

Central Station Sydney

We are in Central Station, Sydney; a clock high above reads 1915. An amplified voice sounds over all.

Voice North, south, west. We can't take you east because it's under water. (pause) Trains arriving soon from Brisbane, Melbourne, Bourke. And a few other places. You'll love the names. Narrabri! Not bad, is it! Narrabri! Out there in the bush, they're keen to get to town, God bless'em. There's people here wanting to go bush, God bless'em too.

A man steps out of the office and comes to the centre of the public space. We'll call him Information, Info for short. He's left his amplification behind.

Info Welcome to the people from Perth! (He looks around, and there aren't any.) Have I got that wrong? (He looks at the clock.) Didn't we have a line in 1915? They might've got stuck on the Nullus - arbor. Not a tree in sight! Wouldn't want to go there, would you. Yes ma'am?

Molly I'm looking for love, for me and my child. (She has a son.)

Info Which direction are you thinking of?

Molly Wherever I can find what I want.

Info Aha! (A large group of men are marching under the station's cavernous roof.) This is the mob from

Narrabri, that I was going to tell you about. They're heading off to war. Volunteers! What do they say? Those that God wants to destroy, he first makes mad. True enough? (to the would-be soldiers) You're in the wrong place, boys. Oh we can put you on a local, I suppose. There's a boat down at the water, waiting for you, and all the rest, when they arrive. Plenty of places to fill, from what I hear.

He turns his attention back to Mollie.

Follow those men. You'll get one of them to love you. Take the boy. It makes them go soft all the more quickly ...

Mollie takes her boy and joins the departing men.

... in the head!

The clock changes to 1918 amid a booming of bells, and surges of cheers. The city outside is going wild but the men who return to the central space look lost, confused, quite unsure.

Frank I never thought I'd be coming back.

Mollie I'll look after you darling.

Frank (rubbing the boy's head) I'm sorry, I've forgotten his name.

Mollie Frank, same as yours.

Frank Two francs. Wouldn't buy you much in Villers Bretonneux.

Mollie Was it bad?
 Frank Only when they shelled us darling. (He laughs.)
 Twenty four hours a day!
 Mollie Got to start again now Frank.
 Frank What's it like out there, Mollie?
 Mollie Tough, darling. Reckon you're up to it?
 Frank No, but we've got to try. It can't be any worse than
 what I've been through, can it?
 Mollie I think it can be, Frank, and I think we're going to
 see.
 Frank Which platform, darling? Lead me to my future.

Frank, Mollie and the boy Frank go off.

Info The boy came back in nineteen forty, but we never
 saw him after that. Balik Papan, I think it was.
 There's a world full of names out there. (The clock
 turns to 1932 and some awfully dressed men come
 on.) Oh God, drifters. (He studies them as they go
 past.) There ought to be a station called Hope. On
 your way, boys. For Christ's sake get in a carriage.
 Don't try and hang on underneath. It can't be done.

Luke, one of the unemployed men comes over to Info.

Luke I want to see the water.
 Info (pointing towards Circular Quay) Catch the ferry to
 Manly.
 Luke Will it take me out to sea?
 Info You'll see the sea. That's when you make your
 choice.

Luke Is that your job? Giving people choice?
 Info My friend, I'm no more than the hand that points.
 Luke When are we going to have good times again?
 Info We're told they're just around the corner.
 Luke Which corner, mate?
 Info I wish I knew.
 Luke I've come down from the bush to find a job.
 Info Half the city's going bush for the same reason.
 Luke Stupid.
 Info They're taking your jobs and you're after theirs.
 Luke What jobs? There aren't any.
 Info Here's a man might have something to say.

Kenneth Slessor comes on, neat, dapper, smart.

Info Got a song for us, Sless?
 Slessor The girl that you kissed at Calais,
 Or pledged at Beersheba with beer,
 Or danced with all night at a Palais,
 Or lied to all night on a pier,
 Is older and staidier and fatter,
 She's vanished with vanishing cream -
 But those were the days, those miraculous days,
 And what does it matter,
 You've still got your dream!
 Info This is Mollie, Sless; she's looking for guidance.
 Mollie (to the poet) Frank's gone in the head. He doesn't
 know me any more.
 Slessor He knows just enough to know that he used to be bet-
 ter.

Mollie He keeps asking, where did I meet you, and I tell him it was here.

Info Bring him down on the train; see if he knows where he is.

Mollie He'd be lost as ever. It's in his head.

Slessor leads her to a mirror and places her before it.

Slessor Pause, child, and stare me in the face
Before you dare to pass –
Forget the falling shoulder-lace,
And hear me in the glass!
My pretty mouth you surely know;
It shouldn't cause dismay –
I am Yourself two lives ago
Ten thousand miles away.

Mollie When he was on the other side of the world, I believed in something. I knew he was coming back.

Slessor We'd see the lights of morning break
And candles burn the wick,
While still a fist was left awake
To shake a fiddlestick;
And, oh, the fiddle and the bow,
They didn't beg for pay –
But that was ninety years ago,
Ten thousand miles away.

He brings Mollie forward.

And is your heart as light, as light
As mine was happy then,
Before the gossip learned to write
With such a spiteful pen,
Before the bitters learned to flow,
The saxophone to play –
As mine was ninety years ago,
Ten thousand miles away?

Mollie Great-grandmother, there's no defence
For half the things I do,
But (pardon the impertinence)
You weren't so dusty, too;
It's just as well for all, you know,
The papers never say
What happened ninety years ago,
Ten thousand miles away!

Slessor (as Mollie goes off) She's my type, you know. She needs to be looked after.

He follows Mollie. Info watches him go, then looks up at the clock, which changes to 2006.

Info (pessimistically) Modern times. See what you make of this.

A rock band starts up, lights swirl in many colours as if Central Station was a concert venue, and a band of raunchy teenagers dance in the middle of the space, shaking their thighs until they bump against the penisoid guitars. Info stands watching. Maddy, the

most noticeable of the girls, slides a leg over the guitar of Jeff, and moves up the guitar until, her lips kissing his, she's silenced him. Paris, the second girl, silences Wolf in the same way. That leaves Marty, Bryn and Cole, the drummer, still trying to keep the music going, but each is silenced in much the same way by Celia, Clarke, and Greta.

Info (when there's silence at last) I sometimes think this building's the only thing in town that still feels shame. Look at them! They're going to have it off in public. Not while I'm in charge!

He waves, and the lights go out. Almost at once a bright torch is seen coming, and a spotlight picks up Bonny, the usherette holding the torch. From somewhere at the side of the great space we hear Slessor's voice.

Slessor I've fallen in love with a firefly,
Two legs and a flambeau complete,
A heavenly smile as she runs down the aisle,
And a laugh as she bangs down the seat.

Then Bonny the usherette takes over.

Bonny Don't tell me she lives at Clovelly,
Don't say that she catches a tram,
Or dotes on "Vendetta" by Marie Corelli,
And loves to eat pickles and ham.
She comes as a comet to Halley,
Assisting a duke to his place -
A cloud of gold fire, like a star in the valley,

Slessor Two legs and a dim little face.
He woos the usherette in an old-fashioned way.

Slessor I don't adore Mae or Dolores,
Or give Greta Garbo my heart,
Nor yet the particular glories
American pictures impart.
The statues can rust in a thicket,
The Wurlitzer gives me a pain;
If it wasn't a firefly who gazed on my ticket (stage
business here)
I wouldn't have come here again.

Both And I know when I go to Saint Peter,
He'll call out his staff with a grin -
A Devil no doubt, to show the Way Out,
But a firefly to light the Way In!

Bonny leads Slessor off with her torch, and the lights come up slowly. The five musos and their women are pulling clothes back on.

Greta (referring to Bonny & Sless) Maybe noone ever told them how to do it.

Cole Some people enjoy restraint, I think. Not me.

Greta Head on, full on, nonstop, that's the way to live.

Cole You don't know what it is till you let it have its head.

Maddy Who's to stop us? Old pricks who had a rotten time when they were young?

Jeff Trouble is, when you get older, you don't know where you are.

Paris Where you are is something you make happen.
 Cole But the thing that happens has to be new, and we run
 out.
 Maddy We take what you give us, and we make something
 new.
 Bryn That's the end of us.
 Celia We turn you into dads.
 Marty What a fate! Start up again boys!
 Clarke (looking up) Here?
 Wolf It's a space we can fill.
 Info It's bigger than you think.
 Wolf Doesn't look all that big to me.
 Info Listen, mate, listen to the silence.

We hear a music of distance and paradoxically of silence. The five musicians and their women listen and feel compelled, at first sarcastically, to whisper the names coming out of the night.

Voices Wyalong. Forbes. Condobolin.
 Bryn Wagga Wagga wagga wagga wogga wogga wogga
 wogga wogga wogga wogga wogga woow woow
 woow wagga wagga woow woow woow ... (His
 voice becomes a sort of didgeridoo.)
 Celia Uranquinty ...
 Jeff The Rock!
 Maddy The Cock!
 Bryn The Rock!
 Maddy The Cock!
 Cole Condobolin.

Clarke Jerilderie.
 Marty Carathool.
 Paris Deniliquin, Denny to you, Moulamein. Nevertire.
 Wolf Matakana, Menindie, Broken Hill.
 Paris Broken Hill.
 All voices Broken Hill, Broken Hill.
 Celia Gosford, Wyong, Kurri Kurri. Nevertire.
 Marty Gerringong, Dapto, Bulli, Sydney Central ...
 Bryn Sydney Central ...
 All voices Nevertire.
 Jeff Lord luv-a-duck!
 Maddy Stuff me dead!
 Cole Yes please!
 Maddy Not you!
 All voices Sydney Central.
 Info Here!
 All voices Here. (They seem surprised at what they've been
 forced to recognise.)
 Maddy Can't get away from it, can you?
 Info Catch a train!
 Voices Armidale. Cobar. Byron Bay.
 Voices Wollongong, Gunnedah, Gilgandra ...
 Voices Katoomba ...
 Marty ... away in the west ...
 Clarke ... the blue mountains ...
 Paris ... in the morning ...
 Cole ... always there ...

Paris ... in the night ...
 Cole ... and the bloody hot days ...
 Wolf ... in winter and fire...
 Greta ... far away and near ...
 Celia ... out of sight, out of mind ...
 Maddy ... never, unfortunately ...
 Wolf ... or fortunately ...
 Info (back in his office: amplified) Announcement, announcement. The track between Narromine and Nyngan is under repair. Passengers will transfer to a bus at Narromine. Normal service will resume at Nyngan. Overnight passengers will have to sit up a little longer. Sorreeeeeeee!
 Jeff Bastards! Why can't they do it in the daytime?
 Maddy Why don't we?
 Jeff This place is taking the sex out of me.
 Maddy You mean it's making us wait.
 Info (still in his office) We pull lovers apart, we bring them back, in time.
 Wolf The world's a small place.
 Paris Until you start to travel.
 Celia Then you know how big it is ...
 Marty ... how far away ...
 Clarke ... like the night, it's a mystery every time ...
 Bryn ... you can go to the end of the line ...
 Greta ... but you can't escape ...
 Cole ... all you can do is look around, and then come back ...

All voices ... here.
 Info (amplified) Sydney Central Station. The Trans-Continental from Perth is running forty minutes late. The Trans-Continental from Perth is running forty minutes late.
 Maddy Who gives a shit?
 Jeff I'm not on it.
 Clarke You might be next time ...
 Jeff ... then it won't be late!
 Wolf Could be, mate.
 Jeff Not if I'm on board.
 Marty Trains are no respecter of persons. They don't give any guarantee.
 Info (still amplified) Oh yes they do!
 Voices What?
 Info (stepping out among them) We bring you here, we take you back. What more do you ask?
 Voices Good question. Listen to the night.
 Each of the ten young people takes him/herself to a gateway to one of the tracks, and they call, one after the other, as they disappear.
 Cole Uranquinty ...
 Greta Forbes, The Rock!
 Bryn Condobolin ...
 Clarke Matakana, Menindie, Broken Hill. Broken Hill ...
 Marty Kurri Kurri ...
 Celia Gerringong ...
 Wolf Dapto, Bulli, Byron Bay ... Nevertire ...

Bryn	Wagga Wagga, wogga wogga woow woow ... (He continues to the end, improvising, until his voice is like a didgeridoo underlying all the other names.)
Paris	Armadale, Jerilderie ...
Greta	Gunnedah, Gilgandra ...
Maddy	Narrabri, The Rock, bugger it! Narrabri, The Rock!
Info	(alone in the middle of the space) Sydney Central, wishing you all good travel, and good night. (OR, for a daytime performance) Sydney Central, wishing you all good travel and safe return.

Verses sung by 'Slessor' ('Mademoiselle from Everywhere', 'Great-grandmother speaks', and 'Firefly') are by Kenneth Slessor and were published in *Smith's Weekly* between 1928 and 1933, and collected in *Backless Betty from Bondi*, Angus & Robertson Publishers, Australia, 1983. I would also like to acknowledge the Macfarlan family, formerly of Point Piper, Sydney, whose invitations to stay with them first brought me to see, and grow fond of, Sydney's Central Station.