

the empathy poems

Beach Collection by Ian Syson

(With apologies to Kenneth Slessor)

Softly and humbly to the Edge of Europe
The convoys of dead Syrians come;
At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,
But morning rolls them in the foam.
Beneath the sombre pathos of the rhetoric
Someone, it seems, has time for this,
To pluck them from the shallows and lie them on a blanket
To clean the sand from their nakedness;

And each death certificate, the driven prerogative of bureaucratic finality,
Bears the last signature of men,
Written with such perplexity, with such bewildered pity,
The words choke as they begin –
"Unknown refugee" – the ghostly pencil
Wavers and fades, the purple drips,
The cold of impending autumn has turned their inscriptions
As blue as drowned men's lips.

Dead refugees, gone in search of the same landfall,
Whether as Christians or Muslims,
Or, God forbid, atheists; the sand joins them together,
In a waiting room for some kind of heaven.
(2016)

Beach Burial by Kenneth Slessor

Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs
The convoys of dead sailors come;
At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,
But morning rolls them in the foam.

Between the sob and clubbing of the
gunfire Someone, it seems, has time for
this,
To pluck them from the shallows and bury them in
burrows And tread the sand upon their nakedness;

And each cross, the driven stake of
tidewood, Bears the last signature of men,
Written with such perplexity, with such bewildered pity,
The words choke as they begin –
'Unknown seaman' – the ghostly pencil
Wavers and fades, the purple drips,
The breath of the wet season has washed their
inscriptions As blue as drowned men's lips,

Dead seamen, gone in search of the same landfall,
Whether as enemies they fought,
Or fought with us, or neither; the sand joins them together,
Enlisted on the other front.
(1944)