We feel at home in here:
in our skins that is, for they
are not in the least superficial
but snug and utterly ours.
Beauty may be no more
than skin-deep, as the old line has it,
but there are more ways
to skin a cat, if you want to,
than anyone ever let on.

The farmer’s cattle go forth
leatherbound, like old books,
and are better plump than skinny,
while the wine that goes with my steak
may well be a cleanskin
and easy on the purse.
We swallow the skins of cherries
but never of bananas.

Colour of skin can appear
to glow as the index of race,
the hue of prejudice,
so that Native Americans
were somehow called redskins
by the immigrant colour-blind.
Accordingly we might say
that the sneer of modern racism
is no more than skin-deep:
as frail as any dialect.

Turning out and upward
let’s consider trees;
their skin is called bark
though nothing to do with our dogs
and proves bemusingly rich
in texture, tone and the like;
box, ironbark, peppermint, 
mulga, bluegum, yate, 
snowgum and stringybark, 
these among many will all 
display their selves on their skin.

Now, slender blokes are dubbed skinny, 
baby boys have a foreskin 
which they may or may not lose, 
in the luck of the cultural draw, 
a penny-pincher is of course 
a miserable bloody skinflint, 
and the sensitive lass next door 
was appallingly thin-skinned.

Our globe, the one that we 
are busily now despoiling, 
wheels on beneath a giant skin 
of soil and growing things, 
except where those oceans roll. 
We inflict on its patterned skin 
ills far worse than sunburn; 
we are harrying it on to death.

When Adam first named the beasts 
he took particular note 
of their skins, fur and of course 
the funny shapes of their tails. 
His own skin was elastic, 
pored and grooved like our own, 
replete with hairs and nerves, 
and in God’s view, no doubt, 
a package for the soul, 
which got itself in trouble 
deplorably near the start, 
egged on by a scaly snake.

But we still feel at home in here, 
more or less, anyway, 
packaged inside a skin.
CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE FAHA has published eighteen volumes of poetry, a novel, and numerous prose works. His Selected Poems 1956-1995 (Carcanet Oxford Poets) won the Age Book of the Year Prize. He chairs the newly-established Australian Poetry Limited and is an Emeritus Professor at Melbourne University.
CREEPING LIKE SNAIL

Come along, then, you milkthistle-sniffing
Staffy cross with more than a hint or tittle
of border collie, like ever so many of our
dogs in this neck or lower-right thigh of the world.

D’you think we’ve got till the end of time for this walk,
a suburban Gotterdammerung?

Move those decrepit paws;
after all, there’s a maplike cat merely perching
on a front-gate brick pillar directly over your head,
a study in black-and-white before technicolour
like you.

Deaf as a brick, though, and pretty much blind
you survive in a cloudy world of introspection:
is it pure intellect, or nothing more than hard cheese?

Whatever you’re sniffing now, at the ragged paperbark,
can only be some standardized how-do-you-do.
Get on with it, dog, I still have the black plastic bag
crumpled in my left pocket
for nobody other than you.