# Acceptance Speech

I would have loved to be there to accept this generous award in person. Unfortunately I am not well enough to fly, and the prospect of weeks on board a ship adds extra meaning to the phrase “life is too short”.

That phrase has been on my mind a lot lately. Earlier in the year I got quite a lot of press about my imminent death. The reports were exaggerated, but they were nearer right than wrong. I may last for years yet, but I can’t stray far from the hospital in Cambridge that looks after my various ailments. One of the ailments needs, every three weeks, a drip-feed of what amounts to a liquid immune system; so I couldn’t catch that ship even if I could bear the thought. Chained to my hospital, the majestic Addenbrooke’s, I view New South Wales as a distant, lost haven. But it is always with me in my imagination.

Until I came of age, New South Wales was my whole life. In those days, Australians travelled a lot less within their own country, and I never stepped outside New South Wales until I sailed for London in the early sixties. Almost twenty years later I wrote a book called *Unreliable Memoirs* in which I tried to capture what it had been like to grow up in my Sydney suburb, Kogarah. For me, Kogarah was the centre of Sydney and indeed of New South Wales, if not the world entire.

Kogarah was the Paris of the South Pacific. My ideas of sophistication revolved around Parry’s milk bar in Railway Parade, Kogarah. If I could be with you to accept this magnificent prize in person, I would spend the first few dollars in Parry’s, shouting everybody present to a fruit sundae. But the sensuality of such scenes is all in my book, still available from all good bookshops and a few bad ones. Still available after all these years.

I suppose the same applies to me. I feel that I still have things to write, although I’m not quite sure right now what some of them are. If I was there, I would try to explain why I think that I still have to do my best. One of the reasons is the tradition I come from. Two of my predecessors as winners of this award are Judith Wright and A.D. Hope. When I was first a student at Sydney University, both of them were still alive. They set a daunting example. Even more daunting now is the way their work lives on.

To leave a paragraph or a poem in the national memory: it’s the best, the very best, thing a writer can hope for. Since this Special Award is really an acknowledgment of a lifetime’s effort, I am doubly glad to have it, because it validates the effort I put into my writing, even when I was too young to strike a moderate tone. In fact none of us, in my generation, were moderate. We wanted the world.

But we were right to think that New South Wales was a good place to start wanting it. Kogarah might not have been quite the Paris of the South Pacific, but New South Wales was already a key component in Australia’s cultural growth. Looking back on it, I feel now that my own time abroad was always part of that story. Not a big part, perhaps, but a definite part. After all, my book of memoirs was set in Kogarah, not Paris. It was a book of longing, and at this moment I feel the same longing with particular sharpness.

I wish I could be there. There was a suggestion that I make a video, but finally I decided that the best way of making a virtual appearance would be through a piece of writing, the thing I have always done best, and for which I am now being rewarded with this wonderful prize. My thanks to the judges and everybody concerned. I envy you all. As I write this on a cold day in Cambridge, it has just begun to rain.