

The Sleepout

Childhood¹ sleeps² in a verandah room³
in an iron bed⁴ close to the wall⁵
where the winter over the railing⁶
swelled the blind on its timber boom
and splinters picked lint⁷ off warm linen⁸
and the stars were out over the hill;
then one wall of the room was forest⁹
and all things in there were to come.¹⁰

Breathings¹¹ climbed up on the verandah
when dark¹² cattle rubbed at the corner
and sometimes dim towering rain¹³ stood
for forest, and the dry¹⁴ cave hunched¹⁵ woollen.

Inside the forest was lamplit¹⁶
along tracks to a starry creek bed
and beyond lay the never-fenced country,¹⁷
its full billabongs¹⁸ all surrounded
by animals and birds, in loud crustings,¹⁹
and²⁰ sometimes kept leaping up amongst them.
And²¹ out there, to kindle²¹ whenever
dark found it, hung the daylight moon.^{22 23}

Les Murray

- A very atmospheric poem.
- Uses contrasts:
light/dark
inside/outside
security/insecurity
realist/fantasy
sleep/waking.
- Nature as a living, breathing force.
- Childhood as an imaginative/magical experience.
- Tone = calm/reflective - even celebratory?
- Lots of sense imagery.
- Effective use of sound.

¹ The subject of the poem?

² A kind of personification?

³ Outside or inside? Perhaps a slight tension?

⁴ Suggests something hard/uncomfortable

⁵ Security

⁶ Suggests nature as an influential/controlling/organic force

⁷ Assonance. Vowel sounds predominate in the poem. Room seems dilapidated

⁸ Sense of warmth/richness

⁹ Transition. Darkness descends and division between inside/outside evaporates

¹⁰ Sense of expectancy

¹¹ Personification - whose?

¹² Darkness again, sense of mystery?

¹³ Visual image

¹⁴ Contrast to rain

¹⁵ Visual image

¹⁶ Where is the speaker now? Has moved, perhaps imaginatively, into forest. Light and dark another opposition

¹⁷ Boundless - like his imagination?

¹⁸ Australian term? (Pond? Lake? Not sure!)

¹⁹ Surprising! Original way to describe sounds of nature

²⁰ Repetition moves us forwards

²¹ Light?

²² Another opposition/paradox - darkness is not frightening

²³ He 'sees' all this but only in his imagination?