

Classic Poetry Series

**Philip Hammial**  
**- poems -**

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## Philip Hammial(1937 -)

Philip Roby Hammial (born 1937) is an Australian poet, publisher, editor, artist and art curator. He has a long list of achievements in writing, publishing and sculpting. His achievements include twenty-four collections of poetry, thirty solo sculpture exhibitions and, acting as the director/curator of The Australian Collection of Outsider Art, twenty-six exhibitions of Australian Outsider Art in five countries.

Hammial's significance to Australian poetry has been recognised by the Australia Council, which awarded him a Senior Writer's Fellowship in 1996, an Established Writer's Fellowship in 2004 and the Nancy Keesing Studio at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris in 2009.

### <b>Life</b>

Hammial (born 1937) grew up in and around Detroit, Michigan. He graduated from Farmington High School in 1954. After three years in the engine rooms of US Navy ships he went to Olivet College in Olivet, Michigan, and then to Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, where he 'discovered' poetry, art, philosophy and history. Graduating with honors in English Literature and Philosophy in 1963, he went on to travel the world for a total of eleven years, visiting eighty-one countries & working in three – Denmark, England and Greece. In 1972 he arrived in Sydney on a tourist visa and nine months later was granted a resident visa. He is now an Australian citizen, married to Anne Welch an English as a second language teacher, with one child, Genevieve Aloka, born in 1997, and has been living in the Blue Mountains since 1994. Hammial started work at the age of twelve and had over one hundred jobs in five countries before retiring in 2000. A member of the Woodford Bush Fire Brigade between 1995 and 2003, Hammial fought many of the fires that raged through the Blue Mountains during those years. An environmental and human rights activist, he has worked as a volunteer for the Wilderness Society and for the Free Tibet Action Group.

### <b>Literary and artistic career</b>

Hammial has published twenty-four collections of poetry and is the editor of "25 poètes australiens", an anthology published in Trois-Rivières and Paris. He is also the editor (with Ulli Beier and Rudi Krausmann) of the seminal "Outsider Art in Australia". As the director of The Australian Collection of Outsider Art, he has curated or helped to organize twenty-six exhibitions of Australian Outsider Art – in Australia, Germany, France, Belgium and the United States. The most recent

exhibition – “Australian Outsiders” (23 artists) – spent two months at the Orange Regional Gallery, seven weeks at the Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and then went to the Halle St. Pierre in Paris for six months (September 2006 to February 2007) where it was very well received. Hammial himself is also an artist. He has had thirty-two solo exhibitions and his work has been included in over seventy group exhibitions. In 1979 he became the editor of Island Press. The oldest small press in Australia still publishing poetry, Island was founded in 1970 by Philip Roberts and has published fifty-eight titles to date.

Two of his poetry collections were short-listed for the Kenneth Slessor Prize – “Bread” in 2001 and “In the Year of Our Lord Slaughter’s Children” in 2004 and one was short-listed for the ACT Poetry Prize - "Skin Theory" in 2010. His poems have appeared in 21 anthologies of Australian poetry and in 87 journals in 9 countries. He has represented Australia at six major international poetry festivals – Poetry Africa 2000 in Durban, South Africa; the Festival Franco-Anglais de Poesie, Paris, 2000; The World Festival of Poets, Tokyo, 2000; the Festival International de la Poésie, Trois-Rivières, 2004; the Micro Festival, Prague, 2009 and the Festival Franco-Anglais de Poesie, Melbourne, 2010. In 2001 he had a one month writer-in-residency at the Fundacion Valparaiso in Mojacar, Spain and for six months in 2009/10 he was the Australian writer-in-residence at the Cite International des Arts in Paris.

#### **<b>Awards </b>**

1988: Rothman’s Foundation Poetry Prize

2001: short-listed for a NSW Premier's Award and the Kenneth Slessor prize

2004: short-listed for the Kenneth Slessor prize

# A Delivery Van

In the middle of the intersection of the Rue de Seine & the Rue de Buci a van stops & the driver, taking his sweet time despite the pile up of traffic, loads several cases of bottles onto his trolley & wheels them into the Bar du Marche. About twenty sheep (a flock of sheep in the middle of Paris?) moving slowly up the Rue de Buci, approach the van & clamber into its open side door, & the shepherd, slamming the door shut, sits down at a table & orders a café express which is brought by a surly waiter a few moments later, the van driving off with a load of bleating sheep, this incident similar in many respects to the one I encountered last night at 11:30 in the Pigalle Metro station trying to catch the last train home – a herd of Texan long horn cattle completely filling the platform, impossible to get near the train when it stopped, had to walk home.

Philip Hammial

# Bicycle

It's my fifth birthday & I'm sitting on the present that Uncle Stan has just given me, a green Schwinn bicycle. He gives me a push & down I go, down the gentle slope in his back yard in Chicago that becomes a hill, an interminably long hill that, sixty years later, I'm still going down, the bicycle having become rusty & dilapidated but still capable of moving as fast as the wind. Fortunately the doors, front & back, of the houses I'm passing through are open & the corridors unobstructed, the people, my friends & relatives, in the rooms on either side of the corridors going about their business as though I don't exist: Aunt Mary & Uncle John sitting at opposite ends of a long table, John's prayer of thanksgiving going on & on while the roast beef gets cold; Aunt Jane having one of her fits in the kitchen while Uncle Max looks on helplessly; cousin Dan & his new bride, Eleanor, banging away on a hide-away bed while the radio newscaster tells us that Normandy has just been invaded - D-Day. Over a hundred houses & I'm still going, Uncle Stan passing away at the age of ninety-two, the war in Vietnam grinding to a halt, the Berlin wall torn down brick by brick as I roll by on the Schwinn wondering how the hill has managed to descend through seventy-two countries on five continents - a mystery I'll never have time to fathom because there, at what appears to be the bottom of the hill, is an open grave, half a dozen people standing around it as though waiting for a hearse to arrive.

Philip Hammial

# Brothers

Home alone, late at night, doing what I always do. I'm rowing. Sitting on my kitchen chair, chained to an oar, I'm one of a hundred slaves making sure that the galley keeps moving forward through a sea that is sometimes calm, sometimes raging. Forward, to that distant port where, so rumour has it, we'll be set free, at long last, after all these years. The others, my brothers in chains, sitting in chairs in their own kitchens in this huge sprawl of public housing, rowing ceaselessly, with a strength they didn't know they possessed.

How much further? How many more days? It can't be far. But what if I'm the only one who's still rowing (the galley seems to have slowed down), the others simply sitting at their kitchen tables guzzling beer, munching on pretzels? Those lazy bloated pigs, of course they've stopped rowing. They've left it up to me. Some unspoken agreement among them to stop rowing. That fool in 108, he's still flogging himself; he's insatiable.

Philip Hammial

# Bytes

As you would suspect the plow  
of infidelity if the ox  
had a human face so you would  
the dead if they rehearsed their marriages  
with wooden spoons (& we won't  
insult your intelligence with an explanation  
as to why). Suffice it to say  
that at this point the metaphor  
is already so mannered that its collapse  
is inevitable,

thus, a decline

that could be likened to the sudden change  
of an ECG's recorded pulse into a final, straight  
blue line, which blue is precisely the blue  
of the eyes of the SS Oberfuhrer who at this point  
marches in to read a proclamation concerning  
the nature of the poetry that will be acceptable  
to the Fourth Reich, something to the effect  
that it must be clear & concise, easily swallowed  
between commercials as you congratulate yourself  
on the ever-increasing sensitivity of your palate.

Philip Hammial

# Dog Carts

And went to one of the Glory Temples for which  
our city is famous & found  
a sick congregation – spitting blood

& convulsing obscenely, only the shepherd  
of this flock not afflicted, & outside, lined up,  
waiting – dog carts for the dead, but where

were the dogs? Out chasing  
some silly fox, I assumed, & was correct  
as the huntress, when I finally found her,

was sitting on a log surrounded by hounds, tails  
wagging, the corpse of some poor fox  
in her lap. “Hi,” she said, “I’m

Dot Com & of course  
you’ve come for the dogs.” Obediently  
they followed me back to the church

& were duly harnessed & off we set  
for the burial ground to which, luckily, for it  
was getting dark, the shepherd knew the way.

Philip Hammial

# Face

If yours can be substituted for several  
you're in business, says my guardian (at my side  
like a shadow). But which business? Odds are  
that it's dubious. A straw concession, say – selling  
straws to those old men kneeling on the riverbank  
who love to spend their day sipping muddy water, a  
kind of wisdom getting one supposes; or as a vendor  
of inflammable pulpits – up in flames as the sermon  
comes to a close; or as a shipping magnate – cargoes  
of haloes to Sierra Leone, dreadlocks to Outer  
Mongolia, ostrich feathers to the Arctic, the ship  
crashing through ice, a child's frozen hand  
pointing the way to a village where bicycles  
are adjusted for human use. Ride  
at your own risk. Pitfalls more numerous than mouths  
in Ethiopia waiting for food that never arrives. Held up,  
as always, by the Authorities, in this case a clutch  
of bellicose elders exposing themselves to confidence  
men in the hope that they'll be selected for cross-  
chilling, a process similar to cross-dressing, the only  
significant difference being that the former takes place  
on a cross, the gender switch accomplished before  
a crowd of thousands. In the words of the Virgin: Let  
them rise to this solemn occasion even if it's only for  
yet another publicity shot, paparazzi circling, cameras  
snapping like the teeth of hungry wolves. Which  
gives rise to the question – are these elders  
on a hunger strike? – the answer  
a loud No, nor is their constituency back  
in that Ethiopia that Mussolini's air force  
bombed in '35, Bruno, his pilot son, marvelling  
at the spectacle, one worthy, surely,  
of a Sistine Chapel. Love the way  
those bodies fly. God's children  
on the move. Safe journey  
about as applicable as a fly in aspic  
in a confessional, the priest & the client  
having somehow switched places, the former  
gloating over that boy he'd been a fisher of in '42, a

practice known in the trade as fingering the beads;  
nice work if you can get it, if you don't  
blow the cover, the acoustic plug which, subject  
to explosions of a gaseous nature, has been known  
to fly through the air with the greatest of ease, a  
truly abominable practice which in no way  
reflects upon the morals of those creatures who  
supposedly inhabit the mountains of Tibet, belief  
in their existence not being a prerequisite for  
liberation, obviously, as all phenomena, belief  
included, dissolve like mist when the practice  
is truly ripe, your face as a substitute for several.

Philip Hammial

# Fear

No way to account for the erratic behaviour  
of your erstwhile twin unless you accept that the voice  
on the loudspeaker really does have a message  
for you & you alone: Let  
the glamour girl at the cosmetics counter  
factor in your fear  
& you'll be free,

free to take

the department store escalator down to the sewer  
where Angelo waits with a black-hulled gondola, a  
skull, human, on its prow, a canopy of tattooed skin,  
a rush of adrenalin as off you glide, city noise  
gradually extinguished, nothing but the splash  
of Angelo's oar & the voice  
at your ear: Let Angelo  
factor in your fear  
& you'll be free,

free to take

the birdcage elevator up to the attic where mother's  
wedding dress waits in a trunk. Shake out the dust  
& try it on. It fits perfectly as you knew it would  
& of course you can wear it to the debutantes' ball,  
why not? Let mother  
factor in your fear  
& you'll be free.

Philip Hammial

# Fetch

Had me a word up. One. Through water  
it went by some way  
I could not follow. In  
the depth of me was there  
the death of you? Who? Who fell  
in summer, couldn't wait for fall, skirt  
up around her pretty neck, wrinkled now  
with some ripe age. If I was her  
I'd put a collar on & a chain  
to a hand, not to fly: Beard  
some ship, a bread to count, that  
sort of thing that in, to quote  
Martin Duwell, a blasé literary culture  
like Australia's gets a chop, tall poppy  
not welcome, our verse with feet  
on solid ground. Found, the car  
with the least juice, scare schoolboys  
gone for a spin. So farewell  
my best word. Impossible now  
that word to drive, chain  
to a mistress (me the bucket,  
I'm sent to fetch). If I'm good  
she'll give me a choice – drown  
in a dungeon or the posterity  
of a roadside memorial: ribbons & flowers  
on a telegraph pole.

Philip Hammial

## Honeymoon, Day Two

You can't remember making it –  
that scream she refers to  
on page 98 of her memoirs (Memoirs  
of a Weapon's Buff) – executions justified  
by a once & future Yes, an obsession  
to safari with a difference that manifested  
as a death on hold that spoke no volume. Just  
a whisper published for a shot at the much flouted  
Charity Sufferance with its fifty-seven dolls stuffed  
in your rucksack in case you need them. As now,  
when the most sensible thing to do would be  
to ritually extract them one by one & pass them out  
to the seven sumo wrestlers at the next table, bowing  
deeply, speaking volumes: Domo arigato. Obviously  
what these fatties always wanted, mothers  
to a man with babes to rock to sleep. Sweet  
dreams, it's time to enter that swamp  
where the most stalwart hero is referenced as  
Little Butch: big boys with big smiles for a scrawny  
geijin tourist. Enjoy your stay in Tokyo. Or is this  
Berlin? Probably the latter judging by the atmosphere  
of fight to the death that seems to pervade  
every nook & cranny of this pillbox? Why  
a pillbox? Surely there's nothing to guard in the heart  
of a Georgia swamp, snakes entwined around the still-  
hot barrel of a water-cooled machine gun. Who  
have you massacred this time? Just a dozen  
or so of those big bullies, teach them to keep  
their hands off, always grabbing your ass just  
when you're trying to impress Norma Jean with one  
of your samurai warrior impersonations. Fingers  
in her pie, will you ever? No chance at all  
if you can't get these boxing gloves off. Hopelessly  
knotted laces. And now, how embarrassing, a tray  
of succulent sushi arrives at your table, apparently  
ordered by the wrestlers Manipulating chopsticks  
with boxing gloves is not your idea of fun, but  
they love it – big belly laughs, polite of course.

Arigato

aseholes, may you choke on one another's pigtails.  
And now, inside the fortune cookie that follows  
the sushi, is a message whose relevance  
to your situation is uncanny. Take us  
to your leader. Of course they mean your wife. So  
off you go, all crowded into one groaning elevator,  
pushed aside when you reach the suite to discover  
(you tried to tell them) that she's packed her bags  
& left, gone home to mummy & daddy.

Philip Hammial

# Merchandise

Common graves pan out  
in a felicitous escapade – a waltz  
of merry widows, their gigolos done up  
as clockwork thugs. Six bells  
& all is Not well. There's this little matter  
of the merchandise. One would have thought  
that at your age you'd know enough to keep  
your hands to yourself, but there you go. Down  
with all hands, your mates making digging motions  
on the tablecloth while you, on your hands & knees  
under the table, can't  
come up with the goods – the lost ring  
that you found in a cereal box & had the gall to give  
to your third wife, your access to her blocked  
as of Friday last by a perfect replica  
of Louis Quinze, courtiers clamouring  
for his attention, impossible  
to get through. So where  
is that model you've been boasting about – the one  
for a new, safe family? Out of which  
you could have teased as though through  
the glowing porthole of a sunken liner some truth  
or half truth to see you through to the end  
of your days, a consolation that her sisters in shame  
would not be able to manipulate, dragging  
the needle across your record while they howled  
for a new white hope. Damn shame  
about the last messiah, he simply didn't have  
what it takes – tears on command & the swagger  
of a gunslinger at high noon. Of his many gestures  
that you taught yourself to mimic, that ride into town  
on a white stallion, seemingly casual but in reality  
a slow trot as tight as money in a boom town brothel,  
is the one that served you best, congratulating yourself  
on your cool indifference to the antics of a suicidal  
transsexual. Go ahead, do it! What  
are you waiting for? Salvation? An  
exoneration? A way past  
Louis Quinze?

Philip Hammial

# Prey

Should have sent that birthday card to my sister. Did I remember to double-lock the front door? That word – culpable – that I used in that poem; too jarring, & the thesaurus gone astray. opto & then the rest of the sign metrist. Those nude photos of my first wife – should have burned them. Socks too thick for these shoes. In the midst of a vast expanse of tile on that roof: one weed, olive green. A girl of about sixteen, why is she limping? That man with one leg who picked me up hitchhiking in Ohio, wanted me to touch his wooden leg. I refused. What if I had? Would I be here now? Need help? – call 1800 424 017. The screech of a fan belt. The trunk of an elm tree, open, with a throbbing heart inside. Rubbing his hands together to keep them warm – a roasted chestnut vendor on the Champs Elysees. That freight I rode with Gage on a perfect summer day – San Francisco to Sacramento; Gage dead at 58, his paintings in the Whitney, the Paris Biennale... Fifty-two unread books on my list. Persistent flies, almost swallowed one. That mole on Paula's thigh, how many times did I kiss it? Those jet trails, if only I could watch them until they fade to nothing. Gaze for a few seconds into the eyes of a wildebeest (a wildebeest, here, in the city?) – its breathing my breathing.

Philip Hammial

## Similitude

If we assume that every third house is logical it follows that there's literature in abundance on the subject of steamer trunks of the kind that one might find in every fourth house. She opens it & pulls out a dress, probably her grandmother's, & puts it on, an arrangement that's agreeable to both parties, so agreeable in fact that suddenly there's something that must be said but where are the words? – too choked up with emotion, & the opportunity passes. It's as though you've stopped at a red light on Sunset Boulevard on Saturday night & the beautiful young woman in the back seat – how did she get there? where did she come from? – says thanks for the ride, opens the door & vanishes into the crowd, a somewhat farfetched simile I'm sure you'll agree, but since it & hundreds of other equally preposterous similes can be found in the literature far be it from me to delete it in favour of some more down-to-earth comparison – a simile that, however outlandish, seems perfectly suited to a situation, this situation, where there's sure to be someone in every fifth house who will be prepared to argue that it perfectly conveys what the author intended it to convey.

Philip Hammial

# The Authorities

Without arms or legs, they wiggle out of the sea & up onto the beach shouting commands from fish-like mouths, the authorities. "Put your best & bluest eyes in the crinkled scars where our limbs were attached! Hurry up! What are you waiting for? You know the penalty for disobedience." And so, timid creatures that we are, we do. We always do, always hoping that we haven't lost the ability to grow new eyes, bluer & better eyes than the ones we give away.

Philip Hammial

# The Junta

Wobbles in  
on stiletto heels. Rings in  
with an ox for the soup. Is in  
the captain's closet & won't come out  
to lift its leg. Is  
a domicile privy  
to grunts. Adorns its chest  
with ca-ca. All speed  
to its advocates who roll  
in fat. Must spank  
father first, who  
knew best. Mother  
can wait. Accepts milk  
from a surrogate only. Knows nothing  
of beads but their telling. Its ball  
at odds with cheering. Its catch  
too close for comfort. Its plug  
at the mercy of aviation. Is fraternal  
to the core. Is greased  
for a pole that scrawls  
a nom de guerre. Its tongue  
by more than half is never  
exceeded. Notice how exquisite  
they are, its manners while it eats  
its words.

Philip Hammial

# Tony's Museum

Tony has opened a museum of madness. He's persuaded the administrators to lease one of the rooms in the basement of the Museum of Natural History – a huge, high-ceilinged room in which the displays – in glass cases & cabinets – are arranged in the form of a maze. In these cases & cabinets are objects, strange, often sinister looking objects that Tony has brought back from his many forays into that place called madness. There are also maps, charts, drawings & journals, all with 'scientific' explanations neatly printed on white cards in a Gothic script. In one of the dead ends of the maze, behind a thick black velvet curtain, the museum visitor encounters a mob of tiny people, not dwarves, but tiny people about two feet high. They ask the visitor for an arm which, if given, will be viciously fought over, the visitor lucky to get it back again. And the admission price – only \$1.50, which may explain why there are hundreds of people waiting to get in, a line that extends down a long corridor, up a flight of stairs to the entrance foyer, out into the weather – it's pouring buckets – & down the footpath (a sea of umbrellas) to the end of the block.

Philip Hammial

# Transplant

Two 17th Century Dutch merchants are strolling in an orchard up & down between two rows of trees. They're discussing the recent downturn in business due to competition from their Spanish counterparts. Each time they reach the end of a row they shout out numbers to a Chinese clerk sitting on a high stool. He makes rapid calculations on an abacus & shouts out the results. It doesn't bode well for the patient on the operating table under an apple tree in the heart of the orchard. Like guardian spirits two nurses, a surgeon & an anesthetist in green gowns stand in a half-circle around him. Their mouths covered by masks, it's impossible to tell if they're frowning or smiling. And now, with the last number shouted out by the Chinese clerk – 3 – the patient falls asleep. The surgeon quickly slices his chest open, pries the ribs apart, exposes the throbbing heart &, reaching up without looking, arbitrarily plucks an apple from the abundant tree.

Philip Hammial

# Traps

Article 12 expressly forbids the digging of traps in public gardens. Article 13, in apparent contradiction to 12, declares that all traps in public gardens must be camouflaged with the leaves of banyan trees, oak leaves never, under any circumstances, to be used for this purpose. Article 14, in apparent contradiction to 12 & 13, states that everyone, without exception, who has fallen into an oak leaf-covered trap in any public garden in the month of May is required to attend a banquet at the Town Hall on June 1, a banquet presided over by the mayor who at this solemn occasion will present keys to the city to the May trapees.

Philip Hammial

# Tunnels

I've begun to walk with a stoop. The weight of the world on my shoulders? No, not at all. It's the tunnels. Everywhere I go - out to the garage to find a tool, into a supermarket to buy some food - there's a tunnel to pass through & one that's never quite large enough for me to stand fully upright in. Who puts them there, always directly in my path, no matter what (even anticipating a sudden deviation on my part) & why? Out of simple spite? To teach me humility? I'll probably never know.

Philip Hammial