# **Classic Poetry Series**

# **Kenneth Slessor**

- poems -

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#### **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 thieve 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 leeched 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 ectasies 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, photoes of many different things And different curioes 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.

## **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..."

## **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.

## 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.
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## **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.

#### Thief of the Moon

Thief of the moon, thou robber of old delight,
Thy charms have stolen the star-gold, quenched the moonCold, cold are the birds that, bubbling out of night,
Cried once to my ears their unremembered tuneDark are those orchards, their leaves no longer shine,
No orange's gold is globed like moonrise thereO 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!

#### **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.