

Collected Poems

ANDREW TAYLOR was born in Warnambool, Victoria, and studied at Melbourne University. He is the author of twelve books of poetry, the libretti of two operas and, with Beate Josephi, translator of an anthology of German and Austrian women's poetry. He was regional winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1986, and won the Western Australian Premier's Prize for poetry in 1995. He is a Member of the Order of Australia and was until recently Professor of English at Edith Cowan University.

The works of Andrew Taylor

POETRY

The Cool Change
Ice Fishing
The Invention of Fire
The Cat's Chin and Ears: A Bestiary
Parabolas: Prose Poems
The Crystal Absences, the Trout
Selected Poems 1960–1980
Travelling
Selected Poems 1960–1985
Folds in the Map
Sandstone
Götterämmerung Café
The Stone Threshold

TRANSLATIONS

Miracles of Disbelief with Beate Josephi

OPERA LIBRETTI

The Letters of Amalie Dietrich
Barossa

CRITICAL WORKS

Reading Australian Poetry

Collected Poems

ANDREW TAYLOR



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For Travis and Sarah

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The Cool Change (1971)

Prologue

*My new arm measures its season
by the white watch mark at the wrist.
Already, without reason,
the weather like an alchemist
turns into gold the matter of my arm,
tracing the shape of time across the bone.*

The Mere Repetition of Weather

It seems this summer has no end to it:
no freshened autumn and the fall of leaves,
no keen, lucider air, no break of showers,
haze fostering crispness . . . What intelligence
intact of grit and sweat and destroyed lawn
marshals this column of identical days,
the dust in squadrons looming from the lawn,
the elm leaves in incinerators before
summer's statutory end? Blue girls
from Our Lady of Mercy urged on by a nun
play softball, but whistle as I pass.
They'd rather lie in the shade, abandonedly,
their legs apart, skirts up, hotly asleep.
It must be an intelligence that finds
summer the apex of all ripening,
the apogee of delight, the year's desert?
So splendid imbecile repetition becomes
each day a heavier sweatier malady
as under a stark sun within a park
blue girls whistle dispiritedly at me.

The Guest

Under the Pyramids it has never rained –
not recently, at least. If a locust flew
off course for some plague, maybe, landed inside
where only the Pharaoh, slaves and toiling tourists
are meant to be, and died there, in the night –
because it's always night there, and it's cool –
his little husk would stay, it would dry out
like a coffee bean, only hollow. No-one would want it.
No-one would come with slaves, torches, crowbars,
nor with muttering locals, solar topees, crowbars,
nor with Ford Foundation Grants, camelhair brushes and
crowbars,
and sweat and hack and drill and drive themselves silly
in the Nile Hilton until they'd gouged a way
through ages of rock and rumour to where he lay.
In state, hardly his fashion, a thousand years,
two thousand, ten thousand, his little house
built out of glass would remain in his dark corner –
for it never rains there. And his host,
Master of all Mankind, something of a God –
who knows where he has got to, with his gold?

A Fly by Night Faces the Light

Even the best friends become
sometimes as the years encroach
a memory of weather. Now
someone lets the full moon escape
and his red face
mocks, a celebrate cartoon,
my wish of welcoming you back
with due solemnity. Let me say
I want the sun shining on your return.

There was the wet day once
we sheltered in Elizabeth St.
There were many days in pubs
it undoubtedly rained.
That fly before me on its back,
stranded, wire legs pointing up,
doesn't despair - it's waiting there
for the just world to right again.

Upright it washes, bides its time.
You, in the northern hemisphere
have found your feet,
taken most of the ground
from our endeavour. Now you are back
the moon, a festival balloon,
decorates North Fitzroy.
I get off my back; I try to fly.

The season's right, it's summer everywhere,
your season, your example,
almost, I'd say, your influence.
It's idle to confess
it won't last, and to pray

it stay for you is hardly common sense.
Still, truthfully, it can be said
one's friends, manifestly, make one's day.

Looking Back

In the summer streets the girls' shoulders are brown,
their legs are slimmer where the sun's fingers have reached,
their hair is bleached and turned the colour of sand
and their walk is looser, easier. All around
is evidence of salt, of swimming, and the beach –
the easy season, when life is fully in hand.

Being perhaps of a more melancholy cast,
perhaps less heavily indebted to the sun,
perhaps merely older, merely perhaps more staid,
this season makes me think back over my past.
Many things were advanced, and many more begun
in the hot weather, and a great many gainsaid.

I'm thinking now of one particular girl.
What she is now is far beyond my reckoning.
I taught her some Italian; as a memory
she left me a few French phrases. That is all
we wrote about on Christmas cards. Yet something
more remains – a withered possibility?

She's raising children, wanting a divorce.
What guilt I feel surely is egotistical?
She was as slim and blond as any of these
and the Spanish sun had kindled strong in her voice.
My guilt, for being vain, isn't any less real:
though it's high summer, my conscience is not at ease.

There was another, silent, anxious, depressed,
almost not there at times, she was so withdrawn.
I made her talk, I opened her like a flower
or like a book, whichever simile is best.
And when I left, she was in no way forewarned –
it was a "swift, clean break", the matter of an hour.

To talk about leaving is a quite facile thing.
But looking back at it is a tougher skill
than quitting itself. I settled the past quick
as my train left London. Whose is the questioning
that one girl who was keen and beautiful and well
now is as singular as a rotted stick?

Not mine. Yet had I stayed, would that have occurred?
This is the burden of the season for one
who is too young to forget. So I'd pray
that all those summer girls, their passions stirred,
those ductile reeds quickening to the sun,
count well the cost, and shrewdly measure their day.

San Domenico

Assassins sheltered in these doors. Whores
were caught and floored against the rough
palm-greased walls. These stones'
antiquity atones with rain and frost scars,
harbours savagery.

The belltower wrings from the meagre sky
little attention. Sweat that shakes
those exclamations out
is sucked by stone, the frayed rope
gropes up, writhes the message towards heaven.

Its end is soiled. Some day
replaced. In this monastery
disgrace suicided some three monks
also the abbot. They had assumed
apparently the wrong habit.

The guides' old joke leers through the cloisters.
Clothed in stone, bolstered
plastered, wasted, what piety
survives wrestles with the harvest.
Their flock hardly grubbies the benches.

Their graveyard grows and bleaches.
Adepts find the path precarious
and short through it to the right place.
There, in its shrine, a youthful monk
almost raped me. But he was too nervous.

Letter to Hugh

June 1966

Where you might be now I've no idea –
no special friend, really a chance acquaintance
as easily parted with as met – yet here
something has travelled with me all this distance
– no further's possible – and tonight
over a year apart it's just woken:
Lunch on your terrace, where June sunlight
first tried in sweat all that could be spoken
till Borromini's corkscrew spilt the rest.
“The doomed are most eloquent in their sinking”
but we clearly weren't of that depressed
select minority. I left thinking
all that had brought me there still unexpressed.

Now I know more. Heat that shut us up,
dried words, substituted wine
and chat of women, the broken cup
that flourished mint, that led me to examine
the sea-bed oil-vase tapestried with lime
which in some sunken galley snail or weed
had laid as sure foundation but which time
alone of all their building had decreed
should stay – that heat had its own say.

Now that winter grips me, the milk-cart
shrills in frost, the gaunt trees bare their nerve,
we see we're granted just what we deserve.
Where you are now is more than I can guess,
even perhaps care. Surely it's enough
those halted conversations prove that there
exist in the soul's distances and stress
moments in which memory proves tough
and will outbully absences like this.

Delayed Spring

A sewer vent vibrates with cold
in the late day, a fat pigeon
shuffles across the slates towards
a draughty chimney top, which leaks
smoke and a blur of warm air
over our wall. Spongy with rain
the clouds drag on the city. Nearby
a small voice shouts and is silent,
shouts again, playing its tired game
over and over, selling papers.
And is silent. Only the traffic's vague
unease, impatience, and the bird's
grotesquely plump indifference
hoarsely expressed, disturb the cold.
Blossom is out, even leaves
crinkle, emulate, yet it is not
spring this evening, where everything
shrinks from being what it is. Only
the air grows, crystalline and huge
as a late ray horizontally
catches the Town Hall tower out
in gold – too large, too upright, and
too much itself amongst excessive cold.

The Bell Birds

MORNING

The bell birds pip behind the tractor shed
like echo-sounders in a depth of cool.
The rising wind behind the rising sun
sluices their thin precision from the trees
to where my hot-eyed cat glares at the sun.
You never see the bell birds in the trees.
A kookaburra rattles into sound,
a distant rooster stretches, a car starts,
the first flies, heavy with sleep, bang at the glass
and my cat stares, sleepily alert. Beyond,
the sea's all shine and holiday and glitter,
a fish-bright, fish-scale flash of fins and fire.
Then sun breaks from the trees, the wind subsides:
it's yet another summer, sweltering;
the sea turns blue, turns deep, undiveable.
Sadly the echo-sounders in the gully,
like tiny submarines, unseen, unfound,
repeat their morse or message or mere sound:
they do it each day. My cat moves to the shade;
heat glazes his eyes – he'd rather sleep than prey.

AFTER LUNCH

Hanging like leaves or washing or parched peel
in gullies where the whir of the flies is thick
as the lowest tide fixed farthest at its retreat,
fixed farthest and fast, the bellbirds are not seen,
their morning signals silenced before the flies,
their utter notes not uttered nor signalised.
Somewhere under the fence my cat's gone off
into the scrub, the tea-tree wilderness,
the tall trunks of the eucalyptus, the litter
of fallen bark, the twigs, the ants, the flies;
most probably it sleeps, its nose pressed close
to small torn animals, the prey of dreams.
The distant town's gone fishing, or dozes too.
Even the distant mutter of a pump
continuous in the sullen heat of the day,
hefting the tinsel water to the frail
deliberate thirst of cattle along the hill,
is muted, succumbing to the heat.
Only the sea winds lazily at the beach,
persistent as a fly drones in the heat.

EVENING

The rising tide of shade in the thin gullies
broadens and brims. Darkness deepens, filling
the slotted gulf behind the machinery shed.
Further below the hill, beside the water,
shadow encroaches from the road and floods
the tea-tree tangles and the mangrove swamps,
the long-legged jetties, the lean power-boats nosed
indolently at the mud, the fishing smack
heavy with age, anachronism and dusk.
The note of the bellbirds rises as the dark
settles and rises, a thin stick, a twig,
a pip of meaning in the rising gloom,
a shoot, a shot, insistent, echoing
from a deeper, earlier sunset, back
from the road by the water, from the retired boats.
After the day's drought they're voyaging,
after the day's drought, the heat, they're sending
radar doves beyond their dormitory arcs,
beyond my cat's glazed satisfactory purr,
beyond his claws, into the night, out there.

The Cool Change

We say: After a hot day the cool change
is like a fresh shower and the spirit stands
renewed and alert despite the summer thunder.
Despite the summer thunder and despite
the jagged fulgurations of dry rage
over the Brighton yacht club and beyond
the enclosed alerted small boat anchorage,
despite the ominous clashings in the trees,
after a hot day and a sea like slate
the cool change comes like mother with light skirts
sweeping the torpid gulls from their malaise.
Like mother with cool drinks the cool change gathers
families out of the tea-tree and the water,
moving with her urgency among hampers
caressing, hurrying, to her mysterious ends . . .
The cool change sweeps us back into Sunday night,
the long drive home, the children to be fed,
bathed, put to bed. It makes us parents again.
Later we think of the sullen sea, the obtuse
and adolescent arrogance of the sun,
the dominant zero, pointless, tyrannous.

Hanover Street

The flags strain stiff as plywood in the wind –
over the continent it seems to have come
to drive its chill into my finger-joints
and numb their progress over the blank page.
The planes, re-routed so they pass above
in the white wind, strain audibly to land,
the uncurled clouds drive silently, steadily on;
no rain, no premonition of rain, just wind
and cold. A peppertree flings like a boa,
two pencil cypresses tight as a spring contrive
to sway swiftly, uneasily, but they sway –
their acknowledgment to the season. Only grey
stone sawn crudely into blocks stands straight
and stubbornly upright, earth's element
rooted against its old antagonist.

The builder and the architect who raised
this grey colonial house, as burgherly
as a warehouse, and most fashionable once,
traced in its lines an elegance of strength,
a confidence that what it stood for was right,
against the cold air blowing day in, day out.

The Very Beautiful Winter Day in the Park

It could be in a park, it could be
half way across a frosty morning
under elms, a very English fringe
of oaks further, and tenuous birches,
making this morning as beautiful,
as European, as ready for snow,
the air as purified, purged of all soft
evasions, that it comes to you
you have nowhere to go, you are in a park,
superbly cultivated, the sky
an advertisement for itself, the industrious sun
immaculately polishing each twig, each stem,
and you may as well sit where you are, put down
your bag, and not move again, but study
it all turn into midday, the twigs
turn black, the regardless shadows lean
and lengthen the other way, the Greek
and the Hebrew schoolboys dawdle with their girls,
the old men in their greatcoats leave
their empty sherry bottles, the strange
couple of indeterminate age
and nationality leave off their talk
and go separate ways, lights come on,
the trees dissolve in the dusk, and why,
you ask yourself, why should you move,
you have nowhere to go, nobody
expects you, the shadows shift, the dark forms
into files, columns, which lurch, emerge
closer to the left, to the right, a cat cries
and its cry is savage, a shadow jumps,
crackles behind you, you get up
not looking behind you, you get up
and get out with whatever dignity
you have from that park, which just that morning
made your direction beautifully clear,

made everything very clear indeed
that you've nowhere to go, and you may as well
get out because there's no place for you here.