



# SONG CYCLE

## PART ONE

(i) SETTING OUT— we first went south

Evacuees in wartime we first went south

yes

into undreamed of forest darkneses

where bunched leaves closed overhead

yes

even at noontide, strange birds up there

called like whips cracking, though unseen

yes

and at night our own windows blacked out

we huddled at firesides to wireless war news

yes

wondered when helmeted swart enemy

would come with bayonet and rifle to kill

yes

but the forests hid us well, we survived

to hunt rabbits for meat, make berry jam

yes

and at school rejoiced ringing the bell

when celebrating our army's victory

yes

then we could come back to open country

to birthland of mallee, mulga and salt flats.

yes

yes

(ii) SOUNDS OF SUMMER—Air

Brushing against fence, just the sensation  
as you tread on clods, 'boondies' of clumped grass.  
Your arm instinctively leans here to finger  
and fondle the topmost tightly stretched wire.

What to regard here? Are you emperor...  
the breadth of these pastures? All you survey?  
As from dust creeping comes a 'stick insect',  
mocks elongated eremophyla leaf.

As such instruments sound strident strummings  
on the wire, wind adds ruffles and the tick  
of chaff-ends blown heedlessly across fields.  
Then tosses sky high the cries of curlews,

sprays diadems of brisk willy-wagtails—  
darting black and white with their ecstatic  
djittys-djittys. Where are your feelings, man?  
Now there's sound like women singing to sleep

babes in blankets or returning footsteps.  
Lean ear to telegraph posts to hear music  
of the spheres, wailing of ranked acolytes  
in eastern temples or lost vast wind storms.  
In townsites fathers shout at feats of strength

in schoolyard buffetings. Look beyond these towns, to sparse bush groves —there's wire strung again—ever fencing open lands.

(iii). SOUNDS OF SUMMER—Water

Where ferns stoop among balga trunks  
listen now to the bracken-browned trickle  
of water among granite stones, merging  
into ranked drone of crouching cicadas  
in forest crowns of jarrah and karri.  
Note cries of *gooraba* and *dilabut*  
swooping in dapper black and white from green  
of one hillside to another hillside.  
They ignore old man emu's drumming beat  
passing down woodland aisles in summer heat.

Until summer storms come with mountain's nudge  
of thunder to pass in an angry flash  
and leave sheoak, banksia, marri to drip  
in stinging drops. A sudden hush descends  
where ringtail and quenda edge through underbrush.  
Tumult sensed amidst frog choruses here  
reminds there is multitudinous life  
teeming amid leaf litter's profusion—  
orchids, fungi, mosses and lichens make  
rainforest replete for water's sake.

(iv). SOUNDS OF SUMMER—Scents

Grease on axle parts  
has an unctuous smell  
mixed with spattered chaff

and the odd ear of wheat.

And freshly-wrought iron  
has its metallic tang or  
is it the taste we register,  
when blade serrates tongue?

Rich aromatics rise up  
from idling exhaust of  
truckload of teetering hay  
in settle of summer air.

You might sniff boldness  
of a fox in the dry bed  
of the garden or just tang  
of old figs fallen down.

It's light this scent on air  
and especially here at dusk  
momentary trace is scented  
boronia's sweet rush.

(v). SOUNDS OF SUMMER—Tastes

You put your lips to fence-rail's  
parched timber and draw in  
moisture or is it blood  
of your own lips? Its grain

cracked and frail, this wood  
has been long lying here  
in sun and rain yet resists.  
So you taste again the red gum

of some tree a settler lopped;  
but it is too remote now,  
it is the time to grasp at  
twig and leaf of the living.

To chew for the blood  
of the tree—taste of sap  
and sharp oil of eucalyptus.  
All this exchange of passion.

(vi). SOUNDS OF SUMMER—Earth

The naked foot knows best  
the red earth of the Yilgarn;  
almost as potent as ochre  
pigments of Wilgie Mia—  
old Thuwarri Thaa, mined  
in the Weld Range for aeons.

Thrust aside with your toes  
the shards of spinifex, shed  
needles of casuarina, heap  
this dirt up to inspect, to know  
what is elemental. As your flesh.

## PART TWO

(i). THE LONG ROAD HOME—Verges

By this roadside you have dreamed

to rest awhile, to hide from passing  
of those who speed ever onwards.  
Even urge you too, and take your soul.

These verges—well named as space  
between. Extending almost all our  
roadsides and rail lines of western  
third of this continent, deserving

more than casual glances. Telling  
much of man's fever for close  
confinement, containment, closure.  
But here also preserved so much.

Long history of the land lies here:  
in micro form, before our coming,  
each rock and gully, bird-flight free,  
wildflower, ant hill and grass tree.

Despoiled certainly by our straight  
stretches of steel rails, fence posts,  
white centre-lines of highways and  
lust ever to make all worlds anew.

But pausing, you stand on such a verge,  
become briefly joined with remnant  
land once more; seated here on fallen  
bough of bush tree, try contemplation.

Enough of telling, so let us show  
the verge discoveries where stalk  
trapdoor spiders to lay out diadem  
of tiny twigs to lead the innocent

to their tunnel of love and vice-  
like jaws awaiting sustenance  
in secure darkness. And tiny bird  
in black and white splendour darts  
from branch to leaf to gravel ground,  
pecking at insect strollers, or scattered  
wheat grains and any such sustenance.  
Twenty-eight parrots grope on ground  
for seeds then rise in shrieking flight.  
So this remnant verge still shelters life.

(ii). THE LONG ROAD HOME—Salt Lakes

Aged fenceposts run out into the blue  
of the sky to mark invasion's folly  
and contempt for first nation's land.

At least Juat and Ballardong showed honour  
to millenia of accumulating salt  
crystals and dune shores of gypsum lunettes.

Your footprints may join wild duck and swan  
but encode foreign alphabets and speak  
of invasion's unknowingness and ill.

Even childhood innocence can perpetuate  
dangers of a blameless guilt as you trail  
a branch of blackbutt to write your own name.

For here is aeons-old samphire and saltbush  
mending the winter storms' disturbances,  
making peace with wild waters and rough gales.



You can learn, if you will, from wild damp strands  
in your visitations. Come again and  
again, make peace in contemplative mood.

At least this familiarity can  
impart a dreaming to sustain certain  
wisdom of salt more lasting than footprints.

And lakes will endure in dreams as singing  
of this flat land's most ancient origins;  
receiving the living feet of the worshipful.

## PART THREE

HOME-COMING—For the Last Time

For the last time

yes

I loiter with intent

by the farm house

yes

walking by the sheds

stables, the sheep yards

yes

this was home to my mother

through forming, shaping years

yes

in the sand here, my trails

and tracks among others

yes

see imprint of bronze-wings' feet

anarchic strut of cockatoos  
                  yes  
patter of rabbits coming out  
from under floor boards  
                  yes  
the scrambled trails of sheep  
moving through this old garden  
                  yes  
where Geraldton-wax still  
blooms and easter lilies wilt  
                  yes  
at the forge, goanna tracks  
and disturbed dugite's whiplash  
                  yes  
I loiter with intent  
in my grandfather's ruins  
                  yes  
for the last time  
                  yes  
                  yes

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## A Painter's Background

My first experience of watercolour painting occurred when I was in the final years of primary schooling in a little outback town. Our teacher was an ex-Canadian airforce pilot with a wooden leg. One day he suggested we go out into the schoolgrounds with our paintboxes and drawing books and sketch something that appealed to us. I chose a tall white-gum that towered over the school roof. From that modest beginning, my interest in painting and sketching grew. Encouraged by my brother, who had already left for the city to study to be an art teacher, I gradually learned more and went out into the

country to paint the wheatfields and tree-lined roads. But I was keen to gain a scholarship to study at high school and had to divert my energies to improving my maths and other school subjects. Sketching became an occasional pastime for relief from the intensity of my high school studies. Nevertheless, although I never had another lesson in art at school, I occasionally sought to 'clear my mind' by going out with my sketch book for an hour or two. By this time I lived in metropolitan Perth and on 1951 was persuaded by a teacher to enter the Claude Hotchin Art Award for schoolchildren and was lucky enough to win a 'highly commended' for my painting of a local brickworks including its tall chimney. The painting was acquired by the Claremont Teachers College for its collection of local child art.

Thereafter I only occasionally sketched or painted on request from relatives or friends. Most of these works have long since vanished although have occasionally been glimpsed hanging in their homes in Australia, Italy, the USA, India and China. When I retired as a full-time academic I found I had time at last for my own work, particularly as a published author. Some of my better paintings, particularly those deriving from my academic concentration on 'Landscape Studies', began to appear on covers or as frontispieces for my books. Eventually it was suggested that some of my poems and stories could become appropriate illustrations within books. The more appeared, the more my awareness grew that, as a painter, I had some skill, rudimentary as my depictions were. At last I had so many sketches in print that there were obviously enough to create a book devoted to them—hence *One Hundred Landscapes of Australia, Italy and China* and to launch it there seemed every reason to put some of these paintings into an Exhibition at Edith Cowan University.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Glen Phillips

Born in Southern Cross, Glen Phillips has taught English for many years at Edith Cowan University In Perth Western Australia, where he currently lives. He is the Founding Director of ECU's International Centre for Landscape and Language. His poetry is represented in 30 anthologies, and over 40 individual volumes. His poems have been awarded prestigious prizes, have been translated into several languages and are object of graduate studies. His more recent books include *Alpi e Prati: Poems of Italy* (2014), *Poems of the Wheatbelt* (2016) and *Crouching Tigers, Hidden Dragons: Chinese Poems* (2016).