MIGRANT HOSTEL
Parkes, 1949-51

No one kept count
of all the comings and goings—
arrivals of newcomers
in busloads from the station,
sudden departures from adjoining blocks
that left us wondering
who would be coming next.

Nationalities sought
each other out instinctively—
like a homing pigeon
circling to get its bearings;
years and name-places
recognised by accents,
partitioned off at night
by memories of hunger and hate.

For over two years
we lived like birds of passage—
always sensing a change
in the weather:
unaware of the season
whose track we would follow.

A barrier at the main gate
sealed off the highway
from our doorstep—
as it rose and fell like a finger
pointed in reprimand or shame;
and daily we passed
underneath or alongside it—
needing its sanction
to pass in and out of lives
that had only begun
or were dying.

SAILING TO AUSTRALIA
1949

1
Tired, embittered,
wary of each other—
like men whose death sentences
have been commuted,
they turned their faces
from a shore
none of them could forget.

2
Leaving from
a Displaced Persons' Camp
in Germany,
we travelled south
by train into Italy.

Coming through Austria
I remember
walking between carriages,
seeing aeroplanes
lying broken in a forest—
their yellow and black
camouflage
like a butterfly's
torn wings.

3
Through grey mornings
and long afternoons of drizzle
we lay and talked
of graves that nobody
was prepared
to enter—
argued
about war, disguised nationalities
and the absence of sea birds
from who we always watched.
And all the time

someone, sooner or later,
remarking:
'Nearly, nearly there.'

Though officially
tagged and photographed
to the satisfaction of braided uniforms
we had no names—
a tattooed number
or the gold fillings in a heart
to be disclosed only
to St Peter at The Gates.

For all it
mattered, where kinship
or affiliations
were concerned, each of us
could have been
an empty bullet shell
or prints left by a scavenger bird
around a piece of bone.
Each face became
a set of facts—
a situation
to be associated with
only while the voyage lasted.

5

Even the worst weather
became an ally
to whom confidences and sorrows
were readily confided—
disinherited, self-exiled,
homeless
as a river without banks,
people turned their backs and minds
upon the fallen godhead
of a country's majesty,
quietly embracing comfort
in every drop of salt
that crystallised into manna

on their tongues and in their eyes;
often, waiting until
the moon appeared
like a promised sign—
and the ship might leave the water
to a Castle of Dreams
in the clouds—
before they went to sleep.

5

On arrival,
a great uneasiness
filled the ship—
unspoken, misunderstood,
as a Union Jack
was hung
across the landing dock.

While the solemnity
of a basking sea lion
a government interpreter
held a loudspeaker at arm's length—
telling us, in
his own broken accents,
why we should fell proud
to have arrived,
without mishap, in Australia,
on Armistice Day.

SCARBOROUGH CEMETERY

Our thoughts, reflecting the fears that we suppressed,
turned our eyes to the road ahead and searched
the arc of bay to comment on fishing boats and weather.
Within a few seconds and words we passed the headstones:
marble and red brickwork that sea winds scourged;
forgot the three people huddled on the sloping headland,
heads bowed, as a drizzle started and stopped,
and dead flowers swept across the ditches like paper scraps.

Miles further back on the highway the sun had reappeared—
a dozen or more reflections on windows that caught;
but the wind had brought no quick flashes here:
only the spray of a thousand rivers to wash
the thoughts of three people down the graveyards of the mind,
to headlands not discovered, over landforms undefined.

BUSHFIRES AT KUNGHUR

The fires burned for weeks on end.
In paddocks where they were put out
logs smouldered for days afterwards.
Farmers talked about how long
before there was rain—this wasn’t the west,
but north, east of the ranges,
away from flocks of nuisance galahs.

Water tanks were down, banana plantations
dying under a haze of smoke—
sunlight piercing weatherboards and tin roofs;
water being pumped from the creek
and river. Cattle, hand-fed in silence.

This day the lizards were out
in dozens: heads up, immobile like an Aztec warrior
with a frilled ornament around its neck,
one would rear up and flee on its back legs
as your approaching wheels broke the dome
of sunlight protecting it.

As evening fell the wind turned west.
Fires dotted the range
like rubies in Persephone’s crown—
men returned by ashes and soil,
cursing fire-breaks and ruined crops.

Little pepper-grey moths flew out of the bushes,
desperate against the cold panes, thirsty for light.

MOTHER AND SON

I must be less
than eighteen months old—
naked, in my mother’s arms,
face pressed against hers
as if danger was nearby.

We’re standing
in an empty field
with a hill in the background.
Thistles and weeds
grow around us, at our feet.
The sky’s a total blank.

With my arms wrapped
around her neck
she is smiling a smile of pure love.
You can see it in her eyes.
Her feet are planted
firmly on the ground.
Her floral dress hangs in folds.
There is something courageous
in the way she stands.

The setting is a Displaced Persons' camp
in northern Germany
after the end of World War II.
She has no husband
and I have no father.
Does it make a difference
to how we feel?

Fifty-two years later,
on the night before she dies,
my mother will tell me his name
and the details of our lives.
(While she spoke
I asked few questions—
was content to let her say

what she wanted to
and what she didn’t . . .)

All that matters to me
is that smile of pure love;
all the money in the world
couldn’t buy it
and it would never be for sale.

Today, I stare for hours
at the photograph
and wonder who took it and why,
of a mother standing
with her son in her arms,
in a Displaced Persons’ camp—
in northern Germany
after there’s been a World War—
in a field of weeds and thistles,
under a blank sky.

FLYING FOXES

With the hot summer rains they came
out of the forest, crying like lost souls
against a December moon that offered

no respite or refuge from the secrets
they carried to unburden themselves from
in the darkness of river gorges—

or clung, to mango and pawpaw,
while stars pierced their tongues
and breezes mercilessly whipped them on

from tree to tree, valley to valley,
as midnight faded slowly into a Hades
of sunlight and the flying foxes

were gone from yet another night,
here, in the season of jagged hail
that stoned down upon flame-tree and poincianas

while people talked of petals flowing like blood
past doorsteps and along the road.
When sheet lightning tore the sky

the same people prayed, closed windows,
turned off lights and waited
tensely until the fury of winds passed

deeper into the mountains—then prepared
meals as if a holocaust was at hand;
though, at evening, children were allowed outside

to imitate the screams of flying foxes—out to where
every tree stood like a Tower of Famine
that would always reach.

ANCESTORS

Who are these shadows
that hang over you in a dream—
the bearded, faceless men
standing shoulder to shoulder?

What secrets
do they whisper into the darkness—
why do their eyes
never close?

Where do they point to
from the circle around you—
to what star
do their footprints lead?

Behind them are
mountains, the sounds of a river,
a moonlit plain
of grasses and sand.

Why do they
never speak—how long
is their wait to be?

Why do you wake
as their faces become clearer—
your tongue dry
as caked mud?

From across the plain
where sand and grasses never stir
the wind tastes of blood.

THE POLISH IMMIGRANT

He has grown tired
of the clichéd
pronunciation of his name—
countering
the inadvertent ‘How d’ yer . . . ?’
that humour
or rudeness asks,

a few vowels
and tooth-grinding consonants
that must be
phonetically rehearsed
alone or at night,

to forestall jibes,
embarrassments, false curiousity—
the wasted time
that a Handbook-and-Timetable
devotee provokes.

Yes, he would argue,
there must be places
in history
where land or heritage
asks no exile
of the children it nourishes
and helps to breed,

where a name’s
not laughed at, reviled
or twisted
like some gross truth
or as yet unnamed, imported
European disease.

So, he asks,
Tell me of Strzlecki,
count-turned-explorer—
beside whose name

a creek flows
through the deserts
of South Australia?

Or why a mountain, peaked
with snow,
should resemble a tomb
and be named
Kosciuszko?

Their eyes narrow,
nostrils quaver—
the seconds
between them toll.

Deeply breathing
their mouths open
darkly
and groper-slow.

HUNTING RABBITS

The men would often go hunting rabbits
in the countryside around the hostel—
with guns and traps and children following
in the sunlight of afternoon paddocks:
marvelling in their native tongues
at the scent of eucalypts all around.

We never asked where the guns came from
or what was done with them later:
as each rifle's echo cracked through the hills
and a rabbit would leap as if jerked
on a wire through the air—
or, watching hands release a trap
then listening to a neck being broken.

Later, I could never bring myself
to watch the animals being skinned
and gutted—
                    excitedly
talking about the ones that escaped
and how white tails bobbed among brown tussocks.
For days afterwards
our rooms smelt of blood and fur
as the meat was cooked in pots
over a kerosene primus.

But eat I did, and asked for more,
as I learnt about the meaning of rations
and the length of queues in dining halls—
as well as the names of trees
from the surrounding hills that always seemed
to be flowering with wattles:
growing less and less frightened by gunshots
and what the smell of gunpowder meant—
quickly learning to walk and keep up with men
who strode through strange hills
as if their migration had still not come to an end.

BILLYCART DAYS

He rode the red dust roads as a kid
in a billycart built from a fruitbox
along with other kids like himself
who lived on hope and laughter—
pointing their capguns at galahs and crows
that circled peppercorn trees
in a sky as blue as an exotic bird's eggshell.

Time was a neverending road that ran
between Parkes and the rest of the world:
Orange, Bathurst, Lithgow—
the beautiful Blue Mountains
he remembered crossing once
in a train that blew smoke from its funnel.
Beyond them lay Sydney and its harbour.

Barefoot, head-down, pushing along
one of his playmates from the migrant camp
he'd laugh to see the billycart
go freewheeling down a path or hill
as others tried to pile in—squealing
as the wheels wobbled and they couldn't stop
because it didn't have a break.

Dust in the eyes, dust in the mouth,
none of it mattered to them—
just as long as they were all together
at the end of those long hot days
and there was a drink of cold cordial for them.
It didn't matter who took the billycart home
because they'd all be back for it tomorrow.

Fifty years later none of it's vanished
because the red dust roads of Parkes
run like blood in his veins:
past the remains of the migrant camp
fenced off with steel posts and barbed wire—
whose concrete foundation slabs
lie broken and bleaching in the sun:

where thistles have been poisoned
so the site resembles a wasteland,
where there’s no trace of the billycart
or the lives it carried—
but where the surrounding hills echo
with the cries of crows, galahs, children’s laughter
as fragile as an exotic bird’s eggshell.

IN BASHO'S HOUSE

for Gillian Mears

In Basho’s house
there are no walls,
no roof, floors
or pathway—
nothing to show

where it is,
yet you can enter
from any direction
through a door
that’s always open.

You hear voices
though no one
is near you—
you’ll listen without
knowing you do.

Time and time
you get up to greet
a stranger coming
towards you.
No one ever appears.

Hours and seasons
lose their names—
as do passing clouds.
Rising moon and setting sun
no longer cast shadows.

Sounds drift in
like effortless breathing—
frogsplash, birdsong,
echoes of your
own footsteps.

It all ceases
to exist in Basho’s house—

the place you’ve entered
without knowing
you’ve taken a step.

Sit down. Breathe
in, breathe out.
Close your tired eyes.
Basho is sitting beside you—
a guest in his own house.

RED TREES

Impossible not to see them
once you cross the railway bridge
and enter Memorial Avenue—
the rows of red trees
along the cemetery's perimeter:

maples, claret ash, liquid ambers—
cotoneasters where rosellas
hang upside-down and feast
on berries like clots of blood.

The breath of next month's winter
hangs over them already
but they seem intent on proving
that winter is a lie—
that neither winds nor frosts
are permanent afflictions
and disappear as quickly as they arrive.

A family that I once boarded with
at Jeogla lies buried
beside these trees—mother, father,
son, grandmother:
all "born and bred" in New England
where I came to work
and left when the work was done—
where I once considered
settling down but didn't
for reasons I still can't explain.

The mother dead at ninety-three years of age,
the father at seventy;
grandmother at eighty-five
and the son at twenty-four.
On his headstone
it reads, "Accidentally killed
16th February 1972."
All of them buried
In Loving Memory Of.

What can I do but pray ?
Or be content to live on the memory of a single day
when we sat down and ate a meal together ?

The wind pauses
and brings a moment’s peace—
but still leaves my questions unanswered
hanging from the branches of red trees.

Leaving a ground strewn
with decaying leaves
I leave Memorial Avenue
and walk back towards the railway bridge.

WORK CARD

My father’s “Arbeitskarte”
or Work Card
is the only surviving document
that I have
from his five years
in forced labour in Germany—
after he was taken prisoner
at bayonet-point
from his village in Poland
by the Wehrmacht.

His photo resembles
a mug shot.
Lined up against a wall;
an i.d. number pinned to his lapel;
fingerprinted;
his signature in indelible pencil.

His jacket is crumpled.
His surname is misspelt
as “Skcznecki”.

Although a prisoner
he was “permitted” to work
for the Third Reich
and money would be sent each month
to his family in Poland.
According to the handwritten amounts
and stamps on the reverse side
of the Work Card
in five years it was sent seven times;

but it’s the photograph
that intrigues me the most, even now,
sixteen years after his death:
the way his eyes stare
into the camera and beyond it.
Maybe he remembers soldiers

spilling from trucks to round up
farmers, barking orders,
prodding them
with bayonet-tipped rifles,
promising them work, hope,
lying about their futures in Germany—

or maybe, in that detached look,
he’s realised
that he will never return
to the country where he was born.

REPAIRING OUR SHOES

1

For many years
after arriving in Australia
my father repaired our shoes himself—
partly as a way of saving money
and partly for reasons
I didn't understand.

2

From the hardware store
he'd buy materials—
nails, soles, glue, twine,
needle, awl, steel tips shaped
like crescent moons—
a cast-iron shoe-last
that resembled a clawed hand
and could have been a relic
dug out of the earth.

3

On Saturdays when he didn't
go to work, he'd sit
at his bench in the garage
and repair our shoes
which such concentration
it was hard not to notice—
even when he stopped to "roll his own"
and pat the dog beside him.

I knew he'd been a farmer
and slaughterman from hearing
my parents talk;
but this skill for repairing shoes
was never discussed
and I never asked questions
about where he'd learnt the trade—

even when he stopped doing it
and his tools were cleaned and put away.

4

I no longer watched
the careful trimming
of leather and rubber soles—
no longer heard the tap-tapping sound
of a hammer on small nails;
no longer watched honey-coloured glue
poured from a small thick-glass bottle
like a medication.

Perhaps shoes became cheaper
to buy or have repaired
professionally—
or he believed we deserved better
than what his ageing hands could repair.
He stepped back from it
as if it never happened.

5

Today, all that remains
of those tools is that shoe-last
stored in my garage, unbroken—
still looking like a prehistoric relic,
outliving those early years.

TRANSLATED INTO POLISH

I wonder what my parents
would say knowing
my poems and short stories
are being translated
and published in Poland—
back to the language
I grew up with
before I learned to speak
and write in English.

Thought I've lived
in Australia for fifty-five years
I sometimes still feel
out of place—having
become the traveller
who doesn't want to return
after he makes a trip to Europe.

Looking at the translated works
it's impossible
not to see the irony—
knowing that Polish
is the language I'm quickly forgetting
since both my parents have died,
finding myself
more and more of a stranger
to Polish nouns and verbs
every time I have
to use them correctly.

One part of me says
it's terrific
about the translated works.
Another part asks,
'Does it really matter?'
Goes on to ask more questions
about identity and fate
and why my life
ended up in Australia.

I think of my birth
at the end of World War II
and snippets of history from it
enter my head
as if they had a hidden agenda:
Dresden, Warsaw, Stalingrad,
the fall of Berlin—
the railway tracks leading
to a death camp in Poland
over whose gates
the sign read, *Arbeit Macht Frei.*

“Now there’s an irony,”
the first voice says, “Thank
your lucky stars
your parents took you on a railway journey
that lead to a ship
that sailed to Australia.
Listen to the stories
and poems translated into Polish.
You will hear
the voices of your parents.”

BIRTHPLACE

My thoughts walked ahead of me
and nothing was spoken
the whole time — almost
as if the elements had requested
that the visit be conducted
in silence: out of respect for the glory
of the European summer
that blazed down on Germany
like a branding iron.

Nothing forced me to return.
Nothing forced its presence
upon me, seen or unseen,
as I walked into the valley
that a stream ran through
and wildflowers dotted the hillside
like tiny precious stones.
Doves cooed from a nearby farm loft.

War was still being waged
when I was born here
more than forty years ago —
though nationalities knew the end
was being liberated not far away
and the migration into the future
had already begun: the pall of smoke and ash
lifting off Europe, drifting over
the North Sea and into the sanctuary of the stars.

The room offered me its dampness,
its dank smell of timber and vegetation —
giant maps of mildew spread
across repainted walls
and a cracked ceiling
that looked down on an earthen floor:
that invited me to stand closer and discover
the exact spot where I stood in time and space.

I said nothing. Did nothing.

It was almost as if I didn't exist -
disbelieving that I had travelled
from Australia only to hear my heart beating so fast:

wondering if my thoughts would stop now
like parents that had left a child behind
and waited for it to catch up -
and the reasons for my abandonment
might be explained at last.

FELIKS SKRZYNECKI

My gentle father
Kept pace only with the Joneses
Of his own mind's making -
Loved his garden like an only child,
Spent years walking its perimeter
From sunrise to sleep.
Alert, brisk and silent,
He swept its paths
Ten times around the world.

Hands darkened
From cement, fingers with cracks
Like the sods he broke,
I often wondered how he existed
On five or six hours' sleep each night -
Why his arms didn't fall off
From the soil he turned
And tobacco he rolled.

His Polish friends
Always shook hands too violently,
I thought… Feliks Skrzynecki,
That formal address
I never got used to.
Talking, they reminisced
About farms where paddocks flowered
With corn and wheat,
Horses they bred, pigs
They were skilled in slaughtering.
Five years of forced labour in Germany
Did not dull the softness of his blue eyes

I never once heard
Him complain of work, the weather
Or pain. When twice
They dug cancer out of his foot,
His comment was: ‘but I'm alive'.

Growing older, I

Remember words he taught me,
Remnants of a language
I inherited unknowingly -
The curse that damned
A crew-cut, grey-haired
Department clerk
Who asked me in dancing-bear grunts:
‘Did your father ever attempt to learn English?'

On the back steps of his house,
Bordered by golden cypress,
Lawns - geraniums younger
Than both parents,
My father sits out the evening
With his dog, smoking,
Watching stars and street lights come on,
Happy as I have never been.

At thirteen,
Stumbling over tenses in Caesar's Gallic War,
I forgot my first Polish word.
He repeated it so I never forgot.
After that, like a dumb prophet,
Watched me pegging my tents
Further and further south of Hadrian's Wall.