

westerly

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westerly

a quarterly review

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The Constructor

The trade had been handed down to Charles by his father, now long dead. His father had been taught the art by his father in turn, who had learned it deep in the last century. In fact, a competent genealogist might, if he lived long enough, have traced the trade to that moment when Adam fled the cherubim and the fiery sword and copped out to the east, trailing his bewildered bride, whom he had hastily plastered with fig leaves. The necessity for the trade that Charles had learned from his father, could possibly be traced, if one had sufficient time and inclination, to the two or three seeds that had stuck in the hair of Adam's wife when he took off with her. The need for washing and brushing and combing had not, you see, been noticed and the seeds of the fruit of the tree are sticky things. They nestled in her hair, clinging by their dried sugary juice and jumped off one by one along the arid eastward road, so that really the cherubim had become superfluous. Nevertheless, the whole thing might be said to have been useful, for it had provided Charles and his ancestors and his forebears and the husband of his mother and himself with a purpose for existence.

Each morning Charles rose and breakfasted on dried cereal and milk from cows. Vitamins and minerals had been added to the cereal to provide Charles with his daily requirements, which had previously been removed from the cereal by other members of the same trade as Charles. The vitamins and minerals that were added had been taken from other foods and products that originally contained them so that other members of the trade could find vitamins and minerals to add to this third lot of products, or was it second? This of course was not the trade itself, merely the concession to life that had to be made in order that the trade could be practised in comparative peace. The milk from cows had been pasteurised, not after pasture where germs thrive in content, but from Pasteur who disproved pathenogenesis.

The milk that was left over from the cereal, was converted into cheese in hermetically sealed factories, where the chief enemy was an interesting green mould that crept in on the wind if you were not careful and buried its spores in the skins of the cheeses. On those occasions when a spore swelled and flourished unnoticed in Charles' refrigerator, he cut off the repugnant green fur and threw it in the garbage. When Charles or his wife was attacked by bacteria, he acquired a piece of paper from the family doctor which entitled them to dosages of penicillin, which was clean and sterile as opposed to green and furry and dirty. All this was apparently necessary for the survival of the fittest, which had been discovered by a hypochondriac named Darwin. It was lucky he discovered it, all in all, because until then some of the unfit had been surviving in scattered spots around the globe.

Charles rose every morning and breakfasted on cereal and dried milk. He spent some time in ritualistic activity for which he was given money with which to purchase surreal milk, peese and abacillin. He never tried to trace the sense in this or the reasons for it because, he reasoned, it was not really important and had little to do with the trade that had been handed down to him by his father.

Charles' trade was the building of walls. First he searched the hillsides and the forests for suitable stones. He preferred stones with a warm, golden hue and a rough crumbly surface. He'd select them carefully to fit with the other stones already joined with mortar so that the overall effect would be harmonious. It was essential that they should cleave along the lines he had predicted when he pounded his hammer onto the chisel he had placed carefully on their surface, otherwise they were not good stones. Good stones cleaved neatly into conveniently shaped pieces which were easier to transport to the point of construction of his current wall and were easier to ease into the shape he had planned for the wall in his mind.

Charles had constructed many walls, first under the supervision of his father, then under the supervision of his teachers, who were actually teaching him his trade under miscellaneous headings known as mathematics, spelling and natural science, as opposed to unnatural. Knowledge that might be thought to undermine the art of wall building was carefully fed him in small doses so that he could become immune to it.

The most important wall in Charles' life was the wall he had built to house first his wife and then his children. This wall was essential to protect them from the fury and unpredictability of the elements and from the trees that had sprung from the seeds in the hair of Eve which were generally known to be very poisonous. It was a beautiful wall. Charles had selected the stones with a heart overflowing with love. There was warm, sun-warm sandstone cleaved from the hills at the foot of the mountains, prised relentlessly from the clinging roots of parasitic eucalypts. There were smooth polished river stones loaded in trailers, scraped from the earth at those points where two streams met and eddied and mingled the stones into a heap. These had to be thoroughly washed to remove the mud that forms in such places otherwise the mortar could never have held them in place in the wall. There was a lovely agate with shimmering rims of red, blue and gold which Charles had obtained by slicing through the heart of a thunder egg. It was a rare possession and he'd framed it carefully with pebbles of polished milk quartz and a mortar of crushed red laterite.

Be careful, Charles told his wife whom he loved very much, not to walk into the wall by accident. The stones are very hard and some of them are sharp and I do not want you or the children to be hurt. Charles' wife ran her fingers softly along the face of the agate and avoided the walls automatically. When the children went too close to the stones, she slapped them gently on the hand and said, no. Soon they avoided the walls automatically too. Charles and his wife loved their children for being so sensible.

All went well until the storm.

The clouds came over at about lunchtime, gathering softly in pearl grey on the horizon and the sun shining from the centre of the sky lit them from above, covering the earth with an unworldly light of muted gold. They gathered, thickened and darkened to charcoal flocks that pushed across the blue until they cut the sun from the conversation it was having with the trees and severed the warmth it had been pouring onto the walls of Charles' home. Still it was warm inside and Charles and his wife never noticed the static dance as electrons sped to ferocity in special spots in the clouds and swooped to earth in blinding flashing daggers of light that split the sky with shivering booms. All that was outside. The wet rings that saturated the earth and cooled the leaves, shattered on the stones of Charles' wall and ran to soak in

the ground and seek a root that would receive them instead of deflecting. Indeed Charles and his wife were very cosy until they heard the scratching at the door and found the blind girl.

There is someone at the door, Charles said, someone scratching. Most unusual. Ought I to answer it?

Outside there is a storm, she said. You had better answer it. Perhaps we are in some danger.

Charles found the blind girl on his doorstep. Her hair was matted with the mud he had left in the yard from washing the river stones and one sharp cut shone across her forehead, red, dark red and streaked by rain. Her strength had nearly gone and she sat on the stone step in a daze, dripping and cold. Charles shivered with a transient fear misted by memories of birdsong and moonlight, but he was good at dealing with fear. He quashed it and carried her into the house. Inside, the girl warmed and regained her strength until she could sip some soup with the family and talk and even stroke the dog who came to find what it was all about. It was some days before they realised she was blind.

Once she was walking quickly straight towards the wall where Charles had deliberately left a very sharp stone for contrast. Straight towards it she walked and had Charles not grabbed her, she'd have struck her head and bled again. She listened limpidly as he warned her and nodded silently, staring at the wall in some puzzlement. Another time when they had been sitting in the garden under one of the poisonous trees that had somehow rooted there and Charles decided they should go inside, she tried to walk straight through the side wall of the house instead of going through the door. There was a path leading to the door constructed of smooth paving stones that had cost Charles some effort. It followed the wall eastward for thirty paces past the bonsai pots, turned north for two by the polythene bird-bath then west for five paces and you were at the front door.

Don't you see the path? Charles asked, concerned that she had almost hurt herself, it follows the wall exactly.

Touched by her vulnerability, he took her hands and ran her fingers along the stone.

There is a wall, he said, do you feel it?

I feel only the warmth of your skin, she smiled, and the sunlight on my fingertips.

So Charles understood that she was something more than blind.

You can't live like that, he said, it would be too dangerous. I would be terrified in such a world. I'll teach you where the walls are.

Alright, she said, because Charles' hand was warm in hers and she'd loved him from the day he carried her out of the storm.

Charles set his mind to the problem. His education stood him in good stead and it did not take him long to find a solution to the difficulty. He drove off to the hills to collect a pile of special stones to build the special room that had appeared in his mind's eye. He worked diligently in his off hours and constructed a neat rectangular room forty feet by fifty. He knew she was a creature that needed space to breathe and he thought the size was a reasonable balance between her need and his available time. He built the room from cool white marble, because it was a special room, a temple for the chirp of the grasshopper that he remembered from his childhood and which he had almost heard again, sitting with the blind girl in the garden. He spattered the walls randomly with deep green malachite and level slabs of blue azurite so she would not feel separated from the grass and the sky and he organised controlled lighting to emulate the sun with only one flick of the index finger on the black, plastic switch. When his work was complete, he built a tunnel between his home and the room and led the blind girl away from his wife and children.

I've often dreamt, he said, of a special place to go, a place for my dreams, a place for the world I see in your eyes and now I have built it for you.

He put his arms around her and held her close, so close. He stroked the soft silk of her hair and wept as birdsong and flowers from his childhood hurt his ears. The blind girl held him close and firm; caressed the child who lay in her arms and gently licked the sweat that dewed on his forehead. But her eyes narrowed, because a sunbeam peeped through the centre of the thickest block of marble and tickled her chin. She never said a word as Charles strapped the invention to her wrists, for she'd loved him from the day he carried her out of the storm.

The invention had wires leading from her wrist to the small box which Charles carried in his hand. Since she could neither see nor smell nor feel the walls that Charles had carefully planned in his mind and constructed, he knew that something special had to be used. The box in his hand was connected via an insulated cord to the mains supply. Whenever the blind girl came within six inches of one of the walls, he pushed a black plastic button on the box and a sharp shock of pain contorted her body. Thus Charles thought to protect her from the damage she could do herself by walking blindly into one of the walls. Several times she fell twitching to the floor and bruised herself badly and bit her lip until the blood dripped from her chin and stained the marble. She learned very quickly and soon walked around as if she could see the walls and never came in danger of colliding with them at all. Charles also averted her to the entrance of the tunnel.

When she was alone the blind girl ran fingers down the blue veins of her wrist, licked her lips gently with the tip of her tongue and smiled for the child who pushed black buttons with tiny voltages when she had weathered the clashing of electrons in clouds. But she stayed in the space defined, because she had loved Charles from the day he had wiped the blood from the wound on her forehead.

It was summer outside. The room of marble was warm and perfumed by the scent of lavender that somehow drifted in. Charles dozed peacefully in a soft corner of the room and the blind girl stroked him gently. She thought he was full asleep and listened to the lavender and tasted the sunbeams that had been playing shadows with the leaves of the tree. Come back, they whispered and sighed and hid in her hair and teased her. Carefully she moved Charles' head from her lap to the stone floor he had built. She sniffed the sunbeam and laughed as it tingled in her nose. Straight to the wall she walked, to the green of the grass, the silk of the butterfly, the velvet of the bee and the cool, cool shade of the tree that bore the fruit that her mother had eaten without shame. She kissed the cherubim that guarded the gate until they smiled and dipped her tongue in the bland liquid fire of the sword. She sighed once, for Adam trudging away in the desert.

Charles woke as she walked through the wall. Momentarily it disappeared, dissolving every wall he'd toiled and sweated and laboured and strived for. Gone all. One point in open space and time pierced him with fear. He rushed in panic to the spot where he'd last seen the blind girl, but at the moment his mind recalled that there was a hard wall of marble before him, he hit it and cut his head badly.

People have been hurt before, netting wild things.

MICHAEL BLANCH

Here in the Land of Plenty

Here in the land of plenty,
underneath every window, the flowers grow
in summer. All the people have found some
shadow. The heat is not unbearable.

Pale blue, and pink, even hectic red
flowers grow. Fountains send up
their fireworks over the city;
the river, at night, puts forth

its flaming. Towers, tall buildings
in one square; trees, two-storey houses
and backyards in another, fronting the lake.
At night, the water, it seems, breaks forth

in showers with the wind. On calm nights
it settles down. And it becomes a mirror
that these people dare not look into
too long, this time of the year. With doors

open, windows, but for flyscreen, flung wide
for any windborne sign of unrest,
they hide inside. For these people are the children of
fathers born elsewhere, into poverty, onto farms

or overseas. Nothing here is not new.
So the sons in their neat dining rooms,
watched closely, eat too quickly and do not enjoy
life. Their taste is for the obvious

—the neat rows, every tenth one varied
slightly for effect, when it is houses.
But their streets are wide in most places
for it is better to travel than arrive there.

All along there are signs asking you
to come in where you are wanted;
at every hundred yards there is a petrol station,
restaurant and hotel. But when you stop

and you are alone, you must go on
eventually. Being alone is altogether
too much of a burden. And when bells ring
they resound in every home across town.

Trees respond. The gaunt houses put on majesty;
at this time of the year they become invisible
in coral tree, palm frond, bougainvillaea,
here in the land of plenty.

STEPHEN GILFEDDER

A Change

“A rumour’s going round
that the upswing of
my parabola of grief
has not yet commenced.”

The cracks in the back-yard
fence still worry me—
I can’t doubt that they
were party to this latest observation,

my returning home to find
the house’s empty
my wife’s got loose and
the boarder’s gone.

So stranded, but covered
by my atrophy, and thankful
that my case has
aroused so small an interest.

My wife that well-known
orientaliste having said
“The pleasures of the infidel!”
I believed I had disposed of that.

Foolish now I rest in sequence
when words have given out.
The only consolation
was a letter from

The Registrar of Motor Vehicles
renewing registration
with a sticker. Blue proxy valentine
for the window of the car.

The old sticker won’t easily
come off. Bits flake, I scrape
with water and a knife.
Resistant like a small red heart.

A Larger Version

Dying seems to be
a larger version of
those cuts and sores
I had as a kid,
from which I'm now
immune, my skin
turned floury white.

I can't pin down any
reason why I should
be afflicted with
the mounting pile
of telegrams my mother keeps
together with photos
of the captured faces.

Uncle Jim, his looks lambent
in a frame above
the mantel-piece, is one.
He's getting worse,
is seeing snakes around his bed
a letter notified,
distillate of love.

In the front room, far
removed from death he is
poor thing now and stiff
in his panoply. Faintly
I have a qualm that he'll
become unmanageable. He weighs
on me, scripture and a face,

a movement of the calendar.
For the time being
we move around
each other, as threatened as
the Ptolemaic spheres
above the early
Galileo's head.

D. S. LONG

family stories
only we laugh at
knowing when to laugh
and when to stop

driving home in a storm

several possibilities
this may be a poem
alternately it might be
something lost
in a childhood dream
a broken bear under the bed
a father
listening in the dark
to his children's dreams

JENNIFER MAIDEN

Mortal Details

I have never been able to see far over civilization's wall. It is still the safety which I remember most easily. And the safety can more easily be described. We first heard of Noel Betts last Xmas.

It was what Gil was already calling "a blonde night". A glossy moonscape made the window look liquid, And I was at that stage in the brandy when you begin to direct your eyes like an expensive camera. My wife was reflected in my glass at an odd angle, her head deliberately relaxed—neck curved backward, in the couch in the glass rim. Mirrored floorwards, her fingers occasionally tapped the air. "That", I said to someone, "is the secret of her conversational grace—the old cigarette habits and no cigarette." She was laughing . . . Relax . . . I willed her . . . relax more . . . but she was suddenly too interested. She hunched forward, hugging her lap in both arms. Gossiping. Deep voice but a high crooning intonation. Owl-tone yet lyrical. Her elbows looked sleek but gnarled, almost Egyptian with their natural oil.

Elbows, I reflected, are one of those mortal details the memory of which shakes you cruelly when someone is dead. Her mother had died last week, but at present I could only convincingly recall her thin elbows—rigid blue hollows. My father's had been flaccid, white and vulnerable at last, sans the starched sleeves and mother-of-pearl cufflinks. The grog was making my memory insanely precise, and I felt detached from Gillian. "Protection impedes thought", I murmured with difficulty, to check my fear of her enthusiasm. I shrugged, but my gesture was a vestigial shudder. She could cry soon. From lack of rest . . . the fact of death . . . and her own numbing vagueries.

"Coffee or sleep?" smiled Siriol Pierson, who was hostessing through our populous lounge room with a tray of cups and mist. She meticulously sought out a varnished table from one of those inevitable and frangible nests of glued wood. Placing it near Gil's chiffon-spread arms, she gently poured Nescafe and suppressed it with sudsy milk.

My wife was once Siriol's lover. They had lived together at boarding school and again when Gil returned from teaching in New Guinea. Siriol, though, did not regard me as a rival so much as someone more or less deserving for whom she had at last done an heroic favour. Her marriage to Matthew Pierson—who was my executive research officer at the bureau—and the birth of their children had done nothing to stain her medieval constancy to Gil.

In the hallway, her husband laughed at something. He came in loudly. And looked burly—robust in our convocation of shimmer and fatigue.

"Math," Siriol stood up at once, and he grasped her hand briefly and tightly.

They sat on the couch on either side of Gillian. Who seemed almost shy, I thought. But really she was relaxed now, poised by their tension.

Siriol was an immaculate and wistful character, with a diffidence that excused her determination. Her husband was powerful: often inadvertently, perhaps but the ambition was nevertheless, I think, all his. She was neither so restless nor so over-responsive.

"Where", demanded Gillian, "did you abandon Rachel and Dominic?"

Random children—the Piersons' girl was four, and the boy still a baby—were usually stashed, comatose with pudding and lemonade, in our spare room on Xmas Eve.

"Noel's looking after them".

"Noel . . . ?"

"Betts", said Matthew. "We are now boarding a student. Post-grad, actually. Who's doing a thesis on agri-urban settlement, whatever that may be. He came to me for statistics at the bureau, and I ended up offering him the divan on the verandah for five bucks a week. He needed it, poor child . . ."

"I think", Siriol added, "he'd been sleeping in Shelley Beach toot for a fortnight".

"No scholarship?"

"Not enough. And he's been researching in New Guinea. Fares. And a shithouse mother", Matthew grinned, "who tends to starve eloquently every three weeks and loses a pension a week on the dogs. That's the story anyway."

"And I believe it," yawned Siriol. Rather resentfully, too. She veiled most of her unease with Matthew in an elaborate languor, which was really a special sort of energy. And protectiveness perhaps.

I remember it as a tableau. They were grouped together at the table as I walked down from my car. They were at a glass stable in the beer garden, close to the pub door. Siriol was nursing the baby, and Rachel, redheaded and pensive, was spooning up icecream luxuriously. It had, I saw as I approached, been sauced by some of her father's beer.

Math was outlining some sort of map on the tabletop with his finger in spilt ice. A sun-black, straw-blond young man was watching it dutifully.

"James Ewen", introduced Siriol, "this is Noel Betts."

Matthew cocked his head suddenly backward, grinned and stretched out his arms. He shut his fists in the air, and discarded his water-sketch amiably. Betts seemed stoical at the interruption. He gave me a slight smile, an "I have heard about you" nod. He seemed still youthfully judicious—not sure where charm finished and compromise began. Especially after New Guinea. I sat with them for a while.

I had worked for ten years in Moresby before returning to take over the central office. We talked about that city, with me trying to be radical but general, and Noel willing the conversation back to specifics and the bureau. He had to be indirect. But he was oddly obsessive. He wanted my attitude to something I had forgotten. And he did know that it was impossible that I should at once remember a slight incident, and one Papuan girl: a typist who had been too drunk and too eloquent. And who was rather regretfully dismissed. To me, that pretty chattering thing and a statistical death hadn't been related. I'd never even caught her surname properly. And with a plan like his he couldn't afford to grow angry yet, to mention her name. Eventually, however, his gloved persistence won. I remembered her death—suicide—but not the reason. Except the note: that she couldn't go home. And was "constantly being watched". The latter may have been as true as the former, for we simply didn't know what she still had left to say. I didn't worry about it myself, but someone else in the bureau may have.

“Do you think she was paranoid?” asked Siriol with careless incision.

“Or perhaps just guilty and hysterical. But it wasn’t all her fault”, I conceded, and meant to think about it later alone. But I didn’t for a time—not in fact until a month later. And even then I forgot it again, until I saw the gun.

“She was paranoid . . .” echoed Noel conclusively (But she was paranoid for his sake. His ideas . . . an ideal . . .) I thought he sounded tired.

I didn’t see him again for a month. In that time he had established himself as resident baby-sitter-cum-honourary-big-brother to the Piersons’ children: so much so that he and not Siriol now collected Rachel at the tiny preschool of which my wife was directress. My second meeting with him, therefore, was deep in an emphatic and garish forest of finger-paintings. These were made even more feral by drawn curtains which released only tigerish flecks of the afternoon sun. At first I didn’t see him. He was lounging in appraisal beside what seemed to be a coital clench of vermilion spiders on a tattered cardboard screen.

“Rachel?”

“Yeah” he nodded, smiled, again uncommittal. They had a fierce elegance which may not have been accidental, and I smiled too, unsurprised. He was smoking, and I took one. I never saw him with a cigarette again, but perhaps that nursery signature smell of turpentine, urine and clay compelled it. I wondered suddenly why I hadn’t asked him if *he* had known the Papuan—Wendy, recalling her name. But there was no room for the question here, particularly as he seemed more at ease with me now. We talked about farming co-ops on the peninsula, until Gillian strode in, scolding me about smoke and the asthma children.

We helped her open the windows, but she stayed with us, absent-minded, pretending to rest. It was one of the quirks of her depression. She had talked her mother over with me, until the raw loss was used up: neat, reasonable, manageable. The spasms, however, now took the form of these rare moments of mindless enervation. Betts and I structured the conversation beneath her silence—he did have an intuitive tact for such things—without isolating her more.

She refocused herself slowly, but only when Betts asked her how Australia affected us, after so long in New Guinea, did she really respond. I’d expected it, as she’d been badly disappointed by “those numb, cramped suburbs and paralysed cities”. There was an indignant thrum in her voice, evoking them again. Betts linked his hands behind him, awkward with interest, and unusually self-forgotten. As she talked, however, he gave an involuntary shrug. He looked vaguely threatened and miserable. His gaze began to search the door for Rachel, and Gil stopped speaking, listened with him for the girl’s high voice among the clamorous aviary of children in the playground.

Gillian called her from the doorway, but she came down the stairs—loudly, to signify extravagant obedience. Her hands were black with soil from her window-box. She hadn’t seen me since the first time I met Betts. She shook her arms helplessly, exasperated that she couldn’t hug me. Gillian demanded her “first nursery necessity”—a wet cloth—and Betts found it somewhere. Rachel saluted me—literally, after a swift arm-clasp—and then stood beside him. He seemed grateful.

We talked for some time until Rachel, although tolerant, had begun to twist her foot and frown, obviously bored for home. Noel soon left with her. We had asked him round for tea when the Piersons came. He had agreed, in a soft, rather resigned voice, to be there.

Gil was half dozing in the car beside me, her head and shoulder pressed against the window. Her body was angled away from me, so that I knew she was also thinking, using her limpness and the dark to encapsulate her in moods which excluded me.

Tonight would be the first night since Xmas Eve that the Piersons had spent with us, and she had been anxious all day. I hadn't helped—had come from work tetchy, and said something about her strain at seeing Matthew and Siriol together. The result of this remark brooded beside me now, and I felt too drained to cope with it. I was belatedly aware of the acuteness of her fear of breaking down tonight. On Xmas Eve she had not done so until early morning when we were alone. But there was a quality in her grief then which was alarming. Standing upright, she had cried without tears. The noise was so arid, deep and convulsive that it might have been the cough in a machine.

That night at least, I had the sense to comfort rather than analyse her, being a little more adequate at the former than the latter, but we were practising a sort of psychological brinkmanship, and the death of her mother was only part of the reason. *I* might have been the rest of it, but guilt is a form of fiction. In personal relations conscience is too much like self-aggrandizement. It boasts more power, more conscious control than I've ever had over anyone I've loved.

If, by negligence or cruelty, I had really caused this problem, I might now, with proper deliberation, have been able to solve it.

"My dear", I began, I hoped with deference. Uneasy that my voice was unemotional.

"We have decayed into the language of endearment", she remarked with portentous whimsy in her low rather churchillian voice. She sat up and pulled reclining creases from her clothes. I felt my face tighten at the accuracy. There *are* years of haphazard intimacy between people when "you" or a mock peremptory surname is enough, christian names are only called from other rooms, and endearments are for telephones and absence, when eyes and inflections aren't possible. I laughed and said "For God's sake".

I closed my fingers on her arm. She lifted them off, but slowly, almost courteously.

I held the wheel with both hands for the rest of the journey, of course, and drove faster. I was at last glad that we had invited Noel Betts that night. He was an excuse to keep the evening fairly relaxed and formal.

Gil had looked at her watch and over-wound it four times in the past five minutes. so I asked her for the time. She looked at it again.

"5.30".

Betts and the Piersons were due at 7.30, and they were bringing the two children with them. We arrived home, put the shopping away, and dressed, wordless, for their arrival.

Betts must have brought the gun with him. But there was no knowing that from his behaviour at tea. He sat long at the table, helping us to discuss local bi-elections and the merits of fish and chicken against red meat in hot weather.

Siriol was wearing a white caped dress, its ruff as starched and ample as the wingspan of a byzantine angel. It rubbed her neck. She frequently tugged at it with her fingers for ease from the pins-and-needles of sweat. I was only thankful that for once she seemed more uncomfortable than Gil at a dinner party. Neither Gillian nor I attempted to hint that the damned collar might be detachable and, if so, dear, please feel free to . . .

At first Betts seemed to be more concerned, in his diffident way, with Siriol than with anyone else in the room. So much so that I was beginning to suspect a Sagan situation, and to watch Matthew's reactions carefully. In fact, they had "almost" made love once, as Siriol explained afterwards. And maybe that made a slight difference to the crisis when it came.

He meant to murder me—that word “assassinate” is too impersonal, and it suggests he might have been the tool of some ruthless whitehearted organization. In truth, I had “killed” Wendy, he had to do something about it, and would.

At 9.45 I was still chattering away at my dinner table, tactfully not noticing his general silence—obviously not sullenness—Mrs Pierson fidgeting with the top of her dress in the humidity, or my wife’s edgy insomniac prettiness. Most of my attention was still willed discreetly on Pierson. I thought I knew him least, and that he was the strongest person present.

Betts could have shot at once. But he’d wait—he’d explain. Surely death, he must have thought, isn’t fully death when its unexpected. It needs the prior explanation.

He was not sure yet, what he was going to do afterwards. Suicide, if someone else would help him die. Pierson might. They would at any rate be witnesses to his suicide. Pierson and the women might be too distraught, or too human, to want to prolong their own revenge . . . Too: because of his career, Pierson would want to stress that my death was personal, not political . . . and, Betts decided suddenly, it might even be possible to achieve an easy suicide by threatening to implicate the Piersons in a conspiracy for power in the bureau. I’m told he later explained to Gillian that it was new to him that night, the idea that he might shy at his own death. Its novelty probably shows that his actions up to that time were really something like delayed shock, despite his plotted facade.

About the time he must have been concentrating on the blackmail notion, he spilled the wine decanter over Gillian’s lap and his own.

He bent down with her to salvage the pieces. While she was sucking a glass-graze on her thumb, and I was making superfluous gestures of comfort, he elaborately piled the fragments on the tablecloth and then, as an afterthought, withdrew a bulky object from his side, fumbling under his shoulder as he did so.

I didn’t seem to feel surprise. Nor, despite his premeditated eloquence, did he say a word. Experimentally, I covered the gun-barrel with my hand. It seemed a matter of priorities, the hand or my life. Practically, of course, the obstacle would have made no difference to his purpose, but perhaps some thought that it would increase the mess confused him. Standing up, he discarded the gun and looked nonplussed. I tried to reach down for it, but he had lifted an alabaster bookend. He crashed it against the back of my head. I slithered down on my side until my legs were sticking out straight in front of me. I felt no direct pain, but was, oddly, conscious of being so *cold* that it hurt me. It did not seem so peculiar that my vision, after a few seconds of void, returned only in black and white, as if my eyes were accepting too much light to define colours anymore. I shut them for comfort. I don’t remember being lifted by Matthew. I was lying on a divan which was usually under the verandah window. Someone must have dragged it into the hall for me. I wondered why they hadn’t just used the lounge couch. I was also annoyed that Gillian wasn’t with me, as I could hear her voice murmuring close by, with those of Betts and Matthew.

“We will leave of course,” Matthew remarked, “on one condition”.

“That is?” Betts asked.

“We can take the gun with us”.

Matthew was doing well, I thought. That “of course” was superb logic. The boy had been bred a scholar. And the use of “I” not “we” would have been nervily self-assertive. His including Siriol suggested something altogether more companionable and unsurprised.

But I was still astonished in a disembodied way, when Betts agreed with him. And then began to talk, almost pleadingly, with Siriol and Gil. He took it for granted, despite their denials, that once out of the house the Piersons would call

the police. He was suggesting an alternative, and they were, to my still detached but increasing incredulity, beginning to agree. At least it now seemed out of the question to all of them that he do any further harm to me.

A new obsession—his assisted suicide—had fully superseded his old fixation on my death. His death would take the form of an authentically despondent letter and a mammoth cocktail of whatever sedatives were in the house at the time. The latter bizarrely practical suggestion was Gil's. She perhaps judged it to be more tolerable, or maybe less inevitable, than the gun. And anyway, she probably wanted the Piersons to escape as quickly as possible and call me a doctor.

I heard Siriol agree with the suicide proposal firmly. It was her commonsense but intimate tone which must have reassured Betts that she took him seriously. At the time I imagined her touching his arm. She had.

I heard Gil bustle about in the kitchen and bathroom, and then return.

Betts said "I will unload the gun".

I heard a metallic snap, and, a minute later, Matthew thank him cheerfully and apparently pocket it.

The children were to be left asleep in the house. The Piersons had deposited them earlier, and gone for a night out. Betts had stayed here to study. Alone in our lounge room—we were asleep early—the brooding loss of some new, white Wendy—according to the note—would have overcome him, and Gil's sleeping tablets were the result. My injury occurred as I tried to prevent him taking them. As far as he was concerned, it would, of course, have made his death inevitable. Returning, the Piersons would find me damaged, in Gillian's care, and the young man dead.

I heard the Piersons go.

I felt like someone waking in the early morning, when the act and the half-dream of dressing are the same thing—when you think yourself to be on your feet and walking and half an hour later recognize a cocoon of twisted blankets still around you.

It must have been in fact half an hour, because when I was at last swaying upright in front of him, Betts was doubled up gasping on the couch. A clotted froth of vomit had formed in his mouth.

He was unconscious, but his eyes were wide, and airless tears had already settled on them. There was a half drained tumbler of livid emulsion on the carpet.

Gillian was huddling in an armchair. I staggered over and held her arm, nearly over balancing, but her pulse was normal. My first thought for Betts was not a doctor. The one Matthew found was probably quicker anyway, but I'm sorry to say I didn't even consider that then. I did think of raw eggs and baking soda. Something about his breathing and colour, however, suggested that he was already quietly smothering on his own vomit, and that cramming extra muck into his throat wouldn't help at all.

I fell into a half-kneeling position beside him, squeezed his chest and puffed into his mouth. It was hopeless. There was a dense foam like spun sugar deep in his throat. I fumbled to clear his mouth with my fingers, shouting at Gil. I didn't know an emergency number. I told her to call the exchange.

But when she did, his heartbeat was undetectable, and the Piersons had arrived with a doctor. They didn't bring the police. The doctor called them later, after the ambulance, as a routine matter, to report my injuries and the fact that Betts was dead.

As he phoned, Siriol was tidying Betts' face and hair, spitting on Kleenex, wiping his lips and chin. It was Math, I think, who closed the eyes for her.

Pierson told me he had known the boy would be "too sick to hurt anyone", and had decided to give him a chance at "choosing" for himself rather than suffer the

“irrelevant humiliation” of prison. I told him I wouldn’t have reported it anyway. But I wasn’t even sure of that.

Math added that he had brought, not telephoned, the doctor because he wanted to humour Betts and feared more violence if the boy followed and saw him ring. Siriol added nothing, watching Gil with a wry, but exacting stare that demanded she understand. Gil’s eyes answered her gaze for a while with an expression of impotent compassion which in no way involved herself. She left us, walked into her bedroom and shut the door. The Piersons stayed until the body was taken away. Gil called out to them before they left, asking what time they would collect the children—who were still in bed—from the preschool in the morning.

Siriol answered “around eleven. And please don’t tell them about this. We’ll work out what to do.” Leaving, she kissed me dispassionately on the cheek.

At the doctor’s request, we had left Betts’ note, and various other items, untouched for the police; but of course there were no problems.

Leaving, Matthew gave me an intelligent nod. I stood holding the hall door open for a long time. after the car was gone.

Shivering, and for some reason forcing myself to swallow a sweet biscuit—but deliberately in portions too small for enjoyment—I leant on the patio rail, watching Rachel in the sunrise. She was too restless, perhaps intuitively, to keep to her cot in the spare room. She had wandered out into the frosty yard, and clambered onto a rubber tyre which was chained to the clothes hoist, and served as a swing. In it she was curled, limp, with her head lolling backwards. As the dawn-warmth began to flush her face, she dozed . . . back and forth . . . back and forth . . . quite comfortably, as if she had fallen asleep on the sea.

PHILIP HAMMIAL

Up the Woods

 It's fictitious
up the woods you hang there

like fish
dyed in wool they're dead you take them
by 2s & all at once & put
their blue on & no one sees it

& no one hears it/honk
geese/get
the lake toned they land
by 4s & all at once & with the logic
of crossing that bridge when you come to it/one nail
keeps the whole thing together/it's hollow/it's filled
from a bottle/it keeps
the whole thing together you're told
to strip

& just to wait

& no one sees it/hears it
 (they're fictitious, but not enough)
how geese swallow fish get dyed they're dead you put
their blue on
by 8s & all at once you hang

just wait

& all at once you hang
loud & clear
up the woods.

HELEN CHAPMAN

Rumour of War

Is this the last day?

It is lovely enough,
hot, with a strong summer heat, although summer is over,
and, in a way I have never seen before,
the ghost of a ghost of smoke from a distant fire
lies flat and thin across a familiar hill
turning sunlight to moonlight.

Move very carefully in this breakable day.
—New as a wet lamb go I, tasting the air,
feeling thin grass through leather.
It is all here, everything that made me.

Like a moon-traveller, who looks back to earth
with love, almost with tears, I gaze and gaze,
drawing the four wide corners of the world
in on my dwindled breath.

Not fear; a sort of recognition.
Love.
Late, helpless love.

Alone, and scarcely breathing in the light
motionless air, I wait whatever night.

LEON SLADE

Principia Aesthetica

I

It was a wet summer, a tropical
depression brought unexpected rain;
now winter is as cold as we recall,
yet dry. The sheep shiver in the paddocks
as they starve and prophets proliferate,
saying the climate's changed, that there
is trouble in the air. The old photographer
regrets that he displayed himself
too soon, brushed off the whiskered crevices.
Time is both scarrer and the scar.
He sees the young contemptibles show
off the lot and, wearing his beard
like wisdom, sulks and sucks a black
cheroot. One thinks of the mystic
who contemplates his navel. At first
glance it seems more productive
to contemplate another. Yet, on further consideration,
taking a damned good look, it seems
that productivity requires a little more
involvement, a little more than dwelling
on originality. The work of art predates
the limits set by practicality. The revolutionaries
have won and still fight on;
only the beaten old are unaware.

II

Now I must race to get
the outline down; the value
of an image is only realised
as it fades.
Or is it that, having gone,
its loss puts a price on it
that, extant, it never had possessed?
How many bitter years
did he bestride his bike? Thoughtless,
I was, of how he felt; we kid
ourselves that we have loved
and yet we cannot know until we do.
What we have taken,
for all these years, as serenity
was truly hatred burning
out on love.

Our own increasing age gives
us a view that youth could never
have and words and phrases,
quiet passionless conversations
take on new meanings, strike
chords that only tightening years
could render sensitive. Once,
and only once, he reproved me
for this very thing; no, rather
he reproved himself for thinking
that I had reached the requisite stage.

III

When shoulders were my widest part
and sport was an external thing
and I had yet to shake the puritan vestige
that work is never work unless
it seems to be, the cheddar of my erstwhile
intimates engaged me as I mark now
the chalk of my contemporaries.

Scat proudly served his time at pitching
dunny roofs while his master plied
his trade at topping brick veneers.
Scat maintained his iron and fibro
maquettes were, by their compression,
more satisfactory, more elemental than
the major works to which he never graduated.
Sewerage was anathema to him.
The gap of those twenty years was bridged
by the leg-spread steps I perched upon
to coat the ceiling of our inside toilet.
The phone called as coloured glue flowed
to my elbows. Having aced me
with his call, the bidder sought
to cast the exposed timbers of my house in alloy.
His bower was the promise of painting's end:
I see the weatherboard as an artform in itself
to be preserved at my inconvenience.
I even visualise the day when I will beat
vieing prospectors off the last authentic Australian
specimen of its breed. He yielded to the joker.

When last I heard of Scat, he'd thrown
in his indentures, joined the Navy,
taken to the sea, having succeeded,
as the artist and the poet vainly endeavour,
in the transcendence of his artform.
It all seemed so effortless to him;
that, I suppose, was the point.

PETER MURPHY

Getting Out

The long tray of silver rings, which she has left balancing just over the edge of the glass counter, slips suddenly, and with a loud crash, strikes the carefully polished floor. Now across its shiny, fussy surface the racing rings slide round and round, veering inward erratically, toppling flat unexpectedly.

"Damn!" cries Carol. "Damn! Damn! Damn!"

Just as quickly, though, she looks up to make sure that Mrs. Simpson is not within earshot. The old witch! . . . She's been out of the shop more than a minute, but you can never tell; you can never really feel quite safe.

Looking down once more, she is disgusted to find that the floor has turned into night; not only because of the sunlight which has just hit her in the face, but chiefly because of the after-effects of the night before.

While she is picking up the last of the rings, Mrs. Simpson hurries in noiselessly. She glares at the girl. How clumsy Carol is! Accidents like this always make her face pinched with annoyance; there is something malicious in the girl's stupidity; something deliberate and nasty.

"Carol, there are some mistakes you shouldn't even have to avoid. Why don't you knock over the whole counter. . ."

Witch! Spiteful old witch! Carol is used to her ways, so used to them in fact that she seems somehow to be caught in a web. Mrs. Simpson would be looking at her now; for sure! She feels a slight flinching and looks up . . . but Mrs. Simpson is watching someone across the road. The morning sun is crisp and white and people are more like shadows; but Mrs. Simpson picks them out.

Really, she isn't worth keeping, Mrs. Simpson thinks, as she watches the aimless way Carol is arranging some bronze pendants; Can't she see that she'll have to do it all again? That completely blank expression on her face now—why, she could never, in all her life, think of words as insulting as that; supposing, of course, that she can think. Still, what would be the point of dismissing her? She is no different from all the rest; that's just it—bright, sharp features; clumsy, demanding voices.

Lovely, too, in a distorted way—and Carol, indeed, lovelier than all the rest; this is her one point of difference, unfortunately. Mrs. Simpson stares at the girl enviously: watches the careless way her red hair moves in the sunlight, follows the confident movements of her body. In any imaginable conflict, she knows how easily she can ride roughshod over Carol . . . but so what! The years have taught her a few good tricks—and that's all. Carol is young, very young; she is like a guest come late, still fresh, who will see the party out till morning.

"Carol, can't you see that what you're doing isn't going to work. You'll simply have to start again. Look, put the small ones here . . . and then . . ."

Witch! Witch! Witch! How easily this word leaps up into Carol's consciousness. It is her favourite way of thinking of the woman—old Mrs. . . . Witch! Of course, she would have to admit that it is a little inappropriate, as far as the finer points are concerned. Mrs. Simpson is an old shrew, certainly, but as Carol realises only too well, she is not an indelicate one.

As she watches her employer now, carefully checking the cash-register before the customers start to arrive, she sees in that elegant, wasted face—power; power, pure and simple, although often used in devious ways. No matter what Carol might do or say, or try to get away with, Mrs. Simpson will always be able to turn the tables against her. Even as she watches her, the girl feels her face go red with the memory of all the times she has been put quickly and neatly in her place by the woman's sharp but economical jibes; remarks which the woman can produce instantly and without reflection, and which suddenly thrust Carol back to the sort of person she is before her parents—childish, graceless, ungrateful.

"Well, just see how long you can keep me here!" Carol mutters, smiling harshly as she thinks about her plan of escape from this wretched life. Today she is to be interviewed for a similar sort of job in a nearby suburb; her prospective employer is another old lady who is anything but friendly with Mrs. Simpson. At about ten to twelve, today, Carol will feel ill and will take her lunch-hour early in order to get to the other shop in time for her interview. She is not particularly anxious about her prospects; she will almost certainly get the job.

"Just you wait, you old witch . . ."

* * *

"I'm waiting for an explanation, child. I hope I will not have to wait all day. You've wasted enough of my time already."

How Carol hated her when she spoke like that; how she hated her! It had been bad enough, earlier that afternoon, to find that the job she had been counting on had already been taken; she had even been denied the little drama of an interview. It had upset her more than she could have imagined, so much so that she had decided to make the most of her extended lunch-hour, and had even arrived back an hour late.

Mrs. Simpson had said nothing. Apparently she had accepted the girl's story and had decided not to worry her. On returning, Carol had noticed the odd look Mrs. Simpson had given her, but as she really was feeling bad at that stage, she was not in a mood for subtleties of that kind, and had not thought about it till now.

Putting two and two together all the time! Can't I get away with anything here? She's not just a miser; there's something cruel, personal, in the way she treats you. God, I'd rather be anywhere than cooped up in this cage with her.

In fact, Mrs. Simpson had not believed her story about going home to have dinner and a little rest. And so it was that at about half-past-twelve, her mother had been surprised to receive a disinterested call from the shop asking if her poor daughter was feeling any better. She had been acting so strangely lately that Mrs. Simpson had even wondered if the poor girl was suffering from nerves. Of course, she hoped that this was not so.

Carol's mother was a friend of Mrs. Simpson; they were the kind of friends who deserved each other. Listening to old Mrs. Simpson carrying on like this, Carol can easily predict the kind of speech she is going to get on arriving home tonight. She can even make guesses as to what parts of it will be drawn directly from her mother's own dislike of her, and what will be Mrs. Simpson's doing.

"After all, my girl, you can't pretend that the money isn't important to you . . ."

She has to admit, of course, that Mrs. Simpson has grounds for complaint—but to keep all this in store till ten minutes before the shop closed, that was really too spiteful altogether! There was something in all this which shocked Carol. Not that

she hadn't played tricks of her own, as bad as this and worse too, in order to survive, but . . . Somehow, she seemed never to expect such petty acts of cruelty as this; there was something cold and haunting in them—because Mrs. Simpson was not a ruthless woman; there was something obsessive about her and, if not vulnerable, intimate, in a repulsive kind of way.

And to top it all off, she was not even threatened with dismissal—at least, no more than was usual when Mrs. Simpson took it into her mind to give the girl a few words of advice. Perhaps Mrs. Simpson did not know the full story; and was simply being more than ordinarily nasty, because of what she would regard as provocation. But Carol is reluctant to harbour illusions. She is like an animal that has been struck and momentarily thrown off guard; she is dazed and does not know how to see the situation through. She is leaving the initiative completely in Mrs. Simpson's hands.

She feels sick, nauseated, exhausted. It is not nice to feel trapped in a place that you can always leave, if you really want to. It is only too easy to feel what all the other mornings and evenings in this place will be like—until she has served her time as an employee, and, one way or another, has married herself out of jobs like these. She almost shudders at the thought of all the apologies she will have to make, and at the quiet hatred of people who spend most of their time together, never losing sight of the fact that, somehow it is their own choosing.

But she does not think about her own duplicity, or the ways in which the years, with her guidance, will refine it.

And when she is finally released, and she walks out quietly into the heavy, yellowish warmth of sunset, she feels as if she is dying. Her skin is numbed and vapid as air; the sunlight spills over her like dishwater . . . Damn that old witch! Whatever misfortune might befall her now, it could not fail to delight Carol, who has no illusions now about the intensity of her hatred.

And Mrs. Simpson, too, as she watches the girl leave, feels equally miserable. It is more than "tiresome" to know how much you are hated, especially when it is by someone you do not respect and cannot hope to compete with.

As the girl walks out of sight, hurriedly now, on the other side of the road, she sees how the waning sun is caught in the girl's red hair, always so carefully set and cared for. Along the gutter, odd scraps are drifting in the slight breeze—bits of newspapers, milk cartons; and among them a few small leaves, bright green and delicate as flowers.

There is something sharp in the sunlight, though, and suddenly she feels a bar of pain behind her forehead. Heavily, she sits down. So as not to waste time, she begins sorting through a tray of pearl-brooches the girl had been working on. It is in a mess as usual. She might have known!

Sadly, she stares out into the street, along which the last few shoppers are hurrying to and fro; and the last of the shop-assistants hurrying too, move out of sight, as if a curtain is soon to fall.

HAL COLEBATCH

Euthanasia

No, my brothers, not that way.
After all, once, long ago,
they must have been conditioned
to defend themselves against
what might be regarded as a
direct attack (Though you would hardly
think it to look at them now).

Yes, gently, one by one,
walk them, sleepy with age
into the gas chamber.
Position yourselves one on each side
so that last-minute resistance
can be quietly subdued.

Explain to any spectators
that the breed has outlived its usefulness
as often as is necessary for conviction.

A cloud of gas is much the best.
Let them die quietly, half grumbling
into ever-diminishing circles.
Put them to sleep, snuffling in their muzzles
in a dream of fleas and bones and bitches.

Now . . . Yes, so. Unbutton
their tunics at the neck,
unpin their medals, or
if you feel more aggressive,
TEAR THEM OFF!! (falsetto)

No need for the crude
rifle-butt to remove their fangs
(which might aesthetically offend
the R.S.P.C.A.).

A simple, undramatic hammer
will do the job as well
and be more in keeping
with the spirit of the times.

Now, naked, their obscenity be accentuated
as they lie piled together
like white and deflating balloons.
They will have no mourners who matter,
particularly if buried without
manifestations of either
joy or sorrow,
remembering always the gas was relatively painless
for them.

We have our articles of faith.

MARGOT LUKE

Perth Festival Drama 1974

There was a strong Australian bias in the plays selected: two revivals, one recent play and one specially commissioned for the occasion. The remaining two were both classics given aggressively modern treatment. In all it made for lively theatre, with an unintentional emphasis on comparisons. Why was the Canadian company so much better than any Australian equivalent? Why was the Sydney Nimrod Street Theatre group so much better than any of our local Perth companies, but at the same time, why were the Sydney imports into our local companies unimpressive? Why was Dorothy Hewett's wildly imperfect play "Catspaw" so much more interesting than smoothly professional Alan Seymour's "Structures". Why was it that the top-hat and khaki production of Antony and Cleopatra for which nobody could find a kind word, stays most vividly in the memory?

The Stratford National Theatre of Canada's presentation of Moliere's "The Imaginary Invalid" was indubitably the most accomplished production of the festival. There was a confidence and professionalism evident that made one accept unquestioningly the liberties taken with Moliere—in fact one was hypnotised into regarding the innovation as superior to the original. The breadth of treatment, as well as the costuming, placed the action in the Hogarthian 18th century rather than the 17th where it belongs, though the tone of the English translation was colloquial-modern, giving the producer complete freedom to colour the play with the style his actors adopted, and in this case notably the visuals. Tanya Moseiwitsch's set suggested aged, slightly shabby grandeur, subdued yet solid, which threw into brilliant contrast the final, surrealist scene of the Imaginary Invalid's ritual induction into the "medical profession". But it was William Hutt as Argan the gullible hypochondriac who gave the play its larger than life quality. Surrounded by an excellent cast, he dominated the stage even in repose. There was the suggestion of the grand manner reminiscent of the greats of the past, composed of personal magnetism and a mastery of his craft that allows him to play with his audience and his role. The closest approach to this ease and robustness one has seen in the Australian context is Leo McKern at his best—one thinks of the Melbourne Theatre Company's "Patate".

It was easy enough to respond to the quality of the company, more difficult to explain it. First class direction cannot account for everything, though Jean Gascon's success in blending coarse farce, mannered comedy, and macabre hallucination into a unified whole was at the core of the production. But it is more than this. The air of confidence exuded is attributable to the image the company has of itself: it is a company of world class, not a self-consciously "local" group relying on chauvinist support against all comers. The cast, composed of Canadian, American and English

actors, is patently chosen on quality, not Canadianness. This willingness (and financial ability) to reach out into the world and draw talent to itself, and to become a focal point, drawing audiences—at first 21 years ago by its novelty, then by virtue of its reputation—all this is invisibly behind the concrete evidence exhibited when the curtain goes up.

The obvious contrast was Aarne Neeme's production of *Antony and Cleopatra* at the New Fortune theatre. Here too an attempt had been made to give new colour and contemporary relevance to an established classic. The effect was challenging and exasperating, witty but too often off-key, and a scrambling of effects that did not work as intended. The two main flaws were miscasting and the imposing of a theory on the text that did not stand up to theatrical realities.

The production was straightjacketed by two impossible demands: the conflict of lifestyles was to be the dominant theme of the play (which it isn't), and the approach should be as Elizabethan as possible, which was to be achieved by discarding all traditional features, and making the costumes approximately relevant to *our* time, so that like a contemporary Elizabethan audience we would feel it was a play about our world.

Had the lifestyles approach been integrated into the larger concerns of the play, this could have been a brilliant production. The contrasts between Cleopatra's household of hippie-like gypsies and the military Roman establishment (part centurion, part fascist) were visually most effective. Where visual wit was relevant, some of the happiest effects were achieved: Antony and Caesar at the conference table, with top-hatted, frock-coated Lepidus doing the honours, acting as chairman and host passing small cakes around. Hornrimmed executive Agrippa as the punctilious diplomat, fussy, smooth, wellgroomed—all wonderful parody of summit talks. The schematic use of head-gear for identification-purposes, too, worked well in the confusion of truncated warfare. By their hats we knew whose side we were following—turbans for the gypsies and helmets for the Romans. What tended to irritate, though, was the basic army-issue khaki throughout, which was modified with token items of costume. Frock-coats with khaki pants look ugly and bizarre, and the mind was preoccupied with this attack on the aesthetic sense, letting the attention wander from the main concerns.

The most noticeable casualty, however, was the poetic element. Having decided that the legendary pair of lovers must be scaled down to the ordinary chap's dimensions, the whole play seemed to melt away to triviality. Antony (played by Arthur Dignam, who is usually a fine actor, but temperamentally wrong for the part) could only win the fight against Shakespeare's giant by speaking the lines against the grain, methodically destroying the grandeur of the language. His costume too, evoked the wrong echoes—part oleoprint biblical, part Lawrence of Arabia.

The Serpent of the Nile did not fare any better. Was this the queen that had seduced mighty Antony from the rigid Roman establishment? A slip of a girl, bare-foot, capricious, slightly vulgar and pettish, though undeniably attractive. One couldn't help wondering what all the fuss was about. Only near the end of the play was there a glimpse of the regal Cleopatra, but it was too brief and too late.

The stated purpose had been to achieve some kind of parallel to the experience of Elizabethan audiences seeing the play in Shakespeare's time. The effect was Shakespeare played like Brecht. The token "modern" dress was in effect alienation-modern, making us more aware of the people than the characters portrayed. This was aggravated by copying the Elizabethan practice of having actors playing multiple parts, which resulted in more concern in working out whether this was a previously seen character in a new hat, or a previously seen actor in a new part. In short, throughout the play the audience was nudged into noticing effects at the expense of absorbing the play.

The discrepancy between intention and effect was most strikingly demonstrated by the use of lights. In an effort to bridge the gulf between actors and audience it was remembered that in Elizabethan days the auditorium was not darkened. So the powerful lights of the twentieth century blazed on the audience for three and a half hours, which was irritating to the lucky people sitting in the raised portions of the theatre, but physical agony to those sitting in the pit with eyes raised up to the stage.

Elementary errors of judgment, as detailed above, would be obviated if this unusual theatre were put to regular use enabling producers to become familiar with its demands and problems, until they can, in fact, "play", instead of submitting to an annual experiment.

Yet, despite the many areas of dissatisfaction, the production had character, and the memory salvages totally successful scenes such as the above mentioned conference, the carousing of the soldiers, Enobarbus' speech (Leslie Wright), and Cleopatra's fierce interview of the messenger who brings news of Antony's marriage to Octavia (Robyn Nevin and Steve Jodrell).

Of the Australian plays, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* at the Octagon took the honours. It is a play that has worn remarkably well, and any signs of age are felt not so much as *dating* it but rather as contributing to an evocative period-piece. The Nimrod Street Theatre company's most striking characteristic was its vitality, which gave full play to the humour of the piece. There is no condescension on the portrait of the Carlton Barmaids, but rather an affectionate observation, and a relish in their down-to-earth acceptance of life. Even though the serious concern of the play is with immaturity and ageing, with the postponing of responsibilities and the inherent tragedy, there is a gusto about the presentation of the characters that excludes pity but does bring understanding. The play is unmistakably, not self-consciously Australian. It is not an examination of specifically Australian attitudes, but of a group of people faced with a problem that might be repeated in any part of the world: the false glamour of sham "youth" protracted over seventeen years of quasi honeymoons, the adolescent idea of having a "good time" delaying maturity and stultifying the personality and adult relationships. The language is comic and colourful, a genuine Australian idiom that is spontaneously funny, as contrasted with the current forced Bazza Mackenzieisms that rely on hyperbole and juvenile exhibitionism.

However, even this accomplished production, beautifully acted, with Melissa Jaffer as Olive and Reg Gorman as Barney, with colourful Emma being played by Marion Johns, came to grief on the stumbling block of modernisation. The set, obviously intended as a symbol of the dream-world the characters have created for themselves (already perfectly adequately symbolised by the kewpie dolls written into the play), was entirely composed of glossy pink furniture and aggressive newness and shiny surfaces. The play's intentions—showing a delapidated inner-suburbs terrace house which only assumes magic in the eyes of some of the characters, were thus completely ignored and destroyed. The Doll was a harbinger of a modern Australian drama renaissance, and has become a kind of legend, even in the minds of people who were around to see its original production. It was good to have an opportunity to reassess it, to appreciate its warmth, its humour, and to be reminded that the "well-made" play has much to recommend it.

If *The Doll* was a revival of great value, the same cannot be said for Alan Seymour's "Swamp Creatures". To be entirely fair, it was a substitute for a more recent Seymour work, which had to be abandoned at the last minute. It had a certain curiosity value, if only to show what kinds of plays were taken seriously in 1957, when it was placed as one of the top 20 entries for the London "Observer" play competition.

It is a preposterously gothic piece, which might do well played for laughs, but has enough serious-sounding lines in it to make one fear that it was all meant to be significant. The ingredients of mouldering mansion, crazy lady scientist-sadist, insane but appealingly frightened sister of lady scientist and terrified neighbours/captives, and the threatening swamp out there peopled with new and horrible creatures bred by the scientist, is wonderfully preposterous, and good material for a comedy—thriller, with the innocent young man (who happens to be the illegitimate son of the younger of the two mad-women) coming like a young knight to do battle with monsters and dragons. Alas, weighty psychological explanations spoil the fun: the dominant sister (played with a maniac glint and sturdy walking stick by Margaret Anketell) was rejected by her father whom she loved excessively, resulting in a kinky need to re-live the scene of her rejection by some spooky play-acting, it also left her with a horror of sex which she sublimates by breeding the creatures of the swamp (which howl most menacingly off-stage), also she treats her sister to forms of torment (revenge for her greater success with men and the proud achievement of a son). The combination of melodramatic horror comic with pop-psychology makes it impossible to take the place seriously, but it does have the advantage of leaving an audience in a state of amazement and incredulity, breathless to know what can possibly happen next. The cast, twisted and deformed, worked their way manfully through this farrago and most vivid in the memory stays Harriet Craig as the endearingly dotty victimised sister.

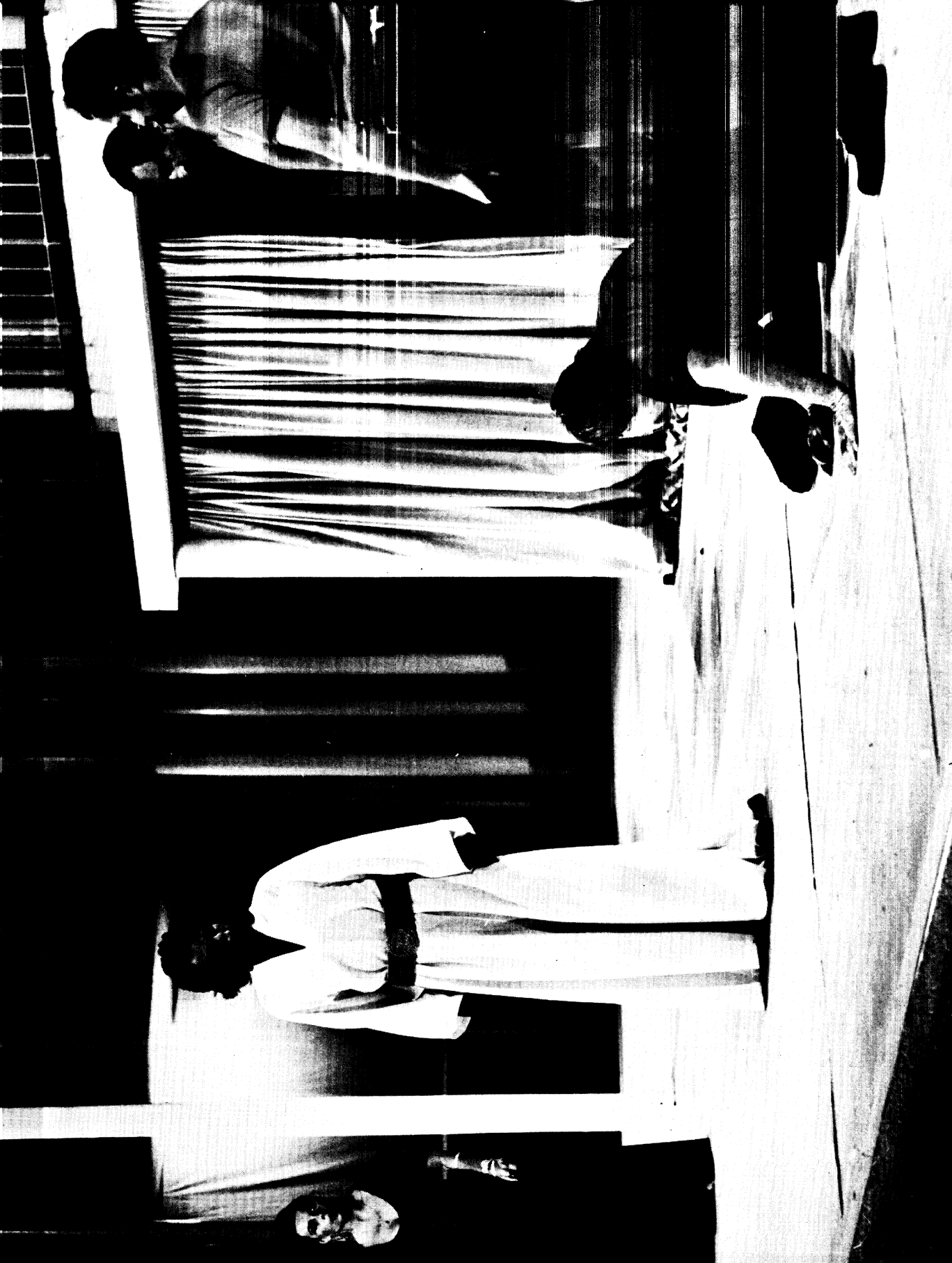
In the total context of Festival drama there is possibly a place for a freakish example of an early work by an established dramatist. Alan Seymour's reputation rests, of course, on the myth-exploding "One Day of the Year", which took its strength from the topic—the reassessment and courageous deflation of a sacrosanct national ritual. By examining something so firmly rooted in Australian life, and feeling sufficiently strongly about it to make it the centre of debate between the generations, Seymour had made an important contribution to the emerging discovery and definition of Australia in dramatic form.

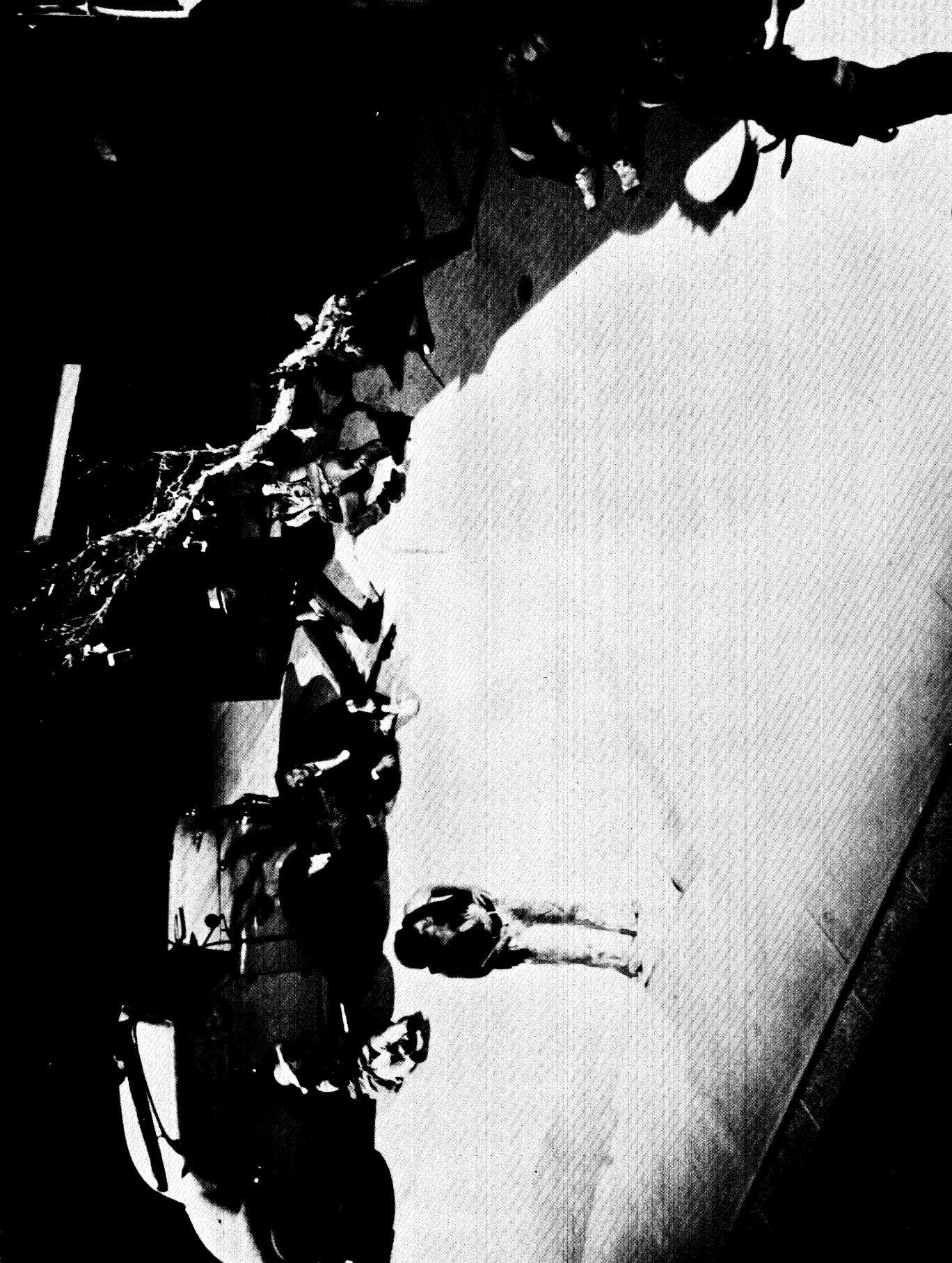
By the time his recent play "Structures" came to be written, the Australian content was reduced to a token, and somewhat manufactured Australian character in a group of clichée Londoners. The title refers to the attempts of a fairly affluent, fairly intelligent, fairly frustrated housewife to give her life form—structure—to fill in the meaningless gaps of existence. The main point that emerges is that her life's empty because in her ego-centricity she is unable to form meaningful relationships. However, the actual working out of the theme relies on what seems to be a carefully selected sample bag of fashionable misfits, who are presented with considerable sympathy, but they are too familiar, too prepackaged, borrowed from TV documentaries and Sundaypaper supplements. It shows the development from the early Alan Seymour, who welded incongruous elements (unreal horror with textbook psychology), to the smoothly professional manufacturer of intelligent entertainment: the dialogue is excellent—funny, moving, revealing, the psychological problems are accurately observed, and the structure—one day in the life of a neurotic housewife—neat and economical. But somehow it is *too* neat. The change from the seemingly happy couple managing to be devastatingly witty at breakfast, to the shattered pair at the end of the day when every one of the wife's self-delusions has been unmasked, *should* leave an audience drained, or enriched by new insights. Yet the neat succession of demonstration-models—smug husband holding reality at bay, homosexual who can joke about it but has other problems, good-time girl who is touchy on the subject of prostitution, drug addict brother—all these are interesting and, yes, *entertaining*, in a way that precludes them being taken very seriously. The final impression is that play is a consumer-article—well made of chrome and plastic, but they don't seem to use wood and leather any more.

















The acting gave it a temporary aura of sincerity. Harriet Craig was impressively frenetic as the unloved and unlovely housewife, and of the victims of contemporary disorientation Evan Taplin stood out in a performance that was at once moving and dignified.

Dorothy Hewett's "Catspaw" was especially written for the Festival. It was envisaged as an entertainment on the grand scale: a folk rock-opera. The only thing large enough to carry an ambitious project of this kind is the author's imaginative range. Both the music and vital elements in the cast let her down. This highly-coloured dream needs the grand treatment, but with tame music and a leading man who couldn't sing or suggest the charisma that is supposed to be his dominant quality, an important dimension was lacking from the start. The curious mixture of morality play and revue has its attractions, but also its inconsistencies. On the one hand the play is extremely funny, relying on a contemporary lack of respect for the great Australian figures of the past. Dame Nellie Melba, Daisy Bates, Mary Gilmore—having their shades romping and staggering through a modern drop-out's trip is an inspired device. But what are they doing there anywhere? Half the time one feels that it's all for the fun of the thing, and there seems no reason for their selection. Yet the mantle of intellectual respectability is spread over the revue items by the fact that they are fitted into a young man's journey, ostensibly a journey of self-realisation. The somewhat pretentious framework and the exuberant "turns" appear in uneasy co-existence.

With one hand the author seems to attack society—both straight and dropout, and while we are still trying to sort out our allegiance, she conjures up the Australian dream of things past, challenging us to see some sort of connection throughout, which is either so subtle that it does not fully emerge, or is lost in the joy of creating entertainment out of the previously revered legends.

The Catspaw of the title is Cat (played by Spencer Whiteley) a handsome dropout, who meets Rabbit (Helen Neeme) a beautiful bewildered widow, and her daughter Kitten (Mary Haire), a dreamy teenager, part idealist, part sex-kitten.

After an initial encounter in a car wreckers' yard (Hair-type songs with chorus about brotherhood and turning on) all three set off on Cat's motorbike to find a new life in the desert. They become involved with the denizens of the opal fields, notably Ma Spicer, sixty years old, earth mother in gum-boots (Margaret Ford) and her friends the town drunk (Brian Blain), an ageless Chinese prophet (Peter Rowley) and Rod Williams, a courteous ex-jackeroo. All four are quite superb, and in their number "Water them Geraniums" give a hint of what the play may turn into given time and polish. But this bush idyll is of short duration. Cat, driven by internal demons, wrecks all relationships, Rabbit dies in childbirth, Cat and Kitten move on.

Brian Blain's evocative set—wrecked car, dead tree festooned with cans, and corrugated iron shack, serves as background for all three locales: yard, opal field, and endless desert.

Whereas in the first half of the play we are marginally in the realm of reality, with recognisable bush-types only slightly larger than life, in the second half we are liberated into satirical fantasy. A spaceship arrives, piloted by Amy Johnson, with passengers Dame Nellie Melba (plus retinue of two divas in drag), Daisy Bates with her Kabbarli wisdom, and Dame Mary Gilmore. For good measures there is Mo McCackie, acting as master of ceremonies. As in the first half, it is the "characters" who overshadow the protagonists. In part this is due to inspired casting (Peter Julian as the robot Mary Gilmore and Margarie Fletcher as a scrumptious Nellie Melba steal the show between them.) In part it is the outrageous wit of the writing: Dame Mary speaks entirely in fragments of her poetry, ending on echoing lines, a windup-toy running out of steam. But there is also a difference in treatment: quite apart from the mawkish notion of cat and kitten and rabbit which do not seem adequate

symbols for the ideas they are expected to express, Cat is neither shown to be a sufficiently dynamic nor attractive character to inspire people to follow him without question. (*Why*, one asks, do they feel the urge to call Cat for King?) Neither is Spencer Whiteley's performance magnetic enough to hide the defect. Throughout the play Cat's charisma is proclaimed, but not demonstrated.

Mary Haire as the nubile teenage kitten is more successful: she has a charming voice and moves well—but throughout the evening one has the feeling that there is something slightly phony about her strong instinctive innocence, just as Cat's poetic visions laced with contemporary (unprintable) vernacular seem strained. Many of their comments about the deeper things seem pale besides sharply defined speeches such as Ma Spicer taking leave of the opal field: "Me dog's died of ticks and goanner bites. I put a cross over 'im. I've set the last of me homemade jam out for the bandicoots, brushed the bull ants orf the table, swept the floor an' put me hat on. We're finished here . . ."

Helen Neeme's dual appearance best illustrates the split personality of the play. In the first half, as the languid Rabbit she is glamorous though vapid. Returning in the second half as a crisp Daisy Bates, (singing about herself to the tune of *Baby Face*) she sparkles. "I get all my vibes from the last of the tribes", she sings, and is told by Wylie, her Aboriginal sparring partner, "We haven't *passed*, we haven't even come yet!"

Thus the second half, relying as it does, on the set pieces performed by the space-ship visitors, is by far the more successful part of the play. There is the Australian medley performed by the three operatic ladies, there are some wonderfully re-captured Mo numbers (though someone more physically like Mo would improve them), there is Peter Fisher's delightfully absurd black-power aboriginal in frock-coat and loincloth. In short, the mixture of send-up and sniping at sacred cows is a joy.

But what of the serious "body" of the play—the pilgrimage of Cat which leads him in a large circle from the car yard through the desert and back again. What exactly does he learn, or discover? How has the experience changed him, or us? We don't really know, and almost to the last moment we are given the impression that the author is asking for our reluctant approval of Cat, yet finally everyone rejects him. "They'll crucify me on top of the A.M.P. building", says Cat, and his old mates from the yard answers: "And nobody'll come, because nobody gives a monkey's f - - -." So we are left with Kitten, who seems to present a hopeful gleam in this welter of cynical despair. I'm not sure what the author is saying, but I like her way of saying it.

One feels that it is the proper function of a Festival to offer the opportunity for a local writer to try something ambitious, not entirely safe, extravagant. Something that will challenge and entertain, and let creative work grow out of the local scene. In this, Catspaw may be said to have succeeded completely.

PHOTOGRAPHS

1. Alan Seymour's *Swamp Creatures*. L. to r.: Harriet Craig, Margaret Anketell as the sisters, Eileen Colocott as a frightened neighbour, and Con Salvaris as the son returning to this gothic setup from contemporary Sydney.
2. Harriet Craig and Eileen Colocott in Alan Seymour's *Structures*.
3. Harriet Craig and Evan Taplin in Alan Seymour's *Structures*.
4. Antony and Cleopatra. Robyn Nevin as Cleopatra and Arthur Dignam as Antony.

5. Dorothy Hewett's *Catspaw*. The set combining wrecker's yard, outback tree and hut on opal-field.
6. *Denizens of the Opal field: (Catspaw)*.
L. to r.: Rod Williams, Peter Rowley, Brian Blain.
7. *Catspaw*: L. to r.: Spencer Whiteley, Rod Williams, Peter Rowley, Mary Haire, Brian Blain.
8. *Catspaw*: Outback party. Facing camera: Rod Williams and Margaret Ford.

Part of the material concerning 'Catspaw' first appeared in
The Australian, to whom grateful acknowledgement is made.

JOHN M. WRIGHT

Bruce Dawe's Poetry

'... the grasshopper memory leaps
in the long thicket ...'

(Bruce Dawe, 'Soliloquy For One Dead')

It is now widely accepted that Bruce Dawe's is a distinctive voice in contemporary Australian poetry, and that his distinctiveness has to do with his feeling for the unique rhythms of Australian speech. Rodney Hall has written of Dawe that:

... his unique contribution to the present development of our poetry is his use of Australian speech cadences. It is not a matter of slang. Here, maybe for the first time, we have a voice that would strike the Englishman or American as alien, even while using familiar words.¹

While the second part of this statement seems indisputably true of poems such as 'Life-Cycle', 'Enter Without So Much As Knocking', and 'Any Shorter And I'd Have Missed It Altogether', one wonders whether 'the use of Australian speech cadences' is the major factor that distinguishes his most important poetry, even when it is clearly there. No one would doubt, I should think, that there is a distinctive individual 'voice' in the poems, but it is the whole sense of the world which lies behind the 'voice' that *matters*, as one would think it ought to. And the individuality of that sense of the world has to do with (putting it pretty crudely) a sure sense of the ludicrous, balanced against an exuberant affirmation of the possibility of personal response in a world where the rot of conformity is so prevalent.

The title poem of *Condolences Of The Season*² gives some flesh to my phrase—'a sure sense of the ludicrous':

a matronly cosmogony of mums
hover above your pram or basinette
and by an infallible process of recall
place each distinctive trait (the eyes, for instance,
which could only be Uncle Tom's, nobody else's,
Aunt Lena's rugged chin, of course and, yes,
who could mistake those ears of Cousin Ted's?)

It is clear that the drive of the 'Identi-Kitting' process is to dehumanise the infant, 'the eyes ... could only be Uncle Tom's, nobody else's'. The whole process denies the child's individuality, denies his incipient *personality*. But the poem is a comic one because the threat is easily parried. Already the child seems to the speaker to have enough resilience to prevent his becoming the kind of person 'the matronly cosmogony of mums' implicitly want him to be—someone who can be categorised,

¹ R. Hall and T. Shapcott (ed), *New Impulses In Australian Poetry*, p. 36.

² All poems discussed in this essay, unless otherwise stated, are from this volume, which is Dawe's 'Selected Poems'.

'each distinctive trait' accounted for. Any feeling of distaste is well controlled by the speaker's confidence in individuality, his belief that his son will be (indeed, is already) as healthily resistant as he is:

And now it seems that you and I, my son,
must suffer with like fortitude
the diddums chorus, the ickle-man alleluia

In fact it may seem precious to write about 'Condolences of the Season' in terms of control and resilience; it is such a funny poem, delighting in the social games. There is little sense of threat in the poem, but these four lines betray a certain apprehension and distaste:

a matronly cosmogony of mums
hover above your prams or basinette
and by an infallible process of recall
place each distinctive trait

The child is so helpless in the face of all this, he really exists only as a plaything—a kind of curiosity. Because the speaker sees that his child will survive all this, he freely delights in the ridiculousness of it all, and any sense of threat is only there humorously. But compare the tone of this poem:

'Which one's the dog?' you find yourself saying
after the last escape-route has been cut
with the photograph album lying heavily
as a book of judgment on your knees.

Already, in that phrase 'you find yourself saying' there is some sense of desperation. You say it in spite of your manners and habits—you say what you think you ought not to say, but you cannot help it; it springs from a deep-seated horror at what is happening. In a way this, too, is 'the diddums chorus, the ickle-man alleluia'. People behaving dully, predictably and expecting you to behave in a similar way. No other reply than 'Really lovely, really lovely . . .' can be made, except the one he finally makes. There is no delight in this poem, no joyous celebration of the ludicrous (joyous because it can be triumphed over):

'Yes, yes. . . But which one's the dog?'
Why do they so often fail to understand
that your quake of merriment at your own retort
is only, after all,
the farewell flash of the gaffed fish
whose colours stream already into the gunwales
—the teeth now bared
in the familiar social rictus,
the disconnected eye
and lips hooked open on an interminable *mmmnh* of approval?

Even in the expression of an individual perception about social routine, the speaker cannot uphold his confidence in individuality and resilience:

the farewell flash of the gaffed fish
whose colours stream already into the gunwales³

The force of the poetic statement surely denies the claim that the speaker's individuality is merging into the general dull conformity, makes such a suggestion look finally almost melodramatic.

When no individual response, other than a desperate one, seems possible, the ludicrous suddenly becomes more than just ludicrous. It becomes horrifying and

³ Notice, too, the rhythmic finality in this line achieved by the combination of alliteration and assonance.

stifling, the range of possibilities so tightly controlled that individuality seems to be so dependent on the possibility of genuine spontaneity:

I have to be careful with my boy,
that I don't crumple his immediate-delivery-genuine-
fold-up-and-extensible world
into correct English forever, petrify its wonder
with the stone gaze of grammar, or turn him into
a sort of Sunday visitor at the lakeside
who brings bags of specially-prepared bread-crusts
to feed to swans who arch their necks and hiss.

(‘Easy Does It’)

As he so frequently does when moving to the climax of a poem, Dawe has found the paradigm image. Those swans have a conclusive force in the logic of the poem. It is the very spontaneity of their actions that is so strongly suggestive of their splendour. The swans, one imagines, hiss with far more force because they don't plan it ahead. This poem relates to ‘Condolences of the Season’ and differs from ‘Which One's the Dog?’ in its appeal, a comic appeal, to our sense of the ludicrous. And in Bruce Dawe's imaginative world the ludicrous and the prepackaged, the ludicrous and the learnt patterns (the secondhand responses) bear very closely upon each other. Closely related to all this is a missionary quality in the poetry, a fervent urge to set the world right, or at the very least give expression to the fullness of his outrage. He hisses with the swans. While this impulse in his poetry often becomes dominant to the point of stridency (or something like it), as Philip Martin has argued,⁴ it is also responsible for many of the finest moments. It is more frequently successful when the distancing device of satire is employed. The ‘statements’ (for example ‘Process’)⁵ are often too much like student newspaper journalese. His most successful ‘protest’ poems are usually those where one of the perpetrators of the outrage is allowed to ‘plead’ for himself:

Dear one, forgive me appearing before you like this,
in a two-piece track-suit, welder's goggles
and a green cloth cap like some gross bee—this is the State's idea. . .
I would have come arrayed like a bridegroom for these nuptials
knowing how often you have dreamed about this
moment of consummation in your cell.
If I must bind your arms now to your sides
with a leather strap and ask if you have anything to say
—these too are formalities I would dispense with:

(‘A Victorian Hangman Tells His Love’)

What we have here is a superb parody of the public servant's language—‘these too are formalities I would dispense with’, the grand, rhetorical apology for impotence and also the helpless plea of an independent, private ‘morality’ which must be subservient to the Department or the State (elsewhere characterised as the ‘orders is orders’ mentality)—‘this is the state's idea’ set in what is seen as a horrifying macabre parody of a religious ritual. But as the poem proceeds, the question implicit in the details is: ‘How *much* a parody?’:

The journalists are ready with the flash-bulbs of their eyes
raised to the simple altar, the doctor twitches like a stethoscope
—you have been given a clean bill of health, like any
modern bride.

⁴ P. Martin, *Public yet Personal: The Poetry of Bruce Dawe; Meanjin*, Sept. 1966.

⁵ Philip Martin refers to this poem in a similar manner. ‘Process’ is from the second volume, *A Need Of Similar Name*.

With this spring of mine
from the trap, hitting the door lever, you will go forth
into a new life which I, alas, am not yet fit to share.

(What *does* the minister say to the victim? What possible need is there for a doctor here? In the last lines the tone is clearly one of incantation.) Through appealing to our sense of the ultimately ludicrous, Dawe can convey his outrage most effectively. The dishonest, underhanded sordidness of the ritual emerges in the opening lines of the poem. The shabbily dressed hangman protests that he would have dressed for the occasion (and in the poem the anonymity of the hangman, who is in one sense only an incidental figure, does seem to be a calculated part of the ritual). By playing out the tragedy of a hanging as farce, the deepest sense of protest finds expression—the real sordidness cannot be hidden. The missionary impulse is most effective when it is not obtrusive; by dramatising the situation as farce of the most cruelly incongruous kind, Dawe is relieved of any need to *state* his outrage; it is dramatically presented by means of a brilliantly conceived apology which Dawe has drawn from the mouth of his created hangman, whose shadowiness seems even more sinister when he is given prominence and a voice, and who would seem in all the obvious ways the most unlikely figure to be addressing us, particularly with such articulately ludicrous obsequiousness. The final and astonishing poverty of all 'this is state's idea' apologies is searingly apparent.

The outrage which shapes 'A Victorian Hangman Tells His Love' is apparently completely different in kind from that which is implicit in 'Easy Does It'. And it might seem that 'outrage' is not the term one would usually employ to define one's objections to 'bags of specially-prepared bread-crusts'. However, I think it can be quite reasonably argued that there is a major link between the two poems, between in fact almost all of Dawe's poems. It is the annihilation of his individuality, the submergence of 'conscience' (if there is one), the readiness to conform unthinkingly that, in the dramatic structure of 'A Victorian Hangman . . .' enables the hangman to perform the act. Of course he is a tool of 'the State', but without such pliable tools no state (or 'State', with all the suggestiveness which that capital-letter contributes to in the poem) could hang men. This strain of thought would seem to be central to the poem:

—these too are formalities I would dispense with

He accepts the State's decisions even when they don't accord with his personal preferences. The poem suggests that 'his love' has the same power as his conscience—that of course he is incapable of any feeling because he is not a human being at all, but more like 'some gross bee'. Vital to the poem's shape, then, is this passionate denial of the bureaucratic principle, the submergence of individuality. 'Easy Does It' is quite obviously a poem about individuality, the secondhand, unspontaneous (or limitedly, predictably spontaneous) response is just so inadequate to deal with the vibrant, demanding world. The world ought to be perceived, Dawe seems to argue, unmediated. Trust no-one else's responses as fully adequate. In a society stifled by conformity, only the immediacy of sensitive individual response can offer the chance of a significant life:

—she'll only remember how, when they came here,
she held out her hands bright with berries,
the first of the season, and said:
'Make a wish, Tom, make a wish'.

The unleashed, soaring lyricism of these final lines of 'Drifters' celebrates one moment of defining significance in a footloose, tawdry life. The only thing that gives meaning to that woman's life are moments of spontaneous engagement with her environment, in a general setting of dullness and impermanence. The force

of lyricism in this extract seems interestingly related to the force of outrage (so tautly controlled) at the end of 'A Victorian Hangman Tells His Love':

Be assured, you will sink into the generous pool of public feeling
as gently as a leaf—accept your role, feel chosen.
You are this evening's headlines. Come, my love.

Both his 'lyricism' and his 'outrage' are a measure of Dawe's *passion*. In some of his better poems, lyricism balances a sense of loss or poverty:

I try hard

to forget, saying: If God wills,
it must be so, because of
His goodness, because—
but the grasshopper memory leaps
in the long thicket, knowing no ease. Ah, Joe,
you never knew the whole of it. . .

It is, of course, the freshness and clarity, the extraordinary lyrical energy of the 'grasshopper' image that stops this from being cloyingly sentimental. Because of the delicate balance achieved (not only here but in the poem as a whole) between an open lamentation and an immediately evocative affirmation of the vibrant physical world, the poem must be seen as a great elegy. It is not as if celebration and lament alternate crudely, they are inextricably blended:

Sometimes when summer is over the land,
and the heat quickens in the deaf timbers,
and birds are thick in the plums again,
my heart sickens, Joe, calling
for the water of your voice

The image of summer has the heavy, tactile quality of memory. It is so abundant, so bright that it seems to bring the speaker's emotions into focus, with a force like sudden sunlight. He cannot now choke back his sadness:

my heart sickens, Joe

But because the poem dramatically presents the speaker's internal landscape, we are not embarrassed.⁶ The landscape is so overwhelmingly redolent of the heart's heat, that it becomes an active force on the speaker; it is too bright to be borne. The vision of the landscape, in the context of the poem, is both a lament and a celebration—and they cannot be separated.

The poem, 'Leasehold' provides another instance of lyricism informing elegy:

For months, I remember, drunkenness. In the Roaring Forties
of ownership he lost himself endlessly,
running before the gales of alcohol
like a Great Circle clipper,
collapsing in out of the dark, clutching a ruffled 3 lb chicken
to his chest as he hit the deck. By the combustion-stove
the morning after, it was impossible to dislike
his dreaming body still in the act of making
its deep-frozen touchdown.

But one night, late,
I saw him, slumped at the kitchen-table, come awake
with a shocked cry that cleft the house,
on hearing, in the silence stitched like a coverlet with the tiny sounds
of bird and insect, the old refrigerator by the door

⁶ as we so clearly are by those lines of Lowell's: Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me. Tears smut my fingers. ('Grandparents')

start up alarmingly, abandoning
its muted self-possessed loneliness
as it beat on out to sea with great shuddering strokes.

It is that final image that embodies Dawe's compassion. We have the sense of a profound loneliness, a man hopelessly lost at sea. In the middle of the night that most homely of all objects, the refrigerator, becomes the agent of fear—and again that sense of the ludicrous is there, but this time in a quite different way. The parallel between the man and the old fridge (with 'its muted self-possessed loneliness') is not over-suggested or factitious, and the lyrical evocation of the fridge's sound is forcefully dream-like. Our final sense is of a deep compassion for the man lost 'at sea', 'before the gales of alcohol'. Clearly the 'deep-frozen' imagery is resonant on several levels, and even the company name 'Great Circle' is suggestive of the similar sense of aimless lost spinning found in the poem about his mother, 'My Mother In Her Latter Years':

she spins forever in the wholly-bought-and-paid-for
coffin to call her own

And in both poems that sense of loneliness and futility has developed from the dull, day-to-day grind, the search for proprietorship over *something*, even if it is only a house, or a coffin. Both these poems seem founded on incongruity—it is an integral shaping element in Dawe's perception of the world. If it can be used to expose the bogus, secondhand, prepackaged and unimaginative, it can be used also as a profound basis for compassion. Alexander Craig has written of Dawe:

. . . it's this poet's warm humanity, his sense of all men as 'members
of one body', which gives the hot cutting-edge.⁷

If he would always assert individuality as a prime value, he would also stress the inability of humans to do much to change the direction of their lives; he is at heart a determinist, as is so clearly apparent in poems like 'For the Duration'. So his celebration of the possibility of spontaneity is a recognition of the difficulties which must first be overcome, and his poetry is often almost consumed by a sense of transience and impermanence—'Drifters' might be seen as a kind of parable of the human experience. He is able to detect what is ludicrous in the ordinary and, as well as often shaping his outrage, and providing the basis for most of his humour, it provides also the possibility of profound compassion. How much more effective 'Leasehold' is than a poem like Geoffrey Lehmann's 'My Father' which resorts to the banality of mannered formal tribute:

Yet in him elemental beauties flash.

Dawe's elegiac impulse does not seduce him into sentimentality. Unlike the Dawe, the Lehmann cannot work through its images alone but is forced to fall back on assertion. He *asserts* what the poem itself has been trying to embody.

The major reason why Dawe is so often able to work successfully almost entirely through his images is simply that his vision is usually so clear, so immediate. He can, for instance, in 'Cattle At Night-fall' evoke an equally resonant sense of the imagination as Keat's sense in 'I cannot see what flower are at my feet . . .'. The sense of the imagination is tactile, in a darkly, weightily sensuous way:

. . . . When I have closed my books with a sigh
and gone out there into the tussocky darkness,
swinging my lantern,
whether any of them, moody beasts of the imagination,
will unfold their fore-legs like clasp-knives, rise
and follow me willingly home.

⁷ A. Craig (ed.), *12 Poets 1950-1970*, p. 7.

Equally suggestive (of something like anarchy, I suppose) is this image, which gives one no hint of any conscious shaping but emerges from the body of the poem with the suddenness of a dream-image, and its movement starkly parallels its sense of plunging—all that sinister energy:

and, later, as the train rocked slowly over a rusted
bridge, the thought of fish in the darkening water,
diving like planes.

(‘Renewal Notice’, in Dawe’s third volume: *An Eye For A Tooth*.)

It might be said that this particular kind of lyrical clarity is not typical of what might be called Dawe’s ‘lyrical impulse’, that it is heavier and less clearly celebratory than, for instance, the note struck at the end of ‘Drifters’ or that of ‘the grasshopper memory’ in ‘Soliloquy For One Dead’. Certainly those images have a quality of sung energy and an unreserved affirmation which sets them clearly apart from those above. But all four are the products of an extraordinary clarity, where images are given tactile flesh, as it were, and not just called up in the mind. The ending of ‘Letting Go Of Things’ possibly gives an even firmer sense of the poet’s evocative energy:

to be young again in the dark warm with voices
alive with quicksilver kisses, tears,
tigers running through dream-woods
and impossible poetry.

We have the sense here of a lifetime’s experience being compressed into a series of paradigm images, even while the separateness of each is fully preserved. They fall over each other like dream-images do, and their very fleetingness aptly suggests the transience the poem is concerned with. And they gather energy from the first, more tangible memory and soar towards what feels like an image for a final, ultimate fantasy at the end of life.

So this clarity and sureness of image is, then, a distinguishing quality in Bruce Dawe’s poetry. But a poet who works so much through images would seem to run certain risks. Dawe does not only run certain risks, he falls (almost delightedly sometimes) frequently into the most hopeless excesses:

So it is, so it is . . .
and the elderly nod
as the lace of their lives
is fretted away

(‘A Slight Indisposition’)⁸

Although it skirts sentimentality, this image of lace ‘fretting away’ does manage a certain poignancy in evoking the ageing process. But its value is entirely lost because, in the next stanza, the image is forgotten. The poet has found another image to play with:

And memory twines
like a cat round their ankles
—pussy is always
hungry, they say,
nice fish for puss-cat
bones are what’s left of
the wild heap of silver
way out in the bay.

The final effect is one of confusion, of one image being used in too many different ways. It seems that ‘memory’, like a cat, is hungry. The cat (which ‘twines . . . round their ankles’) eats the fish they offer it. Memory feeds on the elderly (although

⁸ This poem is from the fourth volume, *Beyond The Subdivisions*.

by what means we are not shown) as the cat feeds on the fish-bones. All that's left of 'the wild heap of silver/way out in the bay' are the bones. All that's left, in the end, of the human, are the bones. That image of the fish at sea is soaringly lyrical, but the final effect of the poem is of an almost morbid insistence on mortality, an almost sentimental pessimism. The imagery *has* a certain poignancy, but also a softness—a too-easy pattern of association. The poem lacks any real unity because the images compete with each other rather than harmonise.

Sometimes almost the opposite is true—the images harmonise altogether *too* well because they are so cliched that we know instantly which standard moves are being made as they are being made. The poem 'Whether The Ideal World Contains Surprises'⁹ is an example of Dawe's equation of conformity and predictability with a sense of unreality, a feeling of the bogus. The only lines which have any force, however, are the final ones:

A toilet-door being jammed, he shoved a bit
And startled an elderly person having a shit. . .

The point would seem to be that one is not meant to defecate in the lavatories of 'Ideal Homes'! The poem tries to create the sense of a conformity so vast that any kind of privacy is destroyed. For the most part the poem is almost as dully predictable and cliched as its subject matter, and the only sense of any compassion for 'the stouter citizens' comes with the phrase:

when the week's dreams
Reach fever-heat

Basically the poem is just too laboured:

our stouter citizens go
On Ideal Homes inspections, hopefully

Seeking the earth-bound pleb equivalent
Of the home laid up in heaven which awaits
Superannuated souls. I, too, have strolled

Through marble-veneer entrance-halls, and bent
An ear to the salesman-angel at the gates
(Wrought-iron, not pearly):

'Superannuated souls' has that sparkling ring of confidence, the 'I, too' smacks rather heavily of the kind of condescension one can do without in poetry, and the spelling out of the 'gates' image is stunningly clumsy. It is, in fact, primarily a piece of anti-commercialism, and a poem only secondarily.

If the failings of 'Whether the Ideal World Contains Surprises' and 'A Slight Indisposition' do not at first sight seem closely related, it might be urged that they have their genesis in something common. Dawe's best poems have the directness and clarity that comes only from the deepest kind of response, coupled often with the kind of immediacy that one associates with dream-images—images that frequently present themselves as paradigms and yet seem to have surfaced unsolicited from the unconscious. That is to say that Dawe has succeeded in making us unaware of the conscious shaping process, even though one cannot doubt its presence. Often the less successful poems seem to have failed because we become too conscious of 'poetic intentions', so that we have the sense of overshaping, too many games being played with language, images being stretched so far that their suggestiveness is lost. When this happens the poem loses its sense of an individually perceived, specific experience which is simultaneously paradigmatic. In such cases the language is

⁹ From *Beyond The Subdivisions*.

often flawed with clichés, simply because the immediacy has been replaced by an imposed patterning of experience towards what, in many cases, feels like a pre-conceived conclusion. It is a failing of this basic kind which seems to have undermined 'Whether The Ideal World . . .' and 'A Slight Indisposition'.

Conversely, poems such as 'Soliloquy For One Dead', 'The Not-So-Good-Earth', 'Leasehold', and even 'Miss Mac' must be numbered among Bruce Dawe's best poems because they do not lose that sense of direct experience growing towards the representative, the paradigm. With the exception of the dreadfully crass last line of 'Miss Mac' ('(Oh yes, young, young, young, *somebody*)'), these poems give no sense of striving for the grand statement, the definitive human truth of the kind found in 'The Flashing Of Badges', 'A Slight Indisposition', and 'For The Duration'. The vast human generalisations do not need to be *stated* in his best poems, they can be dramatised:

a mouth full of spit, a full quota
likewise of years and no further urge to be clever.
('Any Shorter And I'd Have Missed It Altogether')

the whistling
which is only the wind in the chimney's
smoking belly, the footsteps on the muddy
path that are always somebody else's.
('Soliloquy For One Dead')

The poetic clarity which shapes his best poems and is so clearly exemplified in the extracts above, is, as I have argued, closely related to Dawe's sure sense of the ludicrous. It is this sense which usually manages to keep the poetry firmly in touch with the urgencies of day-to-day life, and which so frequently saves the poetry from sentimentality:

the bruised blue look of evening
prompts speculations upon the reasons for existence
and sets the apprehensive traveller to fingering thoughtfully
his weekly ticket
('The Rock-Thrower')

That last line sets the 'speculations' firmly enough in context.

Often, in fact, it seems that it is his sense of the ludicrous that provides the poetic basis of his compassion. Poems like 'Leasehold' and 'My Mother In Her Latter Years' forcefully exemplify this relationship. And it is that same sure sense of the absurd, the incongruous, the futile which antithetically establishes what Dawe means by individual sensitivity and openness—where dull, secondhand responses are shown to be hopelessly inadequate in the face of a world which offers the *possibility* of spontaneity and a sudden freshness of response:

—she'll only remember how, when they came here,
she held out her hands bright with berries,
the first of the season, and said:
'Make a wish, Tom, make a wish.'

GREGORY CAMPBELL

Profundity and the M.T.T.

when i see you in sunshine
making hay Bluey boy
i almost cry

and watch the cranes flying north
in great dotted lines
beyond the Used-car lots
swaying to work on the eight o'clock
an extra suspicious eye
on the western corner of my window
where gathering cumulo-nimbus bruised the sky
a royal blue
how kindly they waited upon the wings
of passing in their time
before leaping on top of the terminus
and sneezing how sneakily winter doth come
the unprepared alighting in damnations
of where were the ants that scurry?

on this bus i sit and watch lines
transmigrating from yesterday to tomorrow
over my shoulder craning necks
that read this Daily News
ah, when i see you making hay
in sunshine Bluey boy
i almost cry

PAMELA TAYLOR

The Spiders

Spiders in the corner of the shed.
No one else uses the place——
Left for the dead.

No symmetrical web
For my spiders——
A mass of thread

Coming from nowhere
Going to nowhere
Floating on air.

They do everything slowly
These spiders, they live
Slowly, they die slowly.

Dying slower than living
In the same place——
Living and dying.

The skeletons whitening there,
Short bodied, long-legged,
Sprawling on air.

GRAHAM ROWLANDS

One Enchanted Evening

Well, old buggers of sixty
may sunbake in the raw
on their private verandahs
in semi-tropical climates,
may offer sixteen year olds
sherry with the trifle,
even talk about sending sympathy cards
to imprisoned poofers before it's illegal
to jail them and rightly so too,
by jove, but when they down
too many pre-dinner drinks,
kiss your mother's hand ostentatiously,
abuse the waitress, forget the bill,
lean over you during Oscar Wilde
read from an intimate stage,
you'd have to be very naive
not to expect at the very least
to have your hand squeezed in the back seat
while your father drives the old boy home.
You'd have to expect your father
to demand that you burn the Thank You,
particularly when you open it first,
curious, vain, flattered
while still finding it a bit silly.

Of Straw and Things

Of straw and things, and grasses;
Of cloths and sheds in the distance;
Of milk-moons and country nights;
Of brown-soil cliffs and rocks
and heights;
Of hail and white bridges
—seen in foam.
Of straw and things!
Of oil lamps and joyous countenances;
Of conversations and dreams;
Of clocks and stables
—storm-haunted and steadfast.
Of straw and things!

Of nights remembered;
Of whistling wind in gullies.
Of fields and hills
—beneath blank sheets of summers.
Of straw and things!
Of uncharted spots in deep, late sun.
High earthen places near home.
Of bats and owls. Of blue and hay,
and sweet, breezy space.
Yes, of straw and things!

VIV KITSON

The Poet with Tongue in Cheek, Discusses his Present Position

I sit in the top storey of my rented house
—hardly suburbia, five minutes walk from Central—
listening to the roar of traffic on busy Cleveland Street.
I look over my modest backyard jungle:
some flowers planted and some vegetables.
The dog and lover recumbent, if not asleep,
I commune with myself in the flat voice of my contemporaries,
with words laid out on the page in some semblance of order.
I should perhaps contemplate the Cosmos
and other awful aspects of this existence,
but the still night air carries the sound of Greek music
and the fetid odours of the city's life.
So I think instead of lover, dog and garden;
and find some sort of transitory peace.

ANGELA KORVISIANOS

Glint Eye Jack and Tao

We found a potter and a pub that jutted out all across town the sounds of Joe playing his jugband conducting the knucklebones the face with the wrinkled skin and the handlebar ears the spoked arms spoked with calypso fingers the mardi gras the drowning in the bath, the mirror sweating piss, they stuck plastic jewels into the eyes and Joe played with his harlequins and with his mandolins.

Trissa sees no evil hears no evil only senses his Congolese beat, he was born in a mosque fed by a she zebra silver striped melancholy blue had a son called Tao but he drowned. Splayed displayed elfen evil puck only a weevil, termite terror as they eat your boxes and your drums knowledge globes and pidgeon holes sacred monkeys inkwells smears and xylophones. Show us the horsemen Joe, you know the ones of the Apocalypse. Trissa dragged Jessica by the ankles and Joe conducted the sky amidst the stage prop scenery and plastic buckets being beaten rain rain maybe Tao died while baking in the oven and we watched the horde of bikies roaring in the downpour. They're very ritualistic.

Trissa shampooed Joe bottled his blues and sent them with the caravans. Africa Africa monsters and moonshine no jukeboxes just jackals humid jungles tiger shackles. Tubas Joe, you know the years. A lightning flash and one dead crooner. Sentimental wolves give away trinkets Glint eye Jack eats the scent fools schools rhythm crews bathroom slime salt and lime blaring parties on the boats Joe ate soap and scolded Jessica of parsimonious people: Anal Retentives all of them horders and misers expelling cans obstinate and coming on oh so so morally superior. Only a pretty melody she'd scorned. A lightning flash and ten dead birds. Wishing bones strutting. Werewolves and chickens.

Trissa at the bar plays with the ferns, the mirrors and the stars. Olduvai Gorge Kenya Tanganyika and the Veldt. How *did* the leopard get his spots? Chessboards hug gaslight nudes. Trissa was a Masai lady sold in Carthage as a slave. Or was a dirty Berber whore wearing a cowbell. But whatever she was she was illiterate with two side teeth missing. Jessica's smug certificate mad she has the hide to call him psychopath Joe Joe you dirty pig you haven't sublimated all your dung! Trissa had Tao when she was twelve. But she has sublimated that. He's dead anyway. I killed him. In a lightning flash in a telephone booth. Threw him out like he was superman and he was sucked up to the sky. Slurp then burp then nothing. Only the downpour and the bikies roaring off half wondering whether they should stay around and cater to mad Jessica's half non existent fantasies. Because Jessica was there. She was the Supervisor. She didn't have to do much. She never does. That's why they come to her.

Now Joe thinks he's aboreal his metatarsals in the grill Jessica's still she's tired of pranks defensive blank to please you darling butterfat what do you want my sulky bulgy bush eyed frog? A man wearing yellow shoes with deep blue stars placed his feet up on your lap Jessica and you began to lick them. For chrissake cake and peppermints I could have bought you sweeter things. He only ruled a concentration camp. Jessica with your rumps of a zebra.

Joe juggled the ball bearings in his tambourine, visions of can can, organ grinders' monkeys and watery sad pathos. Trissa is the glitter queen, she kisses my photograph.

Joe found the potter and helped him place his mixer of cement, his watermelons and his old scrap metal corsets in the basement. The potter nodded, tied his head-band back, and then began to work. He smiled up through the Don Quixote bars at Jessica. Jessica saw, and leaped, went flying down there when he sent her up the glance and she fell down swift three stories like a bat her arms and legs outspread, her dust cloud cape, her rodent's nose and eyes and landed on a three point dive her cape Fantasia gathered up her shadow.

Screw you Jessica with your membership to the citizens' T.B. League. And the stethoscope hanging out of your pocket.

Awnings and gutters, cockroaches Joe the fool laps up his bongoes to Jessica's hard zombie resin insect spectacles. Trissa is frowning while painting nipples on her ankles. Trissa is constantly on fire since she lost Tao Trissa you bitch why do you stand there like a squaw insolent slut Jessica covets silent Madonnas smirking self reinforcing ones like Trissa. But hate is hate and Jessica has never had to do it in the street!

The barmaid's showering Joe with loving eyes he's going to be a superstar Hail Joe Hail Joe we'll pin a twenty dollar note on the lapel of your Mad Hatter tails and lead you around like a prize pig. Trissa is snorting up her nose. Jessica's beady eyes are quivering, her snout is twitching like a weasel's.

Phonographs violins aphrodisiacs and cobblestones all go to make Joe's jugband. Sand dunes desert owls powder puffs lipstick mirrors Victorian couches and all those awful ferns again emerging from their flowerpots. Wine bottles skiddle across the bar.

Stars are reflecting in the shoeshine of the shoes of Jessica's new beau. The potter's gone, she went and hardened his cement. She'd toyed lolled foaled bored soared and scored. And drank a triumphant lemon squash after it. And still felt discontent and full of twentieth century stereoscopic guilt.

Joe is going to give a gift: the grandest that his Jessica will take. A sugar daddy millionaire, a yachtsman with a fine white blazer and white sandshoes one that will cherish Jessica and soften up her granite brow and mad impatient tapping and ambitious feet.

Velvet curtains curved chairs feathers top hats and Joe smiling like a baby. You're making lots of interference Joe keep your noises for your band, keep your lavender sprays for yourself, give them to Trissa who's lying there provocatively with a daisy in her cunt. Jessica can't wrestle you, she's more preoccupied with fighting death. It keeps her waking all her sleepless moments.

Dogs dogs and jackals. Stop sobbing Joe. Try singing Minnie the Moocher.

The Africans are coming! The Africans are coming! Hoods and eyelids, Joe like a shy embarrassed moron makes his entrance, his groupies riding him with palm fronds. He thinks that Jessica must love him now. Teak porcelain in wedding dresses Almond scent frankincense eastern silk all wasted on the bones of Homo Habilis. Vultures laughing. Tarzan can't even come now, he has been trodden on by high stilleto heels. Joe is hysterical Jessica's phoning the police, she's going to tell them Tao was given to the bikies for their mamas to fatten and Joe knows who killed him.

Jessica's trying to run, to climb over the balcony Trissa isn't bothering to catch her by her weak insipid waist. "Why does she come here?" Trissa screams. "Why does she come here?"

Joe feels his body disconnect the northern lights and comets. Shake off the earth orgasmic whipping of himself up on a rainbow by black Jessica. Jessica please be the huntress, the cheetah, the vulture please be the lady in the leopard skin Jessica!!

But Jessica just babbles about the practicalities and dos and donts of fucking for this yachtman. Ooh Jessica . . .

Black and blue infinity and red and silver bodied dawns. I watched as Tao was slowly murdered.

Four walls and a balcony. Trissa is watering her plants. The potter wants back the arty pieces Jessica stole from him. He's also going to phone up the police. He hates us all . . . He spits on the floor. Trissa stirs it up with her big toe while she is thinking downcast eyes.

They all tried chanting to make Tao come back to life.

Joe sometimes thinks that he must educate his Trissa. She's never known a real live bathroom full of levers. But summer passes pigeons in the city parks and lanes, every day, day after day, week after week, three secretaries meet at lunchtimes in the park and every day religiously they pass a joint. Joe never misses going to watch this ritual of three suave ladies smoking dope.

The parrots of the gasoline and tar. Jessica has an income and a car. Joe loves these passively aggressive sullen birds. He love hate goggles at them like he's Rudolf Valentino.

Glint eye Jack is poking his giant head around the corner of the skyscraper. He has a giant grin and a bow tie. His colourful expansive head is filling up the sky. His eyebrows are moving up and down, his fat thick lips are stretched out to his ears. He winks at Joe. Joe looks away pretending he can't see him.

Tao who had squealed like a mongoose and Jessica who loped like a giraffe. Toothbrushes. The porcelain sink had sweated blood, and lots of overlapping smiles, certified X were stamped into the mirror.

Dogs dogs and jackals . . .

M. DADSWELL

The Marriage Wilderness

A window,
tall wooden poles,
crossed wires
tangled like her mind.

Every day
it's the same
from the alarm clock's clanging
to her hair curlers and dirty dishes,
packed lunches,
coffee with the newspapers,
sex and snoring
and . . .

Couldn't that oil-blotted driveway
lead her beyond
four veneer walls?
to float above silence,
to take to the hills,
to—
to—
oh, her blotted rutted drive

would lead
back
to a kitchen sink,

so
she pours Nu-wash
over stacked dishes,
twists on the hot water
to cloud the window
'til tomorrow.

EAKROBERTS

Graduate Student

tailored grey flannel suit
short skirt
her legs crossed loosely
in tan tights
squishing her mound
in a high A

her body baroque
at that precise
melon moment
before the bloom
turns to wilt

no she did not smoke
but yes a red wine smiling
beaujolais medoc a small
glass of something simple

took her four glasses
to lean forward say
she thought she had
a lot to give
someone
serious
authentic
kind
deep and
lasting

her eyes hopping
soft as trusting sparrows

my first impulse
was to
lie.

Spring in Devon

soft as silk Spring
opening its moist eyes
la belle dame skinny ribs
wrens' wings your fragile lashes
fluttering
and butter wouldn't melt . . .
oh yeah
I've seen you at it sweets
shot in rich backlighting
taking the fivefold kiss
dressed only in almond blossom
spreadeagled brazen as
blood tulips and
only blind Freddy would believe
your fist is not of iron
clothed in that delicate glove of green.

GARY LANGFORD

At the Landing of Cook

While they floated in the sea's breath
they were broken & minute,
land returned power
& hour by hour they traced the coastline,
snow on mountains & black oily water,
shivering in the still bay.
A parade of old women chanting
as they gathered at the river of dusk,
beyond the Gods of Ice & Wind.
They carried the secrets of creation
in the blood's heat,
sleeping in dark places
close to the earth's wounds
& mountains where the dead warriors
marched behind the curtain of mist.
Legends were passed around the fire
of men who shone like the sun
& returned into the ocean,
leaving death & strange objects
to revere for it was rumoured
they would re-enter
through the hole
in the Western sky.

Search Party

From the top of Luf's lagoon
miles of sea rolls in,
turbine green;
I look through the eye
of a cloud
into huge cut stone.

Cliffs full of daisies
enter my feet
& the earth
runs with the hooves
of many animals.
Wild berries grow.

Men work along the coast
throwing cigarette butts
against the sun.
The two bodies lie
on stone watching
them approach.

Tongues pant in heat,
an unknown bird calls
faintly; an arm
is missing, the radio
announces it
quietly.

SHANE W. B. McCAULEY

Stone Angels

On this day . . .
Yes, on this day
the doves have died
like eyes in the rain.
All the past and future glories
are carried in this day
like mosquitoes in mud,
or death in clay.
On this day
the clouds are pitchforks in the sky,
pointed towards the night
they whisper ignoble secrets.
On this day
stone angels fly.

D. S. LONG

all day I move through ships
violating the thresholds of language
sentences frozen for export
the engine valves of punctuation
the mute stowaways sliding for a meal

even storms
forgetting the sea

all the harbours
moved inland by time
lighthouses lost among wetcountry farms
the loneliness of lighthousemen
speaking their own private languages
as if their mouths were filled with seabird eggs
salty adjectives
changing with the tide

all these remnants
of the meridians that divide us
reforming the land on the seabed

GARY LANGFORD

Summer Bath

For Val

White room you lie swishing water
over the soft run of your body,
underwater breasts
and through the open window
bees fill the air.
I watch the sun
touch your nipples,
mountains, cities
and over the edge I pull
the blanket, writing poems
on the wall. You say
'I wish' and meadows
of new grass are born
each day with new odours.
You stare at the sky
and your eyes
are dreaming.

EAKROBERTS

Brighton Beach, Feb. 1973

the surf rattles its knuckles
on the shore
shingle makes tiny gossip
skittering and popping

greater mortality lies
in the tightness of your lower lip
flare of your long black coat
as you pace the beach

we are waiting to say it to each other
something sits on us spindly legged
rusty as the whorls and blistered
silver coronets wrought long ago in iron
on Palace Pier

your hair tied back so hard your
forehead shines with the need
to lay it on the table
smooth your fingers through
the rough cloth of our love

but we don't in this place that
crystallises change
without changing knowing
it would sound as hollow
and exotic as Brighton Palace and
we are not an age or Empire
leaving hotels and Colonels stiffening
in the cold sun on concrete promenades

perhaps like this sea and sand we
move in and out
of each others reach grating
in love one upon the other
incompatible finally
though resting totally
in each other's grip.

PETER GOLDSWORTHY

Delicatessen

from the continental deli
you buy continental delicacies

portraits to decorate your garret
facsimile letters and laundry lists
scores in the original european

each month you trade-in
your household gods

and from the current
definitive biographies

you memorize anecdotes
and derive your own
cheap paperback version

Gods

these days they are everywhere
outwardly normal, they bleed if
scratched, catch colds in winter
fart with earthly realism

they could be anyone you know
brilliant mimics of human folly
impossible to tell from mortal men
even in death

CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE

The News Broken

Dear sir, indeed, and I met all these characters yesterday in a place and heard, and I am lying luxuriously in a nineteenth storey bed, very comfy, haven't digested the news, city below me by L. S. Lowry, dawn cloudsplashes by Robin Wallace-Crabbe, relation of mine? yes, certainly, lying back easily above it all but heard to my surprise, misty westerly traffic sounds, and him so young still, someone said it and my mind changed tracks (metaphor from Joe Furphy I realize) bang! in the middle of a foreign city and still now in comfy bed-with-a-view, my friends, calling back pictures, him in action, flying over the pack, groan of background cars nineteen floors down (earth hath not anything and all that) not seeing him actually: not a clear image but what you might call the Platonic Form, poor old Plato, up here, of a full forward, a *very good* full forward going up over the pack like a rocket, capping it all with eight goals against a strong defence, nice here, yes, but I can't really sleep, London spread out, commas also a way of life, cannot clearly see . . . him, almost put his initials which would have given the wrong idea, flying over someone's shoulders, gosh yes! the black and red, slim but fit as a, can't visualize, keep getting, here, high up, instead, famous snap of Dick Lee in his heyday, how we used to lie on the beach at, never mind, a stationary angel with baggy black shorts, but not, now, John Coleman: yours truly, stop, enough.

BOOKS

Modern Australia in Documents, 1901-1970,
by F. K. Crowley.

In two volumes: Vol. 1 1901-1939
Vol. 2 1939-1970 (1973)

Professor Crowley's documentary history of 20th century Australia comprises over 1000 documents, covering almost 800 subjects. It is designed to illustrate by the use of the printed and spoken words of contemporaries, the major events, developments and controversies in Australia since federation. The documents are arranged chronologically, each with an introduction explaining the historical setting and significance of the subject matter.

Ours is of course the great age of documentary histories. Think of an historical subject and in your school or university library you'll almost certainly find two or more collections of documents on it. There are people who have managed to make a career out of providing for the apparently insatiable market for lots and lots of bits and pieces of history. In more leisurely days it seemed appropriate that having secured an academic position an historian would write a learned monograph or even two, before settling down to the serious business of department and university administration, and, with the little time left over, either write (with or without

the aid of notes) a general history or compile (with the aid of a research assistant) a collection of documents on a marketable piece of history. Things have changed and now it is not unusual for the apprentice historian to flex his academic muscles on a book of documents, bypassing the messy and taxing monograph stage. Such is life.

It should be said now that in terms of the generalizations just made, Professor Crowley has come to books of documents alarmingly late in his career. For over twenty five years he stubbornly refused to be deflected from the production of substantial monographs and valuable bibliographical aids. It is a tribute to the power of the new God, however, that Professor Crowley has at last been forced to his knees in obeisance; and his conversion is almost as complete as can be—*Modern Australia in Documents* outweighs all but the best American examples of the genre.

Modern Australia in Documents is an impressive feat and will prove useful—particularly for harrassed Tech. and University lecturers on the lookout for juicy quotations and the like. It might even be read with pleasure from cover to cover (twice over), missing, perhaps, the editor's rather lack-lustre introductory notes to each document. The task would be at least as pleasurable as reading Australian newspaper headlines from 1901 to the present day. Professor Crowley writes in the Preface that 'historians cannot always be serious'; but shouldn't they write history?

C. T. STANNAGE



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