

» LES MURRAY



(above)

Sydney Harbour  
Bridge, NSW, 1954

PHOTO: MARK STRIZIC  
(1928–2012), STATE  
LIBRARY OF VICTORIA  
COLLECTION



LES MURRAY AO FAHA is one of Australia's most celebrated and widely read poets, with over nine hundred poems published since 1959. He has won many Australian and international awards, including in 1998 the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. Since 1990 he has been the literary editor of the journal **Quadrant**. His most recent collection is **Waiting for the Past** (2015). AUTHOR PHOTO COURTESY OF MARGARET CONNOLLY & ASSOCIATES.

# When Two Percent Were Students

Gorgeous expansion of life  
all day at the university,  
then home to be late for meals,  
an impractical, unwanted boarder.

When rush hours were so tough  
a heart attack might get stepped over  
you looked up from the long footpaths  
to partings in the houses' iron hair.

Hosts of Depression-time and wartime  
hated their failure, which was you.  
Widows with no facelift of joy  
spat their irons. Shamed by bookishness

you puzzled their downcast sons  
who thought you might be a poofter,  
so you'd hitchhike home to run wild  
again where cows made vaccine

and ancient cows discovered aspirin,  
up home, where your father and you  
still wore pink from the housework  
you taught each other years before—

and those were the years when farm wives  
drove to the coast with milk hands  
to gut fish, because government no longer  
trusted poor voters on poor lands.

» LES MURRAY



(above)

so many stories...

PHOTO: LISA EDMONDS,  
FLICKR <WWW.FLICKR.  
COM/PHOTOS/  
NOSTALGIAPHOTO  
GRAPHY/3826026924>,  
CREATIVE COMMONS  
(CC BY 2.0) <CREATIVE  
COMMONS.ORG/  
LICENSES/BY/2.0/>

# The Care

Carers are fifteen years younger  
than you. They stop in for your boy,  
they shower your mother not looking,  
they unpeg and bring in the laundry.

Carers have learned the bad-smelling  
jobs, and soak them as they chat.  
Brown pivot stains shame a veteran—  
Old age is eventually a cat

which starts on the brain of its prey  
so the words come with a delay  
and finally hardly at all.  
Children, years younger again

always knew the nuance of the words,  
the scratchy pants, and the Latin.  
Grown ups twist as the modern  
Approaches down gravel, down the flight-plan,

the airy and the arch,  
the judgemental in starch  
ampoule-filled as their hatches open.  
More friends of mine now face that one

so glory to Nurse Cavell, to Nurse Kenny,  
Doctor Flynn, and the sans-frontiersmen:  
I brace for my turn of white cotton  
and my headstone POET SO FAR then.