

History

Douglas Reid Skinner

Writer

In May 1987, a fleet of tall ships – the *Søren Larsen*, *R Tucker Thompson*, *Anna Kristina*, *Amorina*, *Tradewind*, *Our Svanen*, and *Bounty* – sailed from Portsmouth, England to Australia via Tenerife, Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town and Mauritius in an historical re-enactment of the First Fleet that colonised Australia in 1788.

*That's how it was: bottles and bits
of old wood, cork and sodden paper
driven by tide and wind into corners
where quay meets quay and small waves
mutter against seawalls, the weather
a mixture of wind, sunshine and squalls,*

*the tall ships docked, their sails furled
their decks washed clean of salt and dried.
But ropes and chains will soon be
unhitched again, the journey south
through windy passages resumed.
After months at sea they will arrive*

*at the edge of a country that, no matter
how many roads and buildings are made
to occupy the land, can only be imagined,
is mostly desert possessed by dreams.
How frail they seem to be in this
age of rockets and nuclear fusion,*



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almost too weak to weather slate clouds
and what they bring. Meanwhile the trees
in squares and streets bow and shake
as wind and city wake, and everyone goes
about the intricate patterns of life
that lead across the waves to horizons.

Douglas Reid Skinner was born in Upington, South Africa. He has published eight collections, most recently *A Short Treatise on Mortality* (uHlanga, 2022), and ten books of translation, most recently *Gaius Valerius Catullus: Selected Lyric Poems*, from the Latin, with Richard Whitaker (Crane River, 2020) and *Poesie Scelte: Selected Poems 1989–2019*, from the Italian of Marco Fazzini (Edizioni Fili d'Aquilone, 2020). He is editor of *Stanzas* and English editor and translator for the AVBOB Poetry Project.

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