

# Voyager from Eden

BRANDON CONRON

**A** *COUNTERFEIT SILENCE*<sup>1</sup> is Randolph Stow's third published collection of poems. It contains forty-eight pieces, of which more than half had appeared in his previous volumes *Act One* (1957) and *Outrider* (1962), and is divided into three sections, 'Juvenilia' (1954-6), 'Outrider' (1957-62), and 'Stations' (1962-6). The epigraph, a quotation from Thornton Wilder, is an ironic comment on the book's title: 'Even speech was for them a debased form of silence; how much more futile is poetry, which is a debased form of speech.'

The three sections are a sensitive record of the artistic development of one of Australia's most gifted contemporary writers. In subject matter the early lyrics range from fresh descriptions of sea-coast or grazing country, through a growing awareness of the complexity of the human condition, to personal conflict and challenge of conventional social attitudes. This verse, in addition to its portrayal of the beauty and cruelty of nature, expresses a search for peace and permanence, which perhaps only death can provide. Later poems reflect the wider perspective that experience in England and North America brought, as well as a mature appreciation and even a reconciliation of life's divergent elements, particularly in the context of Stow's own Australian heritage. In both treatment and form many of the early poems are Elizabethan, metaphysical or Keatsian, while the later ones are influenced by modern, and especially French, poets.

'Juvenilia' echoes the scenes of his childhood near Geraldton, West Australia:

My childhood was seashells and sandalwood, windmills  
and yachts in the southerly, ploughshares and keels,

<sup>1</sup> *A Counterfeit Silence: Selected poems of Randolph Stow*. Sydney & London: Angus & Robertson, 1969. pp. 76. 30s.

fostered by hills and by waves on the breakwater,  
 sunflowers and ant-orchids, surfboards and wheels,  
 gulls and green parakeets, sandhills and haystacks, and  
 brief subtle things that a child does not realize,  
 horses and porpoises, aloes and clematis —  
 Do I idealize?  
 Then — I idealize.

But there is also an appreciation of reality by 'Country Children', who watch the breeding of animals and know the underlying cruelty of being:

They see the shearer hurt the half-caste cook  
 and leave her crying, and they laugh and look;  
 for country children know more than they know,  
 yet have no worldwide Punch and Judy show.

'Outrider' (1957-62), which has a suggestive epigraph from a Spanish ballad ('I only tell this song to those who come with me'), expresses the feelings of the outrider or stranger. It begins with Western Australian settings of Stow's youth, and covers that period during his tour as a cadet patrol officer in the Trobriand Islands east of New Guinea.

These poems are filled with images of dust, ruins, waste places, sickness and even suicide — themes which seem the very antithesis of the Australian myth of robust and manly optimism. There are also 'subversive', witty and satiric thrusts at that country's social pragmatism. Yet there persists throughout a note of affirmation, such as is evident in 'The Land's Meaning':

The love of man is a weed of the waste places.  
 One may think of it as the spinifex of dry souls.  
 I have not, it is true, made the trek to the difficult country  
 where it is said to grow; but signs come back,  
 reports come back, of continuing exploration  
 in that terrain. And certain of our young men,  
 who turned in despair from the bar, upsetting a glass,  
 and swore: 'No more' (for the tin rooms stank of flyspray)  
 are sending word that the mastery of silence  
 alone is empire. What is God, they say,  
 but a man unwounded in his loneliness?

In another poem, 'At Sandalwood', a pseudonym for his family's old homestead, Spring Sands, Stow adapts Horace's Alcaic metre to express faith in man's destiny:

'The love of time, and the grief of time: the harmony of life and life in change. — In the hardest season, praise to all three; and the crow's, uniting voice in the empty hall of the summer.

Dead eyes have loved and changed this land I walk in the grief of time, watching the skins of children harden under its sun. — My sad-coloured country, bitterly admired.

Such love, such grief cannot tire.

'Jimmy Woodsers' (an Australian term for a solitary drink) depicts the moment of Stow's decision to leave his homeland in language which recalls nostalgically the doves and blowing dunes of the Indian Ocean coastline where:

Gumtrees stooped and crippled by the southerly  
were ladies washing their long green hair, remembering.

The harsh aridity of Australia's fertile western plains, even in a bumper harvest year, is drolly and dramatically conveyed in 'Dust' which begins abruptly:

'Enough,' she said. But the dust still rained about her;  
over her living-room (hideous, autumnal)  
dropping its small defiance. The clock turned green.  
She spurned her broom and took a train. The neighbours  
have heard nothing.

In 'Stations' (1962-6), the title piece, a dramatic 'Suite for Three Voices and Three Generations', is a meditation by a woman, a man, and a youth on an Australian station, a word which becomes an extended metaphor of life. A powerfully evocative poem, spanning three periods from about 1840 through to 1900 to post World War II and mingling dreams, memories and aspirations with symbolic overtones, it appropriately begins and ends with the voice of The Woman:

*Across the uncleared hills of the nameless country  
I write in blood my blood's abiding name.*

In the thoughts of *The Man* is echoed a recurring motif, which also appears in Stow's novels, that Australians are 'prisoners of Eden':

*Forever to remain* — the condemnation pronounced on graver felons — was for our fathers, coming in freedom, a discipline, a promise, always retractable.

That is not our case,  
the sons: who ran as children wild  
in an unfenced, new-named inheritance.  
Boys of a greedy spring, horizon-drunk,  
peacocked its gold, its streams, declared their stations  
casually by fair water, changed, were changed,  
learning at last that country claims its station  
as men do theirs, and skylines look around us  
surer than walls: *forever to remain* . . .

For *The Youth*, tormented by the loss of an older brother in war, in this land least haunted by European myths there is still the possibility of realizing the dream expressed in Bernard O'Dowd's celebrated sonnet 'Australia':

Here then, in this most bare, most spare, least haunted,  
least furnished of all lands, we are to foster  
greenly the dream, the philadelphic idyll,  
and in good faith and in good heart dream on.

*Land of whose bone and sap I am: are you  
that desert where the perjured West aspires?  
'Or Delos of a coming Sun-God's race?'*  
— *Or camp of torpid factions, by grey fires?*

The fatal lure of the Australian outback for explorers like Leichhardt, Lawson's swagmen, and even for such mediocre poets as Barcroft Boake and Adam Gordon (who both committed suicide), is penetratingly and wittily conveyed in 'The Singing Bones':

No pilgrims leave, no holy-days are kept  
for these who died of landscape. Who can find,  
even, the camp-sites where the saints last slept?  
*Out there* their place is, where the charts are gapped,  
unreachable, unmapped, and mainly in the mind.

Time, time and time again, when the inland wind  
 beats over myall from the dunes, I hear  
 the singing bones, their glum Victorian strain.  
 A ritual manliness, embracing pain  
 to know; to taste terrain their heirs need not draw near.

This same motif of 'singing bones' recurs in Stow's fictional spoof of bushranging, *Midnite: The Story of a Wild Colonial Boy* (1967), in which the death of 'Johann Ludwig Ulrich von Leichhardt zu Voss' occasions an amusing parody of Boake's poem 'Where the Dead Men Lie' (1898).

'Thailand Railway' is a montage, a sequence of images and impressions depicting the plight of Australian prisoners of war forced by the Japanese to build a railroad through the jungle between Bangkok and Rangoon. This ghastly period, of slavery and torture but also of heroism and compassion, already feelingly treated in Stow's autobiographical novel *Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965), is here, too, vividly and movingly depicted:

Thank God for sleep no captor steals indefinitely,  
 for death that brings a gift, the final privacy,  
 time to oneself.

My neighbour moans in his sleep, and I stretch my arm,  
 and he sighs and quietens under my arm like a child,  
 gaunt cheek on hand.

In the midst of such insensate cruelty, hands alone remain beautiful and symbolize the paradox of the human spirit — its tough pride and unselfish tenderness.

hands raising water to dying lips,  
 doing the work of the dying.

Comforting. Cleaning filth from weakened bodies.  
 Bearing the dead to the bonfire.

Such humanity and the vision at night of the innocence of children eventually 'annul the bitterness' of hate. The image of the bonfire blazing bright with fuel of 'skin and bone, flesh and hair' is an ironic reminder for the reader familiar with the novel *To The Islands* (1958) of Stow's description there of similar fires that consumed the remains of hundreds of Aborigines brutally slaughtered by West Australian police in 1928.

The theme of childlike and unselfish action is presented again in 'From the Testament of Tourmaline'. As in Stow's novel *Tourmaline* (1963) the word has suggestive connotations — of mystery, beauty and evil (malin) harmonized. This selected sequence, subtitled 'Variations on Themes of the TAO TEH CHING', usually attributed to Lao-Tze, has a technical excellence, economy, simplicity and explosive impact reminiscent of *haiku*. The movement is musical and the recurrent strain is one of submission and reconciliation:

The loved land will not pass away.  
 World has no life but transformation.  
 Nothing made selfless can decay.  
 The loved land will not pass away.

This is the ideal: to embrace with the whole soul  
 the One, and never, never again to quit it.  
 To husband by will the essence of light and darkness,  
 to grow passive and unselfknowing, as if newborn.  
 Till the doors of perception are cleansed and without  
 distortion,  
 and knowledge, motive, power become curious noises,  
 a total wisdom being paid for a total yielding.

The poems in this collection have a great variety of form and metre. Elizabethan, metaphysical and classical adaptations give way to the influence of such modern French writers as Rimbaud and St John Perse. The most luminous and appealing pieces reflect a close relationship with Australian people and places. As all his writings to date reveal, Stow's imagination and sensibility are deeply informed by his native background and tradition. He is no 'visitant' (to borrow the title of a forthcoming novel) to Australia, and expatriation in England has only increased the urbanity, relaxed authority and confidence with which he uses antipodean images and settings. Although this integral 'Strine' element puts at an obvious disadvantage readers unfamiliar with many of the words and allusions used, it also adds an individual, personal and even exotic flavour to the universal human experiences represented.

In 'Landfall', the last of the poems of the middle section 'Outrider', Stow portrays a *persona* returning like a triumphant explorer to anchor in his own home waters:

And when they ask me where I have been, I shall say  
I do not remember.

And when they ask me what I have seen, I shall say  
I remember nothing.

And if they should ever tempt me to speak again,  
I shall smile, and refrain.

Readers who have had the satisfaction of joining him in his fictional and poetical voyages will be grateful that Stow seems far from his final landfall, and is still tempted to share his discoveries.

## *All Systems Go*

A thrust to send me outwards has begun;  
the world recedes as from an astronaut.  
I enter darkness infinite as space,  
motionless still centre, whirled away too fast.  
My world recedes and where is up or down?

Locked in a metal hull of binding black  
where gravity seems doubled, not removed,  
I float, disorientate of time  
or, outside, shuffle in space-diver's boots  
rehearsing moves attached by lines of love.

Flawed by ignorance of stormy distance,  
remote voices from the receiving world  
crackle commands and chirrup disciplines.  
Only your voice and mine make spot-on contact,  
whispering re-entry as a world recedes.

JOHN YOUNGER