

1992

## Poems

Landeg White

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

---

### Recommended Citation

White, Landeg, Poems, *Kunapipi*, 14(1), 1992.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol14/iss1/19>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Poems

### **Abstract**

OXFAM PLC, LETTERS TO MY SON

# Landeg White

## OXFAM PLC

For once, I knew these people, their  
Names and histories. Their children  
Suckled or clung to trouserlegs as

The players warmed up with rippling  
Arpeggios on the stinkwood xylophone,  
Its gourds like swollen udders.

They talked of the past good-humouredly  
Since the foreigner was interested.  
They had their anger. Terrible things

Had been done. But mine was no more  
Use to them than yesterday's burnt  
Millet stalks, all they had for fuel.

Chords plonked like a signature. Open  
Two-handed fifths, the players  
Octaves apart on the 8-foot instrument

Summoning the dance. The father-  
Drummer, crouching by the charcoal  
Brazier, quickened the python

Skin of his cunning and boom,  
Boom-bih-bih-boom, commanding,  
Boom, the skinny and alert, or fat

And generous, *bih-bih*, the enchanting  
Children, the wide-eyed, boom, children,  
To become that bubbling counterpoint

Wrung from the wood slats, sizzling  
In the hollow gourds, the sound waves  
Hitting vertebrae in body-quakes

Of pleasure. I knew this dance,  
These people. In the New World,  
4000 miles ago, they

Jumped to the dustbin steelband's  
Clangour in the same concentric  
Circles, talking in the same manner

Of history and their lives. They had  
A terrible, precise anger, They were  
Up from slavery. But their dance's

Panorama was an affair of day-break,  
Foraging into the boulevards from  
The burning cane of their past.

(That was another age, before our banks  
Coined under-borrowing, before  
Oil became a weapon splitting

Wealth from work and spawning  
The blood-dimmed trade in weaponry.  
Then the banks called in their debts.)

Today, like X-rays of starvation,  
The people stare out from our less  
Illiberal journals. We are more

In control than ever. Their dance is  
That the second child must die  
That the fourth child must die

To save the others. They are octaves  
Beyond anger. Watching this alien  
Ballet of our dangled

Food Aid, it is their history's  
End, to select each other. We are told  
The doomed children understand.

## LETTERS TO MY SON

1

I am fifty years old  
and writing to you from high summer.

Wheatfields from the hollow  
to the swelling horizon

Have been combine-scythed  
in swirling parallel strokes.

There are swallows up here  
clicking in African languages.

Black cattle wading  
in the shadows of olive trees

Are barely visible  
so black are the shadow pools.

Cicadas among the cornflowers  
are sawing at their washboards

(A linking image from my '50s bored  
teens to your own, as

Suddenly articulate  
you start your own journey).

Whatever I can give you  
has long been given if at all.

There's little else you will  
draw on beyond occasional cheques.

But I want to write of my love  
for you over seventeen winters,

Both the barren anxiety  
that shadows your present choices,

And my pride in you  
and your emerging designs

Like a carnival of poppies  
crowding the disturbed soil

Of motorway embankments  
with their gift of summer.

