

Classic Poetry Series

**Andrew Burke**  
**- poems -**

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## Andrew Burke(1944 -)

Andrew Burke is a contemporary Australian writer.

His poetry has been included in Western Australian and Australian anthologies.

Early in his working life, Burke pursued a career in advertising as a copywriter and Creative Director, switching to academia as a literature and creative writing lecturer in middle age. He has lectured in Australia and China, and read his poetry to audiences of all ages in the United Kingdom, Singapore, China, and throughout Australia.

Andrew Burke has had five collections of poetry published, and has also had short plays on the boards, songs on CD, and short stories and less reliable prose published in magazines and fish'n'chip wrappings. He has been a guest of many universities and festivals, favourite among them being Singapore Writers Festival, Wagga Wagga Writers Writers, and Canberra's Poetry Festival. He is presently working on a PhD at Edith Cowan University where he also does some teaching. He has also just begun Smokebush Press which published its first title - *The Iron Night* by Ross Bolleter - in March 2004.

# Autobiography

each block of wood  
a head to chop  
each plant  
earth pushing up  
the whistling wind  
an open cloak  
river rock crabs  
drowned sailors' hands  
every shadow  
a sundial arm

Andrew Burke

# Dear Father

How sick I get of your ghost  
stirring the blood between us,  
how sick of the ties  
that hold me.  
Father, a shrink on the highway  
told me to write. To who?  
I have made you up. You are  
the air in my birthday balloon  
the clown at our barbecue  
proud patron of the bottle-o  
you shape my fingers and my toes  
you cast my shadow  
my every look-over-the-shoulder  
you carve my tombstone in womb bone.  
How sick I get of my ties to you.  
Let this be a letter  
to the Dead Letter office  
(I'm sick of your jokes).  
Father, I untie you -  
air rushes out  
and I whoop ...  
I'm fifty,  
it's time to let go.

Andrew Burke

# Duet At Shanxi Normal University Linfen, China

As I walked out late along Paragon Road  
among students going hither and thither,  
I heard a trained voice – male, operatic –  
singing quietly to itself, 'Maria, Maria',  
then Mandarin lyrics. I couldn't understand  
so I asked, 'You sing "Maria"?'  
He shook his head. I said, 'You know,  
"Maria" from West Side Story ...' He  
shook his head some more – so I sang  
and he joined me and we sang  
down Paragon Road to the gate,  
my 'Maria', his Chinese song.

At the gate, between smiling sentries,  
I tapped him on the shoulder and said,  
'Same melody has got me thinking,  
it's the same bloody song, mate!'

Andrew Burke

# Esse Est Percipi

for Denis Cherry

I lie on the surgery table  
staring up at the hanging  
anatomical drawings of the forestry  
around the skeletal frames  
of man and woman, and trace  
the muscle that pulls at  
my leg from my lower back.  
Now I know why I'm in pain.  
Upfront I joke with my friend,  
my doctor. He sees my eyebrows,  
my laughing eyes, the leaping fish  
in my mouth. 'You see,' he says,  
meaning I understand, then  
loses me in medico lingo. I  
wander, see him in two plays  
on the same stage. To him  
I am also a double bill: he sees  
under my waves to my currents  
and caves. Lap lap goes my blood,  
following itself in blind obedience  
like a bloodworm from river's edge.  
Does he sense my fear? I see  
he is curious, like a mechanic  
with an out-of-tune engine.  
'Your timing's wrong,' he could say  
and it would be no surprise; I am  
driven by analogies, abstract ideas.  
I back away until I back into  
somebody coming the other way,  
a boy who couldn't cry at fourteen  
and blamed his father for dying.

Andrew Burke

# From Crystal Set To Internet

for my brother Michael

Today, our kitchen radio crackles  
and I remember your crystal set,  
its antenna running around  
jarrah fences, under the grapevine's  
twisty tendrils, behind the flapping  
banana leaves ...

And

in that backyard, by the circular  
barbecue of coloured stones,  
your yacht collected rain where  
weeping willow leaves and leeches  
created their own environment.  
We hadn't heard the word then. We  
hadn't heard the Poms were exploding bombs  
at Maralinga, we only heard Bob Menzies  
speaking more British than Royalty:  
reds under beds, the yellow peril.

Memory is like

an old marbles bag found in an attic:  
Long Point, Mr Rushton's Perfume Factory,  
the running boards of Dad's Pilot V8,  
Mum's Agatha Austin, your first Vespa ...  
Now the information superhighway Internet  
has replaced your crackling crystal set,  
and we are the fathers who  
complain of power and phone bills.  
We have come through an age,  
and await our medals, looking to  
the daily mail or the next phone-call  
to praise us, but hear nothing. So  
I praise us as brothers, as  
sons, as fathers, I  
praise the daily male in us that  
we have come through these  
harrowing decades of change  
with our humour and wonder  
intact.

Buddha said 'All things must pass':  
we are still in the passageway, laughing.

Andrew Burke



# Haibun

for Sheila Murphy

Reading Sheila's book and stirring the porridge is a plaiting: tactile, rhythmic. The dog barks to have such fun, or wants it. Rain primps on our tin roof, veranda dusted off, biddable as Berryman, narcissistic in its newly found pleasure. I eat the porridge, at the mere mention of which a child sings a song of praise. Nobody answers. Cynicism scoffs at such a half- pint hooper. Limited by language building in rounds, ego is not a dirty word, fitting biorhythmic conflict within multi- veined bladders. And the verb ran away with the noun. Duncan spoke of the swarm of human speech, as, just now, galahs parlez loudly in the tall gums. Just now and still then. Wit and words and oats,

the spelling and grammar check is complete.

Andrew Burke

# Mortality

1.

Rushing like an ambulance  
to the Casualty Ward at  
Royal Perth Hospital our car  
stalls and drops its clutch  
on a hill at a Stop sign,  
me not able to push  
in my breathless panic,  
the fear that drove us  
this far, wife, daughter  
and me. The tall cathedral  
lurches between us  
and the hospital, we walk slow-  
ly around, derelicts dreaming  
in greystone shadows, leaves  
locked in chicken-wire cages,  
mortality so much  
a presence I suck air  
like a desert wind,  
then enter  
air-conditioned Casualty.

2.

We wait. My panic  
leaps inside me in this  
chapel of victims -  
street girl cursing in  
her blunt tongue; cops  
like store mannequins,  
their case losing  
too much blood,  
eyes spinning ...  
A tow truck hooks up  
our car, tows it away.  
I lie back amongst  
masks and gases.  
This scene's a clip  
from a madhouse movie -  
yet who would think

to play these cops  
just so, standing,  
waiting, missing  
their free burgers,  
shaping their anger  
amongst  
the angst of others.

3.

I am towed now,  
scanned, and parked.  
A toothless crone  
lies beside me  
mouthing soundless air,  
thrashing at her belts,  
one free hand  
jerking like  
a dying fish's fin.  
I see my mother  
new to her coffin,  
thrashing, hands  
ripping the lining,  
her soundless mouth  
opens and shuts.  
'Taxi!' I scream,  
laughing, 'Taxi!'

Andrew Burke

# Mr Hobby's Poppies

One poppy bends in the wind  
precarious as  
my memory of our driveway  
bordered by poppies -  
yellow, orange, white -  
planted by Mr Hobby  
knobbly old gardener who  
spent a day a week  
at our home.

Although we could afford  
a dozen new sprinklers  
he strapped and washered  
old piping together  
to create his own.

No better portrait  
could have been  
sculpted of the old  
scrawny scarecrow  
rusty brown and bent  
torn cloth chokers  
stained and wet.

They stuttered  
and barely worked  
all summer.

One poppy in the wind  
rewinds me  
forty years ...

Andrew Burke

# Natural Sfx

for Geoff Page

Standing at the edge of  
the Western Desert,  
minus 2 degrees Celsius,  
I listen for  
silence. Moon late,  
campers asleep,

fires out, I hear  
a distant road train  
kicking up red dirt

like a country & western song  
when all you want is  
the white space between

church bells tolling.  
Frogs listen too  
between the lap-

slapping of  
Niagara Dam's hundred-year-old  
waters on

red rock shores. It's  
as close as I'll ever hear to  
hearing nothing,

like Basho atop  
an old craggy mountain.  
Charles Tomlinson writes

'it rings true: for  
silence / is an imagined  
thing.' Listen

Andrew Burke

# None So Raw As This Our Land

for Mary Maclean

Many have been more exotic places, but this  
you offer us, a taste of our land. The air  
so crisp with chill we wear entire wardrobes  
like hunters' furs - jeans over track pants,  
footy socks, beanies, scarves. Mary's roo dog  
does our hunting: an emu caught by the throat,  
plucked and thrown whole on a cooking fire,  
smoke full of singed feathers and flesh  
stings our noses. We wrestle with tin-canned  
standards in words the wind blows away. Huddled  
'round campfires morning and night, we go where  
the sun breaks through as day unrolls. Breakaways,  
mulga bush, a never-used dam a hundred years old;  
this place of bleached bones and broken glass  
queries our presence, unwashed, awkward on  
its unpaved ways. Marrakesch, Kathmandu - tales  
of former hikes, but none so raw as this our land.  
Whose land? Our week is up; we take away  
film rolls, rusted horse shoes, and ochre rocks.

Andrew Burke

# Our Times

in memory of Sam Burke (1977-1995)  
and my days so far

Our wake shapes our days.  
I'm serious. There's no sense in  
hanging yourself, Sam. I am  
all the more bitter for saying this  
after the fact. Family life is a joke, I know -  
I lived with your father as my big brother  
all my young days so who's laughing.  
Now I steer away, little in common  
but memories. In the Swan River  
at the bottom of our hill, your  
grandfather's tender, bought and moored  
for membership, sank, tied to its jetty.  
'Put it on my tab,' he'd say  
in the yacht club bar as  
seaweed dressed the mooring line.  
At home, we stalled  
in the wake of our blood.  
Rich, poor, drunk or sober, we have  
lost touch. I remember trying to  
kill your father with a butter knife,  
then, later, a spear  
I honed with love and hate,  
dark days by the river,  
sunlight knifing my eyes.  
Now your days have ended, sailing the Swan.  
The whys rise up, arguments of our days ...  
At the crematorium I watch my brother.  
How much older he is now.  
He sits straight-backed  
in the front pew near your coffin,  
and in his neck muscles I see  
the weeping he won't allow.

-

Even before I was a teenager

I was a solitary boy. In our ti-tree hedge  
I would sharpen my pen-knife, then  
balance it on the edge of my hand,  
finding its seesaw spot.  
On windy nights  
the almond tree<sup>1</sup>s blossom  
drifted like snow. At first light  
my sister, brother and I  
walked out and stood in it  
barefoot. The cold feet of the dead.  
I hugged my knife  
in my dressing-gown pocket ...

Who can cut me down now?

I watch the river clear itself into the ocean.

Andrew Burke



# Sharp-Smelling Mist

I see us now on the cliffs  
of the Swan River by  
the slumbering suburb  
where my brother and I fought,  
running up slants of  
sunlight, gripping rocks  
and holding roots, then  
sliding back twenty feet  
on hands and knees  
salted with rocksand,  
blood running like  
a river like memory.  
I hear rock crabs  
in jars under beds,  
scuttling like pirates  
on coral islands, caught  
by boys who hired rowboats  
with girls in springtime  
from Smith's boatshed,  
now Mead's Fish Gallery.  
Today, fish swim  
across screens like  
jeering children behind  
glass, and scuttling  
is backflow from  
earbuds on Walkmans ...  
Then floats to now  
in sharp-smelling mist,  
blowfish rotting on jetties,  
rowboats driftwood to shore,  
cars wrapped around trees,  
friends torn like ragdolls,  
then to now like a timetable  
used to wrap gutted fish,  
blood seeping through  
onto salted hands.

Andrew Burke

# Summer Holidays

As a late afternoon seabreeze  
rattled the sleepout's louvres,  
Father sang -  
'It's illegal, it's immoral,  
Or it makes you fat ...'  
The air smelt of sundried seaweed.  
Our long shadows did  
crude tableaux on the grass.  
'Go on, dare ya!'  
but the girls didn't bite.  
Overpainted for daylight,  
Mother sulked in her sundress,  
swivelling ice  
with a red-nailed finger.  
Like a blowfish,  
our host sucked air  
to fire-up the barbecue.  
Father sang on, oblivious.  
We shared our fourth jug  
of ice-cubed raspberry cordial,  
clinking our glasses together.  
'The future,' I toasted.  
The other kids just  
looked at me.

Andrew Burke