up, pink and naked castaways,
On some old beach, where Time is put to rout,
And the world a buried star, not talked about—
So shall we daunt the gods, conceal their gaze.

IX

ONCE, at your words, I would have struck to flame
The ground I strode on, all the hives of blood
Gone bursting mad—but now, congealed and thick,
Anger, the wine, chokes me, hoods me with stone,
Clogs and corrodes me with its marish flood.
Suddenly, as though to metal grown,
I stand immovable, feel strangely sick,
And hear your voice far off, crying my name.
The clouds dissolve. Now I can see your face,
Immense and sweating; the room has fallen in,
Tiny beside it—your face, immense and sweating,
Blurred into mockery at the words that fill you.
Come, then. You wish to crush me. Let us begin;
Since it is obvious I shall have to kill you,
Have done with useless voices and regretting.
I want to get it over, and leave this place.
Then, like some god on a stone pedestal
Who stirs by night with unfamiliar limbs,
I turn to an automation, upraise
Half-wondering an arm I find in the air,
Clammy with grappled iron. Everything swims,
Fogged in the coughing gas-light. Blindly I stare,
And stab once or twice . . . stabbing in a daze
No need for more. He is dead, this animal.
Dead, dead. There was no need to strike
So many times, there is no need to hide—
It's nothing to be ashamed of nowadays.
He was my enemy. Now he has perished,
Charred in the smoking ovens of my pride.
Why should the splendid fury that I cherished

Seem now to be a cold and fruitless blaze?
Good God! Can't I kill my enemy if I like!

X

NOTHING grows on the stone trees
But lanterns, frosty gourds of colour,
Melting their bloody drops in water
Over the dark seas.
These peaks of stucco, smoking light,
These Venice-roads, the pools and channels,
Tunnel the night with a thousand planets,
Daubing their glaze of white,
Where belfries glitter, spire on spire,
Shining on men with paper faces,
And boats, in the glass billow fading,
Beetles of cloudy fire.
Faintly the dripping, crystal strings
Unlock their Spanish airs, their festival
Which, far away, resolves to emptiness,
Echoes of bitter things,
Far away music, cold and small,
Which, like a child's delight remembered,
Falls to mocked effigy for ever,
Melancholy to recall.

XI

COME in your painted coaches, friends of mine,
We'll keep the stars night-company with wine,
Morning shall find us bending to the flute,
And daybreak mock us at our candleshine.
Pile all thy jewelled berries in a heap,
Almonds and musk and sweetmeats, all for thee—
We'll rest on silk a thousand cushions deep,
Wake up and shake the cassia-tree,
And eat a sticky cake, and sleep,
And slee—..

XII

Look up! Thou hast a shining Guest
Whose body in the dews hath lain,
His face like a strange wafer pressed
Secret and starry, at thy pane;
And he shall sing with human tongue
Old music men have never sung
Since Orpheus on earth was young,

And shall not sing again.
But life and all its lies of stone
Shall crack to fumes and disappear,
Thy little golden shells be blown
Like stars in water, far and near,
And thou shalt wake behind the Glass,
In stone dissolved, and phantom brass—
O, deaf! The bells of Music pass,
Not can, but darest, thou hear!

Kenneth Slessor

New Magic

At last I know—it's on old ivory jars,
Glassed with old miniatures and garnered once with musk.
I've seen those eyes like smouldering April stars
As carp might see them behind their bubbled skies
In pale green fishponds—they're as green your eyes,
As lakes themselves, changed to green stone at dusk.

At last I know—it's paned in a crystal hoop
On powder-boxes from some dead Italian girl,
I've seen such eyes grow suddenly dark, and droop
Their small, pure lids, as if I'd pried too far
In finding you snared there on that ivory jar
By crusted motes of rose and smoky-pearl.

Kenneth Slessor

Next Turn

No pause! The buried pipes ring out,
The flour-faced Antic runs from sight;
Now Columbine, with scarlet pout,
Floats in the smoking moon of light.
Now programmes wave, heads bend between—
The roaring Years go past in file.
Soon there's the Transformation Scene—
And then the Footmen down the aisle.
For you must wait, before you leave
This Theatre of Varieties,
Their frozen fingers on your sleeve,
Their most respectful 'Now, sir, please!'
Out in the night, the Carriage stands,
Plumed with black trees. The Post-boys grin.
The Coachman beats upon his hands.
Turn after Turn goes on within.

Kenneth Slessor

North Country

North Country, filled with gesturing wood,
With trees that fence, like archers' volleys,
The flanks of hidden valleys
Where nothing's left to hide

But verticals and perpendiculars,
Like rain gone wooden, fixed in falling,
Or fingers blindly feeling
For what nobody cares;

Or trunks of pewter, bangled by greedy death,
Stuck with black staghorns, quietly sucking,
And trees whose boughs go seeking,
And tress like broken teeth

With smoky antlers broken in the sky;
Or trunks that lie grotesquely rigid,
Like bodies blank and wretched
After a fool's battue,

As if they've secret ways of dying here
And secret places for their anguish
When boughs at last relinquish
Their clench of blowing air

But this gaunt country, filled with mills and saws,
With butter-works and railway-stations
And public institutions,
And scornful rumps of cows,

North Country, filled with gesturing wood—
Timber's the end it gives to branches,
Cut off in cubic inches,
Dripping red with blood.

Kenneth Slessor

Nuremberg

So quiet it was in that high, sun-steeped room,
So warm and still, that sometimes with the light
Through the great windows, bright with bottle-panes,
There'd float a chime from clock-jacks out of sight,
Clapping iron mallets on green copper gongs.

But only in blown music from the town's
Quaint horologe could Time intrude . . . you'd say
Clocks had been bolted out, the flux of years
Defied, and that high chamber sealed away
From earthly change by some old alchemist.

And, oh, those thousand towers of Nuremberg
Flowering like leaden trees outside the panes:
Those gabled roofs with smoking cowls, and those
Encrusted spires of stone, those golden vanes
On shining housetops paved with scarlet tiles!

And all day nine wrought-pewter manticores
Blinked from their spouting faucets, not five steps
Across the cobbled street, or, peering through
The rounds of glass, espied that sun-flushed room
With Dürer gravings at intaglios.

O happy nine, spouting your dew all day
In green-scaled rows of metal, whilst the town
Moves peacefully below in quiet joy . . .
O happy gargoyles to be gazing down
On Albrecht Dürer and his plates of iron!

Kenneth Slessor

Out Of Time

1

I saw Time flowing like a hundred yachts
That fly behind the daylight, foxed with air;
Or piercing, like the quince-bright, bitter slats
Of sun gone thrusting under Harbour's hair.
So Time, the wave, enfolds me in its bed,
Or Time, the bony knife, it runs me through.
'Skulker, take heart,' I thought my own heart said.
'The flood, the blade go by - Time flows, not you!'

Vilely, continuously, stupidly,
Time takes me, drills me, drives through bone and vein,
So water bends the seaweeds in the sea,
The tide goes over, but the weeds remain.

Time, you must cry farewell, take up the track,
And leave this lovely moment at your back!

II

Time leaves the lovely moment at his back,
Eager to quench and ripen, kiss or kill;
To-morrow begs him, breathless for his lack,
Or beauty dead entreats him to be still.
His fate pursues him; he must open doors,
Or close them, for that pale and faceless host
Without a flag, whose agony implores
Birth to be flesh, or funeral, to be ghost.

Out of all reckoning, out of dark and light,
Over the edges of dead Nows and Heres,
Blindly and softly, as a mistress might,
He keeps appointments with a million years.

I and the moment laugh, and let him go,
Leaning against his golden undertow.

III

Leaning against the golden undertow,
Backward, I saw the birds begin to climb
with bodies hailstone-clear, and shadows flow,
Fixed in a sweet meniscus, out of Time,
Out of the torrent, like the fainter land
Lensed in a bubble's ghostly camera,
The lighted beach, the sharp and china sand
Glitters and waters and peninsula -

The moment's world it was; and I was part,
Fleshless and ageless, changeless and made free.
'Fool, would you leave this country?' cried my heart,
But I was taken by the suck of sea.

The gulls go down, the body dies and rots,
And Time flows past them like a hundred yachts.

Kenneth Slessor

Pan At Lane Cove

SCALY with poison, bright with flame,
Great fungi steam beside the gate,
Run tentacles through flagstone cracks,
Or claw beyond, where meditate
Wet poplars on a pitchy lawn.
Some seignior of colonial fame
Has planted here a stone-cut faun
Whose flute juts like a frozen flame.
O lonely faun, what songs are these
For skies where no Immortals hide?
Why finger in this dour abode
Those Pan-pipes girdled at your side?
Your Gods, and Hellas too, have passed,
Forsaken are the Cyclades,
And surely, faun, you are the last
To pipe such ancient songs as these.
Yet, blow your stone-lipped flute and blow
Those red-and-silver pipes of Pan.
Cold stars are bubbling round the moon,
Which, like some golden Indiaman
Disgorged by waterspouts and blown
Through heaven's archipelago,
Drives orange bows by clouds of stone . . .
Blow, blow your flute, you stone boy, blow!
And, Chiron, pipe your centaurs out,
The night has looped a smoky scarf
Round campanili in the town,
And thrown a cloak about Clontarf.
Now earth is ripe for Pan again,
Barbaric ways and Paynim rout,
And revels of old Samian men.
O Chiron, pipe your centaurs out.
This garden by the dark Lane Cove
Shall spark before thy music dies
With silver sandals; all thy gods
Be conjured from Ionian skies.
Those poplars in a fluting-trice
They'll charm into an olive-grove
And dance a while in Paradise

Like men of fire above Lane Cove.

Kenneth Slessor

Polarities

SOMETIMES she is like sherry, like the sun through a vessel of glass,
Like light through an oriel window in a room of yellow wood;
Sometimes she is the colour of lions, of sand in the fire of noon,
Sometimes as bruised with shadows as the afternoon.
Sometimes she moves like rivers, sometimes like trees;
Or tranced and fixed like South Pole silences;
Sometimes she is beauty, sometimes fury, sometimes neither,
Sometimes nothing, drained of meaning, null as water.
Sometimes, when she makes pea-soup or plays me Schumann,
I love her one way; sometimes I love her another
More disturbing way when she opens her mouth in the dark;
Sometimes I like her with camellias, sometimes with a parsley-stalk,
Sometimes I like her swimming in a mirror on the wall;
Sometimes I don't like her at all.

Kenneth Slessor

Realities

(To the etchings of Norman Lindsay)

Now the statues lean over each to each, and sing,
Gravely in warm plaster turning; the hedges are dark.
The trees come suddenly to flower with moonlight,
The water-gardens to glassy fire, and the night, the night,
Breaks in a rain of stars. O, now the statues wake,
Poise on their leaden stems, and dive into the lake—
And the old Gardener, who has grown old with raking,
Bends by his flickering candle, and hears the noise,
And is nodding his head at a music of copper shaking,
And Mercury whispering to some little graven Boys.
And Venus with Venus is walking in a misty grove,
Their mouths breathless with great lies of Jove,
And the green-silver moon flows quivering down their sides,
Till each is lined in light.

'And this Brass Tower?' she said—

But a stone Faun, clawed to the branches overhead,
Could hold his breath no longer, downward slides,
And crashes in a storm of leaves.—O, look, the lake!
O, the great dolphins from the fountain-rim,
And the rusty Tritons—and O, the branches break—
A flute of ivory shines—it is Apollo come to swim!
Then the skies open with a light from no moon or star,
The dark terraces tremble, melt in a shower of petals;
Flowers turn to faces; faces, like small gold panes,
Are bodied with a mist of limbs—no dark remains,
Nor silence, but there is laughter like bells in air,
A rushing wind of music, torches, dancers everywhere,
And lovers no farther. It is not night nor day,
The world's tissue has utterly crumbled away,
Time is a crusty pond, and that old Mirror, Life,
Has broken, and the ghosts of flesh are stirred
With a new blood, the fluid of eternity,
And mouths that have never spoken, ears that have never heard,
Eyes that have never seen, speak now, and hear, and see.
And I, who have climbed in these unrooted boughs
Behind the world, find substance there and flesh,
Thoughts more infrangible than windy vows,
Love that's more bodily, and kisses longer,

And Cythera lovelier, and the girls of moonlight stronger
Than all earth's ladies, webbed in their bony mesh.
The statues dance, and the old Gardener is asleep,
And golden bodies tread the paths—O, happy shapes,
O, shining ones! Could I for ever keep
Within your radiance, made absolute at last,
No more amongst earth's phantoms to be cast,
No more in the shadowy race of the world exist,
But, born into reality, remember Life
As men see ghosts at midnight—so with me
Might all those aery textures, the world's mist,
Melt into Beauty's actuality!

Kenneth Slessor

Rubens' Hell

VENUS with rosy-cloven rump
And rings of straw-bright flying hair
Looks in the glass that slaves are plying
Not for her own face floating there,
But for the sly and curious gaze
Of Rubens, through the keyhole prying.
Warm flesh of gods, by light embayed,
And drifting daemon-bones within
That sweep like music up and down
To pouts and cups of ivory skin,
Firm-valleyed croup, and swagging arm
In whose embankment bracelets drown—
Do you remain, you strokes of paint,
With Venus mocked and Rubens dead
And Beauty sold for an antique
And microscopes raised up instead?
Still are your old adherents true;
Rubens is there, if he could speak.
Rubens is there in your high room,
Rubens it is who blows his breath
To fix you laughing in the glass,
Who keeps a castle here from death
While schools go out and fashions fall
And microscopes and movements pass.
This castle-keep of joys conceived
But never sucked is Rubens' hell,
Is Rubens' limbo, cut and won
From darkness. Here he comes to dwell.
Man's heaven is the place he builds
By thoughts imagined and things done.
Some choose a paradise of gas,
And some, by pious deeds below,
The heavenly butter-hatch for flunkies;
Who dream of nought to nothing go.
Therefore I'd sooner Rubens' hell
Than go to heaven with the donkeys.

Kenneth Slessor

Rubens' Innocents

IF all those tumbling babes of heaven,
Plump cherubim with blown cheeks,
Could vault in these warm skies, or leaven
Our starry silent mountain-peaks—
O painter of chub-faced, shining-thighed
Fat Ganymedes of God—what noise
Would churn between the clouds and stride
Far downward from those rose-mouthed boys!
Down to our spires their lusty whooping,
Fanfares of Paradise, would speed,
Far down to dark-faced clergy stooping
Round altars of their doleful creed;
And God, whose wings of silver sweep
Like metal afire on heaven's rim,
Would daze them with a twinkling peep
Of those young moon-stained cherubim—
Then, for a trice, their skies might sparkle,
And some gold ichor splash amid
Those most respectable, patriarchal
Purveyors of stale pardons, hid
Behind their old cathedral closes
From this unguessed, unguessable God,
Shining before their learned noses
Down roads that Peter Rubens trod.

Kenneth Slessor

Sensuality

FEELING hunger and cold, feeling
Food, feeling fire, feeling
Pity and pain, tasting
Time in a kiss, tasting
Anger and tears, touching
Eyelids with lips, touching
Plague, touching flesh, knowing
Blood in the mouth, knowing
Laughter like flame, holding
Pickaxe and pen, holding
Death in the hand, hearing
Boilers and bells, hearing
Birds, hearing hail, smelling
Cedar and sweat, smelling
Petrol and sea, feeling
Hunger and cold, feeling
Food, feeling fire. . . .
Feeling.

Kenneth Slessor

Serenade

THOU moon, like a white Christus hanging
At the sky's cross-roads, I'll court thee not,
Though travellers bend up, and seek thy grace.
Let them go truckle with their gifts and singing,
I'll ask no favours of thy cocker face.
Moonlight's a viand sucked by the world's lovers,
Captains and peasants, all that are young and have luck.
They take the moon. Nobody asked them to.
Let the musicians lout to thee for favours;
Personally, I have other things to do.

Kenneth Slessor

Sleep

Do you give yourself to me utterly,
Body and no-body, flesh and no-flesh
Not as a fugitive, blindly or bitterly,
But as a child might, with no other wish?
Yes, utterly.

Then I shall bear you down my estuary,
Carry you and ferry you to burial mysteriously,
Take you and receive you,
Consume you, engulf you,
In the huge cave, my belly, lave you
With huger waves continually.
And you shall cling and clamber there
And slumber there, in that dumb chamber,
Beat with my blood's beat, hear my heart move
Blindly in bones that ride above you,
Delve in my flesh, dissolved and bedded,
Through viewless valves embodied so –
Till daylight, the expulsion and awakening,

The riving and the driving forth,

Life with remorseless forceps beckoning –

Pangs and betrayal of harsh birth.

Kenneth Slessor

Snowdrops

The Snowdrop Girl in fields of snowdrops walks,
Whiter than foam, deeper than waters flowing,
Flakes of wild milk gone blowing,
Snowing on cloudy stalks.

The Snowdrop Girl goes picking flowers of snow,
Blossoms of darkness bubbling into dreams,
In a strange country, by the shadowy streams
Where the cruel petals of the Coke-tree grow.

From the smoke and the fume of the backyard room,
Where poverty sits and gloats,
On runaway feet from a dirty street
To a field of snow she floats;
And tickets to Hell have a curious smell
And a dangerous crystal whiff,
Where men hawk Death in a snowdrops's breath
At a couple of shillings a sniff.

Kenneth Slessor

South Country

After the whey-faced anonymity
Of river-gums and scribbly-gums and bush,
After the rubbing and the hit of brush,
You come to the South Country
As if the argument of trees were done,
The doubts and quarrelling, the plots and pains,
All ended by these clear and gliding planes
Like an abrupt solution.

And over the flat earth of empty farms
The monstrous continent of air floats back
Coloured with rotting sunlight and the black,
Bruised flesh of thunderstorms:

Air arched, enormous, pounding the bony ridge,
Ditches and hutches, with a drench of light,
So huge, from such infinities of height,
You walk on the sky's beach

While even the dwindled hills are small and bare,
As if, rebellious, buried, pitiful,
Something below pushed up a knob of skull,
Feeling its way to air.

Kenneth Slessor

Stars

'THESE are the floating berries of the night,
They drop their harvest in dark alleys down,
Softly far down on groves of Venus, or on a little town
Forgotten at the world's edge—and O, their light
Unlocks all closed things, eyes and mouths, and drifts
Quietly over kisses in a golden rain,
Drowning their flight, till suddenly the Cyprian lifts
Her small, white face to the moon, then hides again.
'They are the warm candles of beauty, hung in blessing on high,
Poised like bright comrades on boughs of night above:
They are the link-boys of Queen Venus, running out of the sky,
Spilling their friendly radiance on all her ways of love.
'Should the girl's eyes be lit with swimming fire,
O do not kiss it away, it is a star, a star!'
So cried the passionate poet to his great, romantic guitar.
But I was beating off the stars, gazing, not rhyming.
I saw the bottomless, black cups of space
Between their clusters, and the planets climbing
Dizzily in sick airs, and desired to hide my face.
But I could not escape those tunnels of nothingness,
The cracks in the spinning Cross, nor hold my brain
From rushing for ever down that terrible lane,
Infinity's trap-door, eternal and merciless.

Kenneth Slessor

Talbingo

'TALBINGO RIVER'—as one says of bones:
'Captain' or 'Commodore' that smelt gunpowder
In old engagements no one quite believes
Or understands. Talbingo had its blood
As they did, ran with waters huge and clear
Lopping down mountains,
Turning crags to banks.
Now it's a sort of aching valley,
Basalt shaggy with scales,
A funnel of tobacco-coloured clay,
Smoulders of puffed earth
And pebbles and shell-bodied flies
And water thickening to stone in pocks.
That's what we're like out here,
Beds of dried-up passions.

Kenneth Slessor

Taoist

THOSE friends of Lao-Tzu, those wise old men
Dozing all day in lemon-silken robes,
With tomes of beaten jade spread knee to knee,
And pipe-stem, shining cold with silver, poised
In steaming play, and still a finger free
To dog the path of some forgotten pen;
Almost their bee-sweet ancient words incline
My mind to those old pagan ways, beloved
By mandarins and mages, now but dust
In drowsy pyramids. What creed is this,
Save that which those philosophers discussed
In gold pavilions, over musky wine?
'Repenting always of forgotten wrongs
Will never bring thy heart to rest, for thought
Repairs no whit of evil; rather cast
Thy meditations in that utter void
To which all human deeds resolve at last'
So runs the burden of their thousand songs.
Here, in this dark Star-Chamber of the soul,
You stand arraigned, O slayer of my heart . . .
But I am tired of hoarding up the grist
Of anger, and remember Lao-Tzu.
Revenge is empty to the Taoist,
And tears of penitence a futile toll!

Kenneth Slessor

The Atlas

I. The King of Cuckooz
THE King of Cuckooz Contrey
Hangs peaked above Argier
With Janzaries and Marabutts
To bid a sailor fear—
With lantern-eyed astrologers
Who walk upon the walls
And ram with stars their basilisks
Instead of cannon-balls.
And in that floating castle
(I tell you it is so)
Five thousand naked Concubines
With dulcimers do go.
Each rosy nose anoints a tile,
Bang, bang! the fort salutes,
When He, the King of Cuckooz Land,
Comes forth in satin boots,
Each rosy darling flies before
When he desires his tent,
Or, like a tempest driving flowers,
Inspects a battlement.
And this I spied by moonlight
Behind a royal bamboo—
That Monarch in a curricle
Which ninety virgins drew;
That Monarch drinking nectar
(Lord God, my tale attest!)
Milked from a snow-white elephant
As white as your white breast!
And this is no vain fable
As other knaves may lie—
Have I not got that Fowl aboard
Which no man may deny?
The King's own hunting-falcon
I limed across the side
When by the Bayes of Africa
King James's Fleet did ride.
What crest is there emblazoned,
Whose mark is this, I beg,

Stamped on the silver manacle
Around that dainty leg?
Let this be news to you, my dear,
How Man should be revered;
Though I'm no King of Cuckooz Land,
Behold as fierce a beard!
I have as huge an appetite,
As deep a kiss, my girl,
And somewhere, for the hand that seeks,
Perhaps a Sultan's pearl!

. Post-Roads

POST-ROADS that clapped with tympan heels
Of tilburies and whiskys rapidly spanking,
Where's now the tireless ghost of Ogilby?
Post-roads
That buoyed the rich and plunging springs
Of coaches vaster than Escurials,
Where now does Ogilby propel that Wheel,
What milestones does he pause to reprimand,
In what unmapped savanna of dumb shades?
Ye know not—ye are silent—brutish ducts
Numbed by the bastinadoes of iron boots,
Three hundred years asnore. Do you forget
The phaetons and fiacres, flys and breaks,
The world of dead men staring out of glass
That drummed upon your bones? Do you forget
Those nostrils oozing smoke, those floating tails,
Those criniers whipped with air?
And kidnapped lights,
Floats of rubbed yellow towed from window-panes,
Rushing their lozenges through headlong stones;
And smells of hackneys, mohair sour with damp,
Leather and slopped madeira, partridge-pies
Long-buried under floors; and yawning Fares
With bumping flap-dark spatulas of cards—
'Knave takes the ten . . . oh, God, I wish that it,
I wish that it was Guildford'
Ogilby
Did not forget, could not escape such ecstacies,
Even in the monasteries of mensuration,
Could not forget the roads that he had gone

In fog and shining air. Each line was joy,
Each computation a beatitude,
A diagram of Ogilby's eye and ear
With soundings for the nose. Wherefore I think,
Wherefore I think some English gentleman,
Some learned doctor of the steak-houses,
Ending late dinner, having strolled outside
To quell the frivolous hawthorn, may behold
There in the moonshine, rolling up an hill,
Steered by no fleshly hand, with spokes of light,
The Wheel—John Ogilby's Wheel—the WHEEL hiss by,
Measuring mileposts of eternity.

. Dutch Seacoast

No wind of Life may strike within
This little country's crystal bin,
Nor calendar compute the days
Tubed in their capsule of soft glaze.
Naked and rinsed, the bubble-clear
Canals of Amsterdam appear,
The blue-tiled turrets, china clocks
And glittering beaks of weathercocks.
A gulf of sweet and winking hoops
Whereon there ride poops
With flying mouths and fleeting hair
Of saints hung up like candles there—
Fox-coloured mansions, lean and tall,
That burst in air but never fall
Whose bolted shadows, row by row,
Float changeless on the stones below—
Sky full of ships, bay full of town,
A port of waters jellied brown:
Such is the world no tide may stir,
Sealed by the great cartographer.
O, could he but clap up like this
My decomposed metropolis,
Those other countries of the mind,
So tousled, dark and undefined!

. Mermaids

ONCE Mermaids mocked your ships
With wet and scarlet lips

And fish-dark difficult hips, Conquistador;
Then Ondines danced with Sirens on the shore,
Then from his cloudy stall, you heard the Kraken call,
And, mad with twisting flame, the Firedrake roar.
Such old-established Ladies
No mariner eyed askance,
But, coming on deck, would swivel his neck
To watch the darlings dance,
Or in the gulping dark of nights
Would cast his tranquil eyes
On singular kinds of Hermaphrodites
Without the least surprise.
Then portulano maps were scrolled
With compass-roses, green and gold,
That fired the stiff old Needle with their dyes
And wagged their petals over parchment skies.
Then seas were full of Dolphins' fins,
Full of swept bones and flying Jinns,
Beaches were filled with Anthropophagi
And Antient Africa with Palanquins.
Then sailors, with a flaked and rice-pale flesh
Staring from maps in sweet and poisoned places,
Diced the old Skeleton afresh
In brigs no bigger than their moon-bunched faces.
Those well-known and respected Harpies
Dance no more on the shore to and fro;
All that has ended long ago;
Nor do they sing outside the captain's porthole,
A proceeding fiercely reprehended
By the governors of the P. & O.
Nor do they tumble in the sponges of the moon
For the benefit of tourists in the First Saloon,
Nor fork their foaming lily-fins below the side
On the ranges of the ale-clear tide.
And scientists now, with binocular-eyes,
Remark in a tone of complacent surprise:
'Those pisciform mammals—pure Spectres, I fear—
Must be Doctor Gerbrandus's Mermaids, my dear!'
But before they can cause the philosopher trouble,
They are GONE like the cracking of a bubble.

. The Seafight

HERE in a gulf of golden leaf
You'll find a seafight ringed with flame;
Cannons that cry Tirduf, Tirduf,
Daggers that collop, guns that maim;
Jaws beaked with blood, men flung to hell,
Men blasting trumpets, men that flee,
Men crimped by death, and under all
Old patient, baleful, spying Sea—
Old Sea, that in a dicebox rolls
Their trundling skulls, their jacks of bone,
That sucks them out of broken hulls
When other mumbling mouths have gone—
Old hungry Sea, that holds our flesh
In the huge forceps of the storm,
And they are given to the fish
And we plucked forth, and we made warm.
But ye that kill, why heed the face
Of Ocean? Not alone you slay,
Since deeper seas are dammed in space
And fiercer storms can scream in clay;
Existence has as bitter teeth,
But we can always find a minute
For the festivities of death
Who sail upon this dangerous planet.

Kenneth Slessor

The Country Ride

EARTH which has known so many passages
Of April air, so many marriages
Of strange and lovely atoms breeding light,
Never may find again that lost delight.
In the sharp sky, the frosty deepnesses,
There are still birds to barb the silences,
There are still fields to meet the morning on,
But those who made them beautiful have gone.
Diamonds are flung by other smoking springs,
But where is he that cropped their offerings—
The pick-purse of enchantments, riding by,
Whistling his 'Go and Be Hanged, That's Twice Good bye'?
Who such a frolic pomp of blessing made
To kiss a little pretty dairymaid. . . .
And country wives with bare and earth-burnt knees,
And boys with beer, and smiles from balconies. . . .
The greensleeve girl, apprentice-equerry,
Tending great men with slant-eye mockery:
'Then Mr Sam says, 'Riding's hot,' he says,
Tasting their ale and waving twopences. . . .'
Into one gaze they swam, a moment swirled,
One fiery paintbox of the body's world—
Into Sam's eye, that flying bushranger—
Swinging their torches for earth's voyager.
And how the blood sang, and the senses leapt,
And cells that under tents of horn had slept
Rose dancing, at the black and faceless bale
Of gallows-flesh that had not girl nor ale!

Kenneth Slessor

The Ghost

'BEES of old Spanish wine
Pipe at this Inn to-night,
Music and candleshine
Fill the dim chambers
'Fans toss and ladies pace,
Flutes of cold metal blow,
Maidens like winds of lace
Tease the dark passages
'Run, you fat kitchen-boys,
Pasties in pyramids
Rise while your masters poise
Flagons with silver lids
'Ha! Let the platters fume,
Jars wink and bottles drip,
Staining with smoke and spume
Lips, tables, tapestries
'Wenches with tousled silk,
Mouths warm and bubble eyes,
Tumble those beds of milk
Under carved canopies
'Now let your lovers dive
Deep to that hurricane
O, to be there alive,
Breathing again!
So the ghost cried, and pressed to the dark pane,
Like a white leaf, his face . . . in vain . . . in vain..

Kenneth Slessor

The Knife

THE plough that marks on Harley's field
In flying earth its print
Throws up, like death itself concealed,
A fang of rosy flint,
A flake of stone, by fingers hewed
Whose buried bones are gone,
All gone, with fingers, hunters, food,
But still the knife lives on.
And well I know, when bones are nought,
The blade of stone survives—
I, too, from clods of aching thought,
Have turned up sharper knives.

Kenneth Slessor

The Nabob

(To the memory of William Hickey, Esq.)
COMING out of India with ten thousand a year
Exchanged for flesh and temper, a dry Faust
Whose devil barter with digestion, has he paid dear
For dipping his fingers in the Roc's valley?
Who knows? It's certain that he owns a rage,
A face like shark-skin, full of Yellow Jack,
And that unreckoning tyranny of age
That calls for turtles' eggs in Twickenham.
Sometimes, by moonlight, in a barge he'll float
Whilst hirelings blow their skulking flageolets,
Served by a Rajah in a golden coat
With pigeon-pie . . . Madeira . . . and Madeira . . .
Or in his Bon de Paris with silver frogs
He rolls puff-bellied in an equipage,
Elegant chariot, through a gulf of fogs
To dine on dolphin-steak with Post-Captains.
Who knows? There are worse things than steak, perhaps,
Worse things than oyster-sauces and tureens
And worlds of provender like painted maps
Pricked out with ports of claret and pitchcocked eels,
And hubbubs of billiard-matches, burnt champagne,
Beautiful ladies 'of the establishment'
Always in tempers, or melting out again,
Bailiffs and Burgundy and writs of judgment—
Thus to inhabit huge, lugubrious halls
Damp with the steam of entrees, glazed with smoke,
Raw drinking, greasy eating, bussing and brawls,
Drinking and eating and bursting into bed-chambers.
But, in the end, one says farewell to them;
And if he'd curse to-day—God damn your blood!—
Even his curses I'd not altogether condemn,
Not altogether scorn; and if phantoms ate—
Hickey, I'd say, sit down, pull up, set to:
Here's knife and fork, there's wine, and there's a barmaid.
Let us submerge ourselves in onion-soup,
Anything but this 'damned profession of writing'.

The Night Ride

Gas flaring on the yellow platform; voices running up and down;
Milk-tins in cold dented silver; half-awake I stare,
Pull up the blind, blink out - all sounds are drugged;
the slow blowing of passengers asleep;
engines yawning; water in heavy drips;
Black, sinister travellers, lumbering up the station,
one moment in the window, hooked over bags;
hurrying, unknown faces - boxes with strange labels -
all groping clumsily to mysterious ends,
out of the gaslight, dragged by private Fates,
their echoes die. The dark train shakes and plunges;
bells cry out, the night-ride starts again.
Soon I shall look out into nothing but blackness,
pale, windy fields, the old roar and knock of the rails
melts in dull fury. Pull down the blind. Sleep. Sleep
Nothing but grey, rushing rivers of bush outside.
Gaslight and milk-cans. Of Rapptown I recall nothing else.

Kenneth Slessor

The Old Play

I

IN an old play-house, in an old play,
In an old piece that has been done to death,
We dance, kind ladies, noble friends.
Observe our modishness, I pray,
What dignity the music lends.
Our sighs, no doubt, are only a doll's breath,
But gravely done—indeed, we're all devotion,
All pride and fury and pitiful elegance.
The importance of these antics, who may doubt?
Do you deny us the honour of emotion
Because another has danced this, our dance?
Let us jump it out.

II

IN the old play-house, in the watery flare
Of gilt and candlesticks, in a dim pit
Furred with a powder of corroded plush,
Paint fallen from angels floating in mid-air,
The gods in languor sit.
Their talk they hush,
Their eyes' bright stony suction
Freezes to silence as we come
With our proud masks to act.
Who knows? Our poor induction
May take the ear, may still, perchance, distract.
Unspeakable tedium!
Is there nothing new in this old theatre, nothing new?
Are there no bristles left to prick
With monstrous tunes the music-box of flesh?
Hopes dies away; the dance, absurd, antique,
Fatigues their monocles; the gods pursue
Their ageless colloquy afresh.

III

MARDUK his jewelled finger flips
To greet a friend. Bald-headed, lean,
He wets his red transparent lips,
Taps his pince-nez, and gapes unseen.
Hequet to Mama Cocha cranes
Her horny beak. 'These fools who drink

Hemlock with love deserve their pains.
They're so conventional, I think.'
Limply she ceases to employ
Her little ivory spying-lens.
'I much prefer the Egyptian boy
Who poisoned Thua in the fens.'

IV

BUT who are we to sneer,
Who are we to count the rhymes
Or the authorized postures of the heart
Filched from a dynasty of mimes?
Each has a part;
We do not hear
The mockers at our little, minion ardours,
Our darling hatreds and adulteries,
Our griefs and ecstasies,
Our festivals and murders.
And who are we, who are we,
That would despise the lawful ceremonies
Condoned by the coming of five Christs,
By the beating of an infinitude of breasts,
By Adam's tears, by the dead man's pennies,
Who are we?

V

AND who are we to argue with our lutes,
How would we change the play?
Are we Lucifers with hell in our boots?
There are no Lucifers to-day.
By no means. It is never like this,
Never like this. One does not fall.
How should we find, like Lucifer, an abyss?
Never like that at all.
And who are we to pester Azrael,
Importunate for funeral plumes
And all the graces Death can sell—
Death in cocked feathers, Death in drawing-rooms,
Death with a sword-cane, stabbing down the stairs?
It is not like this at all,
Never, never like this.
Death is the humblest of affairs,
It is really incredibly small:
The dropping of a degree or less,

And tightening of a vein, such gradual things.
And then
How should we guess
The slow Capuan poison, the soft strings,
Of Death with leather jaws come tasting men?

VI

CAMAZOTZ and Anubis
Go no more to the coulisses.
Once they'd wait for hours,
Grateful for a few excuses,
Hiding their snouts in flowers,
Merely as a tribute to the Muses.
Those were the days of serenades.
Prima donnas and appointments.
Now they think longer of pomades,
Less of the heart and more of ointments.
Anubis dabbles with the world;
A charming man, perhaps a trifle sinister,
But with his stars on, and his tendrils curled,
Really, you'd take him for the Persian Minister.
But Camazotz has grown jaded
And likes an arm-chair in the stalls,
Being by brute necessity persuaded
That perfect love inevitably palls;
Such the divine adversity
Of passion twisting on its stem,
Seeking a vague and cloudier trophy
Beyond the usual diadem.
'More balconies! More lilac-trees!
Let us go out to the private bar.
I am so tired of young men like these,
Besides, I note he is carrying a guitar.'

VII

'SHANG YA! I want to be your friend'—
That was the fashion in our termitary,
In the gas-lit cellules of virtuous young men—
'Shang Ya! I want to be your friend.'
Often I think, if we had gone then
Waving the torches of demoniac theory,
We should have melted stone, astonished God,
Overturned kings, exalted scullions,
And ridden the hairy beast outside

Into our stables to be shod—
Such was the infection of our pride,
Almost a confederation of Napoleons.
Though in Yuèh it is usual
To behead a cock and dog,
Such was not considered binding
In our bloodless decalogue.
But the tail-piece to the chapter
We so fierily began
Resembled an old song-book
From the golden days of Han.
Ours was the Life-Parting
Which made the poets so elegantly tragic.
On and on, always on and on,
By fears and families, by a sudden plague of logic,
By an agreeable ossification,
By a thousand tiny particles of space
Widening the fissures of our brotherhood,
We were impelled from place to place,
Dismembered by necessitude.
Who could have called that soft, adhesive nag
We bounced our lives on, a wild horse?
We were given palfreys in the place of stallions;
As for the kings and scullions,
We should, no doubt, have brought them to our flag
Had we not forgotten the prescribed discourse.
On and on, driven by flabby whips,
To the Nine Lands, to the world's end,
We have been scattered by the sea-captains of ships,
Crying no more with bright and childish lips,
Even if we wanted to pretend,
'Shang Ya! Let me be your friend.'

VIII

THIS is really a Complete Life and Works,
The memorial of a great man
Who was born with Excalibur in his fist
And finished by asking questions.
Woken by a star falling on his tiles,
He rushed out, defying devils—
'Come forth, you monster!' Only neighbours peeped
Fish-eyed at this ferocity.
Repeatedly inviting the rogue to stand,

He hunted with a naked sword,
But though general admiration and sympathy were expressed,
The scoundrel was not detected.
At last, regrettable to state, he stopped.
Why honour a coward with pursuit?
So he began to use Excalibur in the kitchen,
Or on occasion as a hay-rake.
How did he know that Time at length would gnaw
The rascal's face with quicklime?
Gradually the print faded, a fog blew down,
He even forgot the nature of the outrage.
However, he managed to live very tolerably,
And now, in a substantial villa,
Having saved enough to purchase an annuity,
Is piously glad he never found anyone.
But Gutumdug and Vukub-Cakix,
Having already seen many great men,
May surely be pardoned if with foundered chins
They doze a little. . . .
Phew . . . heu. . . .
Doze a little.

IX

A BIRD sang in the jaws of night,
Like a star lost in space—
O, dauntless molecule to smite
With joy that giant face!
I heard you mock the lonely air,
The bitter dark, with song,
Waking again the old Despair
That had been dead so long,
That had been covered up with clay
And never talked about,
So none with bony claws could say
They'd dig my coffin out.
But you, with music clear and brave,
Have shamed the buried thing;
It rises dripping from the grave
And tries in vain to sing.
O, could the bleeding mouth reply,
The broken flesh but moan,
The tongues of skeletons would cry,
And Death push back his stone!

X

MY strings I break, my breast I beat,
The immemorial tears repeat,
But Beli, yawning in the pit,
Is not at all impressed by it.
Fresh lachrymations to endure!
He champs a gilded comfiture—
'The song was stale five Acts ago;
Besides, it isn't Life, you know.'

XI

BUT Life we know, but Life we know,
Is full of visions and vertigo,
Full of God's blowpipes belching rubies forth,
And God's ambiguous grape-shot maiming saints,
Full of emancipations and restraints—
Thou poor, bewildered earth!
Thou givest us neither doom nor expiation,
Nor palm-trees bursting into praise;
Blow down thy fruit, we snatch our stomachful,
Thou turnest not thy gaze,
Knowing we do but rob a little time;
A flight of air; thou takest back the spoils.
O, for some thunder on our brother's crime,
Even a little harmless flagellation
Or a few miserable boils!
But thou! Thou dost not turn thy face
Either to buffet or explore.
The devils bask, the martyrs weep.
Art thou too proud in a high place,
Or too befuddled in thy sleep?
Art thou too languorous to roar?

XII

YOU that we raised
To the high places,
With painted eyes
And cloudy faces,
You that are named,
But no one finds,
Made out of nothing
By men's minds—
Be true to us,
Play us not false;

Be cruel, O Gods,
Not fabulous.
You were our statues
Cut from space,
Gorgon's eyes
And dragon's face;
Fail us not,
You that we made,
When the stars go out
And the suns fade.
You were our hope
Death to bless—
Leave us not crying
In emptiness.

Kenneth Slessor

Thief Of The Moon

Thief of the moon, thou robber of old delight,
Thy charms have stolen the star-gold, quenched the moon-
Cold, cold are the birds that, bubbling out of night,
Cried once to my ears their unremembered tune-
Dark are those orchards, their leaves no longer shine,
No orange's gold is globed like moonrise there-
O thief of the earth's old loveliness, once mine,
Why dost thou waste all beauty to make thee fair?

Break, break thy strings, thou lutanists of earth,
Thy musics touch me not-let midnight cover
With pitchy seas those leaves of orange and lime,
I'll not repent. The world's no longer worth
One smile from thee, dear pirate of place and time,
Thief of old loves that haunted once thy lover!

Kenneth Slessor

Thieves' Kitchen

GOOD roaring pistol-boys, brave lads of gold,
Good roistering easy maids, blown cock-a-hoop
On floods of tavern-steam, I greet you! Drunk
With wild Canary, drowned in wines of old,
I'll swear your round, red faces dive and swim
Like clouds of fire-fish in a waxen tide,
And these are seas of smoke we thieves behold.
Yet I've a mind I know what arms enchain
With flesh my shoulders . . . aye, and what warm legs
Wind quickly into mine . . . 'tis no pale mermaid,
No water-wench that floats in a smoky main
Betwixt the tankard and my knees . . . in faith,
I know thee, Joan, and by the beard of God,
I'll prove to-night thy mortal parts again!
Leap, leap, fair vagabonds, your lives are short . . .
Dance firelit in your cauldron-fumes, O thieves,
Ram full your bellies with spiced food, gulp deep
Those goblets of thick ale—yea, feast and sport,
Ye Cyprian maids—lie with great, drunken rogues,
Jump by the fire—soon, soon your flesh must crawl
And Tyburn flap with birds, long-necked and swart!

Kenneth Slessor

To A Friend

ADAM, because on the mind's roads
Your mouth is always in a hurry,
Because you know odes
And ways to make a curry,
Because you fall in love with words
And whistle beauty forth to kiss them,
And blow the tails from China birds
Whilst I continually miss them,
Because you top my angry best
At billiards, fugues or pulling corks out,
And whisk a fritter from its nest
Before there's time to hand the forks out,
Because you saw the Romans wink,
Because your senses dance to metre,
Because, no matter what I drink,
You'll hold at least another litre,
Because you've got a gipsy's eye
That melts the rage of catamountains,
And metaphors that pass me by
Burst from your lips in lovely fountains,
Because you've bitten the harsh foods
Of life, grabbed every dish that passes,
And walked amongst the multitudes
Without the curse of looking-glasses,
Because I burn the selfsame flame
No falls of dirty earth may smother,
Oh, in your Abbey of Thélème,
Enlist me as a serving-brother!

Kenneth Slessor

To Myself

AFTER all, you are my rather tedious hero;
It is impossible (damn it!) to avoid
Looking at you through keyholes.
But come! At least you might try to be
Even, let us say, a Graceful Zero
Or an Eminent Molecule, gorgeously employed.
Have you not played Hamlet's father in the wings
Long enough, listening to poets groan,
Seeking a false catharsis
In flesh not yours, through doors ajar
In the houses of dead kings,
In the gods' tombs, in the coffins of cracked stone?
Have you not poured yourself, thin fluid mind,
Down the dried-up canals, the powdering creeks,
Whose waters none remember
Either to praise them or condemn,
Whose fabulous cataracts none can find
Save one who has forgotten what he seeks?
Your uncle, the Great Harry, left after him
The memory of a cravat, a taste in cheese,
And a way of saying 'I am honoured.'
Such things, when men and beasts have gone,
Smell sweetly to the seraphim.
Believe me, fool, there are worse gifts than these.

Kenneth Slessor

To The Poetry Of Hugh Mccrae

UNCLES who burst on childhood, from the East,
Blown from air, like bearded ghosts arriving,
And are, indeed, a kind of guessed-at ghost
Through mumbled names at dinner-tables moving,
Bearers of parrots, bonfires of blazing stones,
Their pockets fat with riches out of reason,
Meerschaum and sharks'-teeth, ropes of China coins,
And weeds and seeds and berries blowzed with poison—
So, from the baleful Kimberleys of thought,
From the mad continent of dreams, you wander,
Spending your trophies at our bloodless feet,
Mocking our fortunes with more desperate plunder;
So with your boomerangs of rhyme you come,
With blossoms wrenched from sweet and deadly branches,
And we, pale Crusoes in the moment's tomb,
Watch, turn aside, and touch again those riches,
Nor ask what beaches of the mind you trod,
What skies endured, and unimagined rivers,
Or whiteness trenched by what mysterious tide,
And aching silence of the Never-Nevers;
Watch, turn aside, and touch with easy faith
Your chest of miracles, but counting nothing,
Or dumbly, that you stole them out of death,
Out of death's pyramids, to prove us breathing.
We breathe, who beat the sides of emptiness,
We live, who die by statute in steel hearses,
We dance, whose only posture gives us grace
To squeeze the greasy udders of our purses—
(Look in this harsher glass, and I will show you
The daylight after the darkness, and the morning
After the midnight, and after the night the day
After the year after, terribly returning).
We live by these, your masks and images,
We breathe in this, your quick and borrowed body;
But you take passage on the ruffian seas,
And you are vanished in the dark already.

Kenneth Slessor

Toilet Of A Dandy

TRANSPORTS of filed nerves; a wistful cough;
One sensual hairbrush reluctantly concludes
The Great Harry's excruciations and beatitudes,
Delicately and gravely putting things on and off.
Shouting through shirts, dipping out liquid flowers,
All the accoutrements and mysteries,
The awful engines of the toilet—presses, trees,
And huge voluptuous bootjacks, for two shuddering hours.
But in the glass navel of his dressing-room,
Nests of diminishing mirrors, Narcissus peers,
Too nicely shined, parting the cracked, refracted sneers,
And meets the Corpse in Evening Dress; Caruso's tomb.

Kenneth Slessor

Trade Circular

(To the Poets' Ladies)

SHALL I give you the Bourbon-sugars
Of sherry and yellow sky
And a girl in a country curricule
Merrily bowling by?
Or darkness flying with crystals,
And the great Miser, Night,
Rubbing a mountain's breast-bone
With an old rind of light?
Wake up the handcuffed angels,
Muster the marble kings,
Till the blood swims in their bodies
And the stone captain sings?
Ask for a cage of comets,
Poets will give you this—
But if you should ask them for nothing,
They'll see how dead girls kiss.

Kenneth Slessor

Undine

IN Undine's mirror the cutpurse found
Five candlesticks by magic drowned,
Like boughs of silver . . . and pale as death,
Biting his beard, till the rogue's own breath
Shook all their gourds of fire, he stopped,
Eyed the gilt baskets, gaped half-round
Then down to the floor his pistol dropped
No sound in the dark rooms . . . the clank
Of metal and beam died fast . . . and flank
Pressed in strange fear to Undine's bed,
The robber stared long, and bent his head
To that soft wave . . . then hand on silk,
Plumbed the warm valley where nightly sank
Undine the water-maid, caved in milk.
And over those pools, the rogue could smell
Rich essences globed and stoppered well
On Undine's table . . . and row by row,
Jars of green china foamed stiff with snow,
And crystal trays and bottles of stone
Bowed like black slaves to that ivory shell,
The body of Undine . . . but Undine was gone.
Only below the candles' gleam,
In one small casket of waxen cream
With sidelong eyes the thief could follow
That rosy trough, the printed hollow
Of Undine's finger . . . then out to the street
He sprawled and fled . . . but still on the beam
His pistol waited for Undine's feet!

Kenneth Slessor

Vesper-Song Of The Reverend Samuel Marsden

MY cure of souls, my cage of brutes,
Go lick and learn at these my boots!
When tainted highways tear a hole,
I bid my cobbler welt the sole.
O, ye that wear the boots of Hell,
Shall I not welt a soul as well?
O, souls that leak with holes of sin,
Shall I not let God's leather in,
Or hit with sacramental knout
Your twice-convicted vileness out?
Lord, I have sung with ceaseless lips
A tinker's litany of whips,
Have graved another Testament
On backs bowed down and bodies bent.
My stripes of jewelled blood repeat
A scarlet Grace for holy meat.
Not mine, the Hand that writes the weal
On this, my vellum of puffed veal,
Not mine, the glory that endures,
But Yours, dear God, entirely Yours.
Are there not Saints in holier skies
Who have been scourged to Paradise?
O, Lord, when I have come to that,
Grant there may be a Heavenly Cat
With twice as many tails as here—
And make me, God, Your Overseer.
But if the veins of Saints be dead,
Grant me a whip in Hell instead,
Where blood is not so hard to fetch.
But I, Lord, am Your humble wretch.

Kenneth Slessor

Waters

THIS Water, like a sky that no one uses,
Air turned to stone, ridden by stars and birds
No longer, but with clouds of crystal swimming,
I'll not forget, nor men can lose, though words
Dissolve with music, gradually dimming.
So let them die; whatever the mind loses,
Water remains, cables and bells remain,
Night comes, the sailors burn their riding-lamps,
And strangers, pitching on our graves their camps,
Will break through branches to the surf again.
Darkness comes down. The Harbour shakes its mane,
Glazed with a leaf of amber; lights appear
Like thieves too early, dropping their swag by night,
Red, gold and green, down trap-doors glassy-clear,
And lanterns over Pinchgut float with light
Where they so long have lain.
All this will last, but I who gaze must go
On water stranger and less clear, and melt
With flesh away; and stars that I have felt,
And loved, shall shine for eyes I do not know.

Kenneth Slessor

Wild Grapes

The old orchard, full of smoking air,
Full of sour marsh and broken boughs, is there,
But kept no more by vanished Mulligans,
Or Hartigans, long drowned in earth themselves,
Who gave this bitter fruit their care.

Here's where the cherries grew that birds forgot,
And apples bright as dogstars; now there is not
An apple or a cherry; only grapes,
But wild ones, Isabella grapes they're called,
Small, pointed, black, like boughs of musket-shot.

Eating their flesh, half-savage with black fur.
Acid and gipsy-sweet, I thought of her,
Isabella, the dead girl, who has lingered on
Defiantly when all have gone away,
In an old orchard where swallows never stir.

Isabella grapes, outlaws of a strange bough,
That in their harsh sweetness remind me somehow
Of dark hair swinging and silver pins,
A girl half-fierce, half-melting, as these grapes,
Kissed here -- or killed here -- but who remembers now?

Kenneth Slessor

William Street

The red globe of light, the liquor green,
the pulsing arrows and the running fire
spilt on the stones, go deeper than a stream;
You find this ugly, I find it lovely

Ghosts' trousers, like the dangle of hung men,
in pawn-shop windows, bumping knee by knee,
but none inside to suffer or condemn;
You find this ugly, I find it lovely.

Smells rich and rasping, smoke and fat and fish
and puffs of paraffin that crimp the nose,
of grease that blesses onions with a hiss;
You find it ugly, I find it lovely.

The dips and molls, with flip and shiny gaze
(death at their elbows, hunger at their heels)
Ranging the pavements of their pasturage;
You Find this ugly, I find it lovely .

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Winter Dawn

AT five I wake, rise, rub on the smoking pane
A port to see—water breathing in the air,
Boughs broken. The sun comes up in a golden stain,
Floats like a glassy sea-fruit. There is mist everywhere,
White and humid, and the Harbour is like plated stone,
Dull flakes of ice. One light drips out alone,
One bead of winter-red, smouldering in the steam,
Quietly over the roof-tops—another window
Touched with a crystal fire in the sun's gullies,
One lonely star of the morning, where no stars gleam.
Far away on the rim of this great misty cup,
The sun gilds the dead suburbs as he rises up,
Diamonds the wind-cocks, makes glitter the crusted spikes
On moss-drowned gables. Now the tiles drip scarlet-wet,
Swim like birds' paving-stones, and sunlight strikes
Their watery mirrors with a moister rivulet,
Acid and cold. Here lie those mummied Kings,
Men sleeping in houses, embalmed in stony coffins,
Till the Last Trumpet calls their galleries up,
And the suburbs rise with distant murmurings.
O buried dolls, O men sleeping invisible there,
I stare above your mounds of stone, lean down,
Marooned and lonely in this bitter air,
And in one moment deny your frozen town,
Renounce your bodies—earth falls in clouds away,
Stones lose their meaning, substance is lost in clay,
Roofs fade, and that small smoking forgotten heap,
The city, dissolves to a shell of bricks and paper,
Empty, without purpose, a thing not comprehended,
A broken tomb, where ghosts unknown sleep.
And the least crystal weed, shaken with frost,
The furred herbs of silver, the daisies round-eyed and tart,
Painted in antic china, the smallest night-flower tossed
Like a bright penny on the lawn, stirs more my heart.
Strikes deeper this morning air, than mortal towers
Dried to a common blindness, fainter than flowers,
Fordone, extinguished, as the vapours break,
And dead in the dawn. O Sun that kills with life,
And brings to breath all silent things—O Dawn,

Waken me with old earth, keep me awake!

Kenneth Slessor