

The Paradoxes of Water

ROD MORAN was born in 1952 in Seymour, a small country town about 120 kilometres north of Melbourne. His father was a professional soldier who served during the Korean War, and the family moved between the East and West coasts of Australia over the years as his postings necessitated.

This was to have a lasting effect on Moran's sensibilities, attuning him to the oceans, rivers, bush hinterlands and cities he encountered as he grew on both sides of the continent.

His father's experiences—including his time in Korea and the earlier loss of his older brother as a POW at the Sandakan death camp in British North Borneo during World War II—infused Moran with an, at times adversarial, awareness of profound political and historical issues to do with the carnage of the 20th century.

A graduate of the University of Melbourne, Moran's first poetry was published by *The Bulletin* magazine, a key journal in Australian literary history, when he was just 18 years old. He has had three volumes of poetry published, *High Rise Sniper*, *Against the Era* and *Listening to the Train Passing*. His verse has been anthologised nationally and internationally, including by Oxford University Press.

In addition, he is the author of two substantial works of Western Australian history, *Massacre Myth* and *Sex, Maiming and Murder*. The latter was short-listed for the 2003 Margaret Metcalf Award for excellence in archival research.

Moran is also well-known as the biographer of Tom Gray, a highly-regarded identity of Aboriginal descent from WA's Pilbara region, killed fighting pro-Nazi elements of the French Foreign Legion in Syria in 1941. Moran is also a prize-winning journalist.

He has worked as a labourer, school-teacher, full-time union official, academic, and community newspaper publisher. He is currently literary editor of *The West Australian*, the capital city's morning daily.

The Paradoxes of Water

SELECTED AND NEW POEMS 1970–2005

ROD MORAN



CAMBRIDGE

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*To my darling wife Lyn, with the splendours of the blue sea-wind
in your golden hair, my love—forever.*

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Acknowledgments

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I also wish to acknowledge Artlook Books, Fremantle Arts Centre Press and Platypus Press, the publishers of my first three volumes of poetry.

High Rise Sniper 1970–1980

Above all to Lyn and Peter

Chemical Worker

For Ron

One day, I said, there will occur
a great scraping out of your gut,
sulphides and the muck of caustic.
(We catch rank eels at the factory step
where our acid kills rich river weed).
A surgeon will scalp your best lung,
a mortician deliver cosmetic lies
to your only funeral: you will smile
like a cheap wreath. He replied:
death weighs heavily upon the living,
it is best to lay dead looking robust.
And recognise this substantial fact:
power breathes from their waking mouths,
(command, complaint, terse demand),
and this pure acid, like some cruel psalm,
gives us daily bread: remember, they too
have a place in the maggot's equation.
Besides, at the last moment I know
that breath is always short: lungs collapse
like anemones choked with oil.
As for prayers: I say them like insurance.

Country Town

A possum skates across
the shimmering street,
finches sizzle in the blackberry.
A koala, evolution's
sleepy dead end,
chews bitter leaves
all day long, dozing
high in the ivory gums.
Crows shimmer green
and black on dead boughs.

Farmers with eyes
the colour of dust,
arms like twisted banksia,
solemn as crows at a carcass,
perch outside the pub,
faces hard against
the granite twilight.
The talk is of fences
and paddock gates.
Utes nuzzle the gutter like horses.

Cross Country

For Jamie

Where the road turns to water,
I sometimes mistake an old tyre
for a wallaby smashed on the road,
butchered by a semi-trailer.
Broken possums look like tyres too,
their inner tubes ripped out,
perishing like rubber in the sunlight.
Occasionally, half a galah flock
is spattered in its own pink
feathers and gore in mad array,
swimming down the highway
like grotesque fish
in the heat's bright lagoon.
Goannas rot in the mirage too,
crushed by a Mack diesel swerved
to scrawl them like red graffiti
emblazoned on the bitumen.
Down the highway's burning gravel
the land's totems lie shattered.
Cross country, where the road
turns to water, I know something
is drowning in its own blood.

Dreaming

In sleep, a claim staked
to rampant drought,
suspicious crows strutting
the cracked sod, a cairn
of old bones and red dirt,
where once ancestral hearts
implored the arid earth.
Strange atavist, my dreamtime
sees distant sheep wade
a torrent of clear heat,
bright bush parrots tear the air
in barbed shrieks, glow
like fanned embers in the afternoon
tinder wind and dry burn.
Ridges float in the amber wash
where, a vivid rainbow,
the Serpent spat a tilted world.
The tribes' artesian blood
stains ancient rock, spinifex.
Some nights a farmer stands
stump-legged in stubble
swelling like a topaz tide,
fingers sifting broken clay.
Beyond the map of taut fences
a black man sings of death,
plaintive, at the fringe of my sleep.

from Suburban Details

1. HIGH RISE SNIPER

Lord of his Babel,
the suburb prone along his sight,
determined the world
must share his dark;
not madness this hatred,
but vengeance for his torment.

He is our mirror, our making,
the logic of our streets.

Each squeezed shot shatters
a glowing window;
light dies, a body slumps,
falls like a question mark.

Sirens, the strutting strobe
goose-steps across the pavement.

Surrounded, he is lord of his tower.
They cannot stop
his final free-fall.

2. SUICIDE POEM FOR THE BUS DRIVER

Half of his face
is in the mirror.

Half an image
of his tired eyes
hangs at the end
of the bus aisle.

One callous pall
of neon light
thrust through
the fractured image.

Outside the cab,
concrete path.
And the last run is
so very lonely.

5. SISYPHUS

He is Sisyphus on the factory floor,
nobody's sweetheart and a slave.
Between shifts he sometimes checks
that the seasons have not ceased,
or watches how a myna bird
dances up a bough. Until his last
time-clocked breath he stoops,
shoulder hard against the day,
and heaves up a crowded hill.
At night in raucous public bars
he rages against the gods.

7. SUBURBAN RAIN

Tonight I am haunted by
this noiseless tracer,
how each day our orbits
spiral towards nothing,
this vertical silence,
and how the planets spin
echoless always. Tonight,
shining streets stretch
the stars at cross-roads,
alleys glow in stellar water
like narrow constellations.
In parallax and silence
the universe eddies,
concentric in a puddle.

from Bass Strait Poems

1. WYBALENA CHAPEL, FLINDERS ISLAND

*Developed by George Augustus Robinson
in an effort to save the Tasmanian
Aborigines from extinction.*

The chapel ministers to petrels,
a parish of tussock and kelp;
below the dunes, a mass grave
and other accusations:
the rancid huts bulldozed,
clay mounds of tern nests,
guano and dead scrub.

Sea-birds arc half the world to nest here,
eyes bright with constellations,
star-maps, curving water.
The tribes trekked centuries
of ice and rock to arrive, far south,
make fire, camp, and together
dance between gums scaling
cliffs of sheer light.

Instrument of God's love,
Robinson, entrepreneur,
harsh hand of History
and invented fate,
hurried them deathward:
graves mapped, named,
a bucolic Belsen.