Buried now a second time
by alphabet and golden year
(floreat circa 1880)

the outlines of their lives
are fleshe din again from paper;
their myths persist

or are straightened slightly
by proud great-nieces and
polished by scholars.

Admission here is by committee
with death the first requirement—
this mild St Peter’s gate of three

Will vanish also into the text.
Clergymen, graziers, colonial mayors,
owners of goldmines or morning papers …

their public lives are shown and kept
as notable crustaceans
the white flesh private

underneath. The sum of all these shelves
is what we are
or what they’d have us be,

each row a long sarcophagus or crypt—
the earlier volumes wearing already
the discontinued smell of yellow.

Only the recent flesh to the nose.
Public Figures (1880)
Pressed flat with watchchain and cigar

wince and flinch as
year by year
the sweaty thumbs turn through them.

Geoff Page is a Canberra poet. His wife, Carolyn, worked for the ADB in 1982–84. This poem is reprinted from Collected Lives (Angus & Robertson, 1986) with the author’s permission.