

The Floor of Heaven

John Tranter spent his youth on a farm on the South-east coast of Australia, attended country schools, and took his BA in 1970 after sporadic study. He has worked mainly in publishing, teaching and radio production, and has travelled widely, making twenty reading tours of the United States, Britain and Europe. He has lived at various times in Melbourne, Singapore, Brisbane, London, Florida and San Francisco, and now lives in Sydney where he is a company director.

Twenty collections of his verse have been published, including *Urban Myths: 210 Poems*, a volume of new and selected poems.

In 1992 he edited (with Philip Mead) the *Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, which has become the standard text in its field.

He is the editor of the free Internet literary magazine *Jacket*, at jacketmagazine.com, and his own homepage offers hundreds of pages of poems, articles, reviews, interviews, photographs, a bibliography and a biography, including reviews and other material relating to this book, at johntranter.com

The two last poems in the book, “Breathless” and “Rain”, appear in the printed version of the book, but not in this free PDF version.

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John Tranter

The Floor of Heaven

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— J.T., Sydney

To my son Leon

*How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here we will sit, and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears: soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica: look, how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold:
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins . . .*

— Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

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Gloria

Gloria handed the doctor a bundle of notes –
typewritten, grubby, scribbled over
and rewritten in different coloured inks.
Masterson adjusted his spectacles
and leafed through the first few pages,
then burrowed further into the mess.
'Yesss, this is interesting, Gloria,
but it looks complicated, full of bother.
Tell me, what does it represent? Hmmm?'
It represented horror, but we didn't
know that then. We dozed, we lazed.
How many of us were there, reclining
peacefully on the grass, sitting in
on the death of the ego. Four? Five? 'Oh,'
Gloria squirmed. 'Oh, it's my . . . well,
memories, where I tell about myself. Talk –
the things . . . you know, where I've been,
what I've done, all that.' Half a dozen of us,
sitting in the pale sunlight in the park
with our sandwiches and bottles of beer: six,
including the troop leader, Doctor Masterson,
who guided the group on its wanderings.
Gloria – twenties, dark hair, freckles
and large round glasses that gave her

the look of a watchful schoolgirl,
wearing a sweet heady perfume that a
teenager might have used – Gloria
frowned and looked down at her hands.
They were twisting slowly in her lap
like dazed, angry creatures. We all
glanced at them, then looked away.
Masterson held a page up to the light
as though something semi-transparent
were hidden underneath the layers of erasures
and white-out, behind the second thoughts
and reconsiderations, a drift, an argument
that might unravel and explain itself
if he stared through it thoughtfully enough.
He puffed on an old pipe, the grey-blue smoke
almost invisible in the hazy light,
though its odour of smouldering heather
drifted over us like a nostalgic memory
and I noticed how the pipe went with his jacket –
dark green tweed, with elbow patches –
to make up a uniform, suited to a character
from an old British movie – a murder mystery
set in some sleepy village before the war –
a doctor, a serious reader, a teacher, perhaps –
and that this message was a kind of pleading:
see me as an uncle, a tutor, a friend,
but not as the fraud I fear I am.

‘I think I see what you want.
You’d like one of us to read it out,
is that your plan, Gloria?’ He turned
and swung his smile on her like a spotlight.
Was she going to faint? She wavered;
weed under running water. ‘Unhhh . . .
was all Gloria could manage, blushing.
One of the pale animals in her lap
seemed to be on the verge of triumph,
grasping and choking the other, which had
reddened under the sudden attack. A ring –
I hadn’t noticed the glittering engagement ring
before – was being twisted violently.

‘Well, she began, ‘Well, you see . . .
I really can’t bring myself to speak . . .
to come out with all that . . . all those . . .
extraordinary . . . events! My goodness!
When I think back over . . . I hoped that
getting it all down in black and white,
turning what happened into a kind of story,
that is, if I could hold back a little way
from all that . . . those terrible memories,
and the good ones, also, because you know
when things are good – so good – they can be
just like a form of torture, too . . . why,
maybe then, with all the blind alleys,
the promises that led to nothing, dreams
that turned into nightmares when you woke –

maybe, crossed out and botched as they are,
it would all fit together, and make sense.’

I noticed her hands were trembling slightly.
She’d been polishing her glasses on the hem
of her print frock, and as she quickly
put them on, she fumbled, and they slipped.
I saw her upper lip was damp with sweat.
She picked the glasses up and pushed them back
on the bridge of her nose with her middle finger.
The gesture was somehow vulnerable, I thought,
or had I read that in a book somewhere –
or seen it in a movie, long ago,
a trick of Bergman’s, or Superman’s –
she threw a flushed, pleading look quickly
around the group – ‘And why . . . then you could
perhaps explain it all back to me. Then
I’d know what made it all come out like that,
how – when I was young and full of promise,
so much talent at living – why things all
went so wrong, through no fault of my own,
and everything turned into the most Godawful
mess, and then – ’ Her voice caught here,
and she struggled to speak – ‘But I can’t –
somehow I couldn’t bring myself to spew
forth with all that, in front of everyone,
I just couldn’t do that! Do you see?’

She flung a tearful look around the circle

of embarrassed faces like a lasso, but
to no effect. I picked at the grass,
and tried not to look at the others.
I felt sorry for the girl – she seemed
weak, lost, in need of help, and yet
there was something about her voice, her mood –
a clench of hurt, a current of bitterness –
that made me feel anxious and afraid.
I felt sure the story she had to tell –
perhaps not the one she'd given us now,
but some other buried tale too awful
to bring into the light in front of others –
was one that would excite revulsion and fear.

Somewhere in a far recess of summer
monks were playing soccer – the thock
of leather on leather, and their happy cries.

Doctor Masterson's gaze followed her look
at a leisurely pace. He was obviously
searching for someone to saddle with the task
of helping to deliver Gloria's burden
of woe to the world. Looking for a producer,
as it were; a person with tact, someone
who would wade down that black tunnel
that framed Gloria's view of the universe
and bring back treasure – polished, gleaming,
sorted into heaps and counted up;
someone without a stammer or a lisp.

Did we fidget? You bet.

‘Oh,

for God’s sake,’ Gloria said quickly,
and took a deep breath. She held it,
turned pink, and let it out explosively.
Then she gave a short mad laugh. The sun
slipped behind a cloud no one had noticed.

‘I had a dream,’ she began, then paused.
Her voice had taken on a hard edge
and a querulous tone, as though she had to
win some argument against herself.

‘What I wrote, and gave you, that was
the track it followed – not my real career,
but an imaginary one. But in that story,
like a pearl within a pearl shell,
lies another dream – perfect, shimmering.
It’s the mirror of another life.

‘I had a younger sister, name of Karen. She’s –
she’s not like me, or my twin Marjorie.
We were poor, and grew up in the country,
and our mother always taught us girls
to hold a straight opinion of ourselves,
never to waver, or sell ourselves cheap,
maybe not to win, but to endure.
But Karen, from the start, was hot-blooded,
smaller than me or Marjorie, and somehow different –
and when our mother brought Karen home

from the hospital, it was strange, as though
she'd found her there – I don't remember
my mother being pregnant, or any talk
of a little sister – that was a joke
we teased her with, that she was picked up
at a bargain sale in town, dirt cheap,
and Marjorie – she started it – we called her
the lost dog, Karen the Mutt, the mongrel.
We were hoping for a pup, to tell the truth –
I'd been promised an Alsatian for my birthday –
and a kid sister was a disappointment.
She was more a foundling than a relative.
Well, maybe our teasing put an anger in her
that she wouldn't have developed otherwise,
then, maybe she was just bad, the blood
tainted, and nothing you could do about it.
Talk about trouble – you wouldn't believe
the things our family came to later on –
divorce, Marjorie dying, Uncle Ben
ruined, all a result of that girl
and the things she caused to happen.
She looked Nordic, like Mum and Dad,
with pale blonde hair and eyebrows,
and bleached white fuzz on her forearms.
We called her “the Nazi” once – Dad
overheard, and gave us a proper belting.
Grandfather's name had been Larsen,
he changed it to make it more Australian –

the family was Norwegian, or something Scandinavian, and Mum's mother came from the Shetlands, a Williamson, like William the Conqueror, a Norman, descended from the Old Norse raiders. But Marjorie and I were dark, Celtic, with black, curly hair and grey eyes – Dad called us his pair of kelpies. Karen had these bright blue eyes the colour of cornflowers, that looked at you and went right through you like a drill and out the other side.

‘Anyhow – water long gone under the bridge – in this dream I'm Marjorie, not myself, I'm standing to the side, somehow, just accepting everything that happens; the dream's about Karen, and she's a real fuckin bitch.’ She took a few quick deep breaths here, and we all did. She stood up unsteadily, and paced about, rubbing her temples, concentrating. The distant traffic was hushed for a moment. Two magpies quarrelled in a tree.

Gloria seemed a different woman, taller, with stronger hands and the flexible body of a dancer, or an athlete. Somehow her transformation had won her the gift of fluency.

‘Just a moment, Gloria – ’ said the doctor, watchful as ever, and careful of his charge, but his moment had come and gone. ‘I’m Marjorie, right?’ said the girl angrily, ‘and Karen’s talking to me, and I’m listening, so I can remember everything she says.

“You know Kellyville?” she says. Marjorie used to live around that neighbourhood.

“I know Kellyville,” I say. “Out past Blackacre way, boy, what a shithole!”

My voice is booming around, a kind of echo – I can see myself like a reflection.

“Right on,” Karen agrees. “I lived there – oh, ten years back, with that animal I married.

Now why would I marry a creep like that? Me, my father’s pet, the original Princess!

Why would I do a fuckin stupid thing like that? Can you tell me, Marjorie?”

‘I didn’t know why she married a turkey like that,’ says Gloria, ‘but it’s typical of Karen to pick some loser – most of her boyfriends were junkies. But it’s just a story that blooms within a dream like a crystal of some mineral salt growing at the bottom of a forest pool, and those things don’t have a past, that’s

the great gift they have for us, their value,
they come unmarked by childhood guilt, they
drag no chain of nightmares in their wake,
they spring from a limbo of innocence.
But people,' she says, and gives that
mad laugh again – 'real people
do self-destructive things, don't they?
They bruise and damage those around them
because they've dragged their fears
behind them like a pack of mad dogs,
to the point where they can do fuckall else.
Am I right? Yes! They make their own
lack of choice by the choices they make,
and they just have to swallow it,
shit or champagne, like it or not.

'But Karen wouldn't be interested in
that kind of philosophical talk.
She was busy with the story of her life
like it was a movie, or a soap opera.
Marjorie patiently listening, that's me.

“Poor bloody Blake,” Karen says.
“I met him one night – I was dropping pills,
floating and stumbling around in my usual daze
when there he was – a big handsome brute.
He worked hard, drank with his mates,
had a hot car, a Thunderbird
painted red like a fire engine.

And a wonderful place at King's Cross,
high up in the heavens, with a rooftop
where we drank whisky and champagne
and looked at the stars in the sky, and the clouds
lit with a pale pink-orange colour
from the lights you could see twinkling
down below, where the junkies and the
prostitutes played. That's what I love
about Sydney – it's never dark, never
like that inky dark you get in the bush
when it's cloudy – here the night sky
is always lit up with a warm glow
from people working, driving about, eating,
making love with the lights on, being alive.
Blake was fun to be with, he laughed a lot
when we went out, or when his mates
dropped around with a carton or two of beer;
but then he had another side to him –
Mum would say 'Street angel, house devil'.
When he was at home, he had his moods,
like some captive brooding in a cage.

“Then that recession came along,
there were a lot of people out of work,
and Blake – he had a fight with his boss,
a big Samoan fellow, and got the sack.
Next thing we're both on the dole,
and then he had to let the car go.
Then we had to get a cheaper flat.

And he starts reading books and magazines.
Going to the library, borrowing books,
reading into the night. I have to
get my beauty sleep, or I get awful . . .
difficult to live with. Know what I mean?”
“Oh, I know,” I say. “It’s like that
with me, with drink. Or it used to be.”

Could it be, I asked myself, our shy
Gloria, the freckles, the cheap frock,
a drunk? No – it’s possible, but
hard to believe – but then it’s this
Marjorie creature who’s speaking, some
alter ego perhaps, the two faces of Eve,
or more . . . under the skirts of rectitude
the nymphomaniac, behind the proper
bank president howls the alcoholic.

‘Carry on, sweetheart, get it out,’
says Gloria – Marjorie – “Well,” says Karen,
“Blake’s father – he’d been dead for years,
but Blake had been through a bad time
with him, long ago. I knew that Bruce,
the brother, the same age as Blake,
volunteered for service in Vietnam
and never came back, and the father
blamed Blake somehow, for being idle,
for not going too. Bruce was tough,
a heart like an ox, full of courage,

and did things proper, by the book;
Blake was lazy, happy-go-lucky,
good-natured. But the father argued,
picked on Blake a lot, and one day
they had a bad fight – what happened,
the details, he wouldn't say at first.
He didn't want to talk about his past.
Till one night, when it came out –

“It began with the books. He'd bring them home.
And drink this cheap wine, from a flagon,
and sit up late, reading, mumbling
while he followed the words with his finger,
a chuckle, a murmur, rising and falling.
It got on my nerves. Then late at night,
stinking of that cheap after-shave
he wore, he'd want to read them to me, these
magazines, anthologies. ‘C'mon, honey,’
he'd say, ‘this is a really great story,
about this elephant hunter, an adventure,
just let me read you some of it.’ Jesus!

“It started out a kind of bed-time game,
like, at first, the stories, they were kind of
sexy – not from cheap tit magazines, no –
books, classy magazines with nice photos,
the models young, with tasteful makeup,
real authors and all that, but kind of . . .
well, you know. Then, later on,

they grew more intellectual – Blake,
he'd done a course, some university degree
by mail, he'd worked on an oil rig
back in the sixties, all that free time,
so he did this diploma and learnt to read
intellectual books. Then, to make it crazier,
soon it was no sex without a story.
That's what he said. Can you believe that?
He wouldn't, or he couldn't do it any other
way, without this stupid fuckin twist.
And soon it was just this one story,
time after time, about a blind man,
how his wife's lover – a soldier, captured
in Korea and brainwashed, and turned loose
to assassinate the top men in government –
got his wires crossed and murdered ordinary
men and women – a butterfly collector,
an old rabbi, a man selling toys
on the street – well, this crazy pair
plotted to murder her blind husband,
creeping through the house, playing jokes –
that's sick, isn't it? Don't you think?"

'Karen had this ring on her finger,'
Marjorie – Gloria – said, looking at her own
engagement ring, 'and being Karen it was
some cheap rhinestone article
she'd picked up at the Cross, and she
rubbed it and stared at it, and laughed.

“Enough is enough,” she says, in a flat voice,
what with the drinking and the crying –
did I tell you that? He’d get upset
when he reached the final episode
where the blind man stabs the soldier –
he’d made a special white cane, sharpened
at the end, and he pokes his eyes out
and blinds him, so they’re both stumbling around
covered in blood, stabbing at the air –
and Blake’s voice would give out here,
he’d start trembling, staring at the page,
wiping his face. It was like a madhouse,
me in bed in my nightdress, perfume, make-up
and all, Blake drunk and wailing like a loon.
Well, Christ, it had to stop. I said
I was packing up and leaving – then
he told me about his father, how they fought,
and how Blake stabbed him in the face –
Oh God, this is horrible! Horrible!”

‘And Karen burst into tears,’ says Marjorie –
Gloria – and she starts sobbing too, her face
swollen and red. Grief, like a layer-cake!

Doctor Masterson poked at his neglected pipe,
and cleared his throat several times.
He was obviously moved by this complex tale
of wretchedness and desperation. He

grimaced and took some tablets from a pocket –
‘Indigestion, please excuse me,’ and to Gloria:
‘My dear girl – your imagination,
you must use more discipline, more
artistic control – and please sit down,
you make me nervous, stalking around behind me
like that – ’ he dug some tissues
from his jacket – Gloria’s handkerchief
was wet with tears – but in the brief moment
it had taken us all to gather our wits,
she had gathered hers. ‘I’m Marjorie, okay?’
she spat out, and plunged onward –
‘and Karen’s explaining to me about
the fight that mutilated Blake’s father:

“‘They drank heavily, the whole family –
Blake was an alcoholic,” Karen said;
“and the mother was into the cooking sherry.
You remember Auntie Eleanor, Marjorie?
‘Just a refresher, for the cook!’ she’d say,
folding her apron and picking up
a tray of scones, or whipping up a batter,
but sipping at the sherry in between –
remember? Uncle Ben telling blue jokes
and stuffing cakes into his face – God,
that man could eat like a horse –
and mixing his home brew, everybody
laughing in the kitchen, Old Jack
calling by with a brace of wild ducks –

‘Hullo, Missus – I just saw these two
sittin’ on the dam, and I reckoned
you could use ‘em for dinner, so I
nipped back to the shed and got me gun!’
God, Marjorie, the times that are gone . . .
well, like I was saying, Auntie Eleanor,
Blake’s mum was like her, but worse.

“One night – it must have been a Sunday,
and they’d come home early from the Club,
they’d lit the fire in the sitting room,
and turned on a lamp, but the dining room
was dim and shadowy, the mantel clock ticking –
don’t they give you the creeps? – the radiogram
playing some dance tune from the thirties
in another room – So there was Jock,
Blake’s father, thin as a weasel,
not like the boys; drunk, hacking away
at the roast lamb – he’d wolfed down
his dinner, and he wanted second helpings –
splashing gravy on the good linen tablecloth
they kept for Sunday best, the mother crying,
and Jock going on about the blacks, how they
soak up the government handouts, never work,
drink Blue Ruin, and all that racist shit,
and how Blake’s brother was a real man,
never shirked his duty, lion-hearted,
Bruce knew what he wanted, volunteered
for service, killed a few Vietnamese,

and he'd put the Abos in their place.
Blake was keen on a young girl at the time,
part Aborigine, bright, and very pretty.
He swallows as much as he can take, then
he gives a scream like a stuck pig
and a red mist floods over his eyes
and then – it goes blank, no sound,
all dark, he can't remember a thing.

“Just as well, for what he did then –
the carving knife – Blake had a fetish
about sharpening things, he had
a grindstone, and an Arkansas stone,
and a steel like butchers use, he'd go
whip, whip, like that, honing the edge
till it sparkled like a scalpel blade –
in this fit of rage he grabbed the knife
and he cut his father's face about so horribly
that the old man lost both his eyes,
chopped up like soft-boiled eggs. And
the carving fork, with those long prongs,
he drove it right up through his father's nose
with one blow, the thin sinus bones,
right through the floor of the brain cavity,
was how Blake described it. Cut the brain,
a fraction, just a snip, a pointed cut,
right through where your memories are joined,
where you remember things, and store them away.
The ambulance man had to pluck it out,

the long fork, stuck deep in the skull,
and bits of flesh all over the tablecloth.

“Well, Jock lived – a bit of surgery,
no problem, but his eyes were gone, and worse,
his brain was damaged so that he never
remembered any new thing again.

His early memories lingered on: school,
who he was, old train timetables,
the scent of a pine tree cut down,
a movie he'd seen years ago and could
tell you the plot, telephone numbers,
addresses, bets he'd had on the horses –
but nothing he ever learnt from that day on
stuck. Well, you can imagine Blake, the blame,
the guilt! Whatever he could do to make it up,
he tried, because he really loved his dad.

And then the Aboriginal girl left,
shot through with the father of her baby,
some creep from Tokyo, a priest. The mother
seemed to fade away, Blake said,
hardly eating, pecking like a sparrow,
just a few crumbs here and there,
and in the end she got so thin
she lost her will to live – the bloodshed
had shocked her terribly, and her heart
was weakened by the drink, and diabetes –
so she died, and left them, father and son,
the two of them, together in the house.

“Like poor Auntie Eleanor, in her last days.
You used to write to me each week – remember? –
when you went to boarding school in the city,
and tell me how you’d go out to visit,
to the old people’s home, and read to her
from the family Bible – all that way
alone on the tram, in the evening,
to read the Old Testament, and she’d sob
and hold a dirty hankie to her mouth –
old age, it’s a terrible thing. And Gloria,
that bitch, too busy with her books
and her university friends to help out,
too busy drinking gin and having abortions
and being smart and intellectual, and me
stuck on the bloody farm. Oh, I’m sorry,
but those things make me angry. Old Jock.

““Blake read to him at night – his dad
was blind, and he hated advertisements,
so the TV and the radio were out.
And he refused to listen to the ABC,
full of fuckin communists, he said.
Reading. Every evening. That was fine,”
Karen says, “Blake didn’t mind. But you see,
every time he’d start to read a story,
poor Jock would forget it by the time
his son had reached the bottom of the page.
‘How did that begin again?’ he’d say. ‘That

sounds like a bloody good yarn. How does it go?’
and Blake would have to start the page again.
There was one story he particularly liked,
from an old *Playboy* magazine, about a guy
who made a living killing elephants.
There was a sex interest in it somewhere,
but Blake never got that far. Over and over,
page thirty-seven, where the story starts
in Nairobi, buying up supplies, then the hero
gets drunk in a bar, and fights a Negro.
Night after night, that page, for seven years.
Then his father had a stroke – he was
getting on, in any case – had a stroke
and sat there in the nursing home, drooling,
eating up money, that’s how Blake put it,
and the doctors like a flock of vultures,
till his mind went blank – just nothing –
and he was gone, and Blake was left alone.

“‘I picked Blake up,” Karen says,
“in a singles bar, soon after that.
I thought: at last, here was a real doll –
he looked stunning in his red convertible –
a big hunk of a guy, built like a house,
a gentle gorilla – someone to sweep me
off my feet and make up for the bad times:
what happened on the farm, Uncle Ben,
working the street, the trouble with the cops.
He wasn’t Robert Redford, but he had

a sense of humour, and he took me out a lot.
His eyes were grey, his glossy black hair
fell in thick waves over his collar,
he looked so cute in the clothes he wore,
the roll-neck sweaters, duffel jackets.
He polished up nice, on a lady's arm.
It was fun for a while. He was good in bed,
at first, then he began to get moody, then
the stories started, then the madness.

“He drank, and in the end he lost his job,
and we were thrown out of our flat, and moved
to that joint way past Kellyville –
we hardly had any money, except for wine –
then to a basement dump in Darlinghurst –
you had to climb down a flight of stairs,
damp sweat on the walls, mould,
dark and freezing in winter, we always
had the light on even in the daytime
and you hardly ever got to see the sky,
and in summer you'd think it would be cool,
but it was suffocating, like a furnace.
And Blake got obsessed about his hair –
he even had nightmares about it –
how it was going grey, and receding,
and then it was falling out, going bald –
I'd catch him with a comb in his hand,
standing in front of the mirror, crying.

“Then one day, a knock on the door,
and the strangest creature was standing there
weaving from foot to foot in the shadows
like a circus bear – it was Bruce, the brother.
The war was over, and the Vietnamese,
after they’d tortured the poor man
half to death and back, had patched him up
and sent him home again. He looked awful –
big, but bent, hunched over stiffly,
a grey-blond thatch of hair, freckles
that mottled his face like a disfigurement,
and his blue eyes had a crazy glitter.
And there was something wrong with his mouth;
he came up close, and I saw he had a hare-lip
that gave him a strange, sarcastic kind of sneer.
Blake had never told me about that, and then
I realised there were no photos of Bruce –
you’d think when someone close to you
had disappeared off the face of the earth
there’d be a shrine of some sort, but no,
not even a holiday snap, and that was why.
There was a smell about him I didn’t like –
beer, tobacco, a kind of animal sweat.
‘My brother,’ he grunted, ‘A souvenir
for my brother.’ His big fat paws
held out a parcel wrapped in newspaper –
the back of his hands were matted with red hair –
I felt it, something cold and heavy,

but he wouldn't let me take it, he pushed past
and went through the flat like a robot
calling out 'I want my brother!'
He found Blake half asleep, hungover.
Bruce grabbed him and yelled out loud –
'You fucking mongrel, what did you do?
I want to talk to my dad!'
then he started beating poor Blake
and cracking his head against the wall
for what he'd done on that Sunday
with the knife and the carving fork.
I ran to the kitchen to get something
to hit him with – there was a leg of lamb
I'd just taken from the freezer, I grabbed it
and ran back to the bedroom – he'd taken
a grenade from the parcel, and pulled the pin,
and he was holding Blake against his chest
in a bear-hug, groaning and howling.
I swung the leg of lamb and brought it down
crack on the back of his skull, grabbed Blake –
he'd been beaten nearly unconscious –
and pulled him out of there. We were
halfway down the hall when it went off,
a terrible bang! – and I woke up in hospital.

“Blake said later that he'd crawled back
to try to help Bruce, or to apologise,
but there were just pieces everywhere.
What he saw stuck in his memory

like some horror movie episode
repeating over and over. From then on
he was never quite the same. His skull
had been fractured by the beating, they said,
and his eardrums blown in by the grenade,
so he was half deaf from then on,
though he could hear his 'special voices',
he told me, chiding him for little things
like stealing and dishonesty, and Blake said
'I'm a murderer, but they never mention that.'

“Isn't that sad? I cried when he said that.
The doctors patched him up – his eyesight
was never right, and he had to wear glasses,
and they gave him anxiety pills to take
but they made his hands shake, and when he drank
they mixed badly with the alcohol, and then
he'd knock into things and fall over.
And all the time, remembering the grenade,
trying to forget, to blot it out,
then his father, and the meat knife –
he went to group therapy for a while,
but he used to argue, and yell at the doctor.
I was optimistic – he had a medical pension;
there couldn't be any more family trouble –
there wasn't any family, for a start.
I hoped that he could pull himself together.

“He got his job back with the Samoan,
but then he started stealing – a stuffed bird,
an emu egg, a butterfly display –
and so they had to give him the sack again.
In the end – no medication seemed to work,
and he was drunk or drugged all the time,
with a dull stare like a pole-axed bullock –
he started seeing things, wanting to die –
in the end they put him away, and every night
I think of him locked in there, growing old,
flinching at the voices criticising him,
the endless torrent of memories, the poor man
desperate for things to be like they were,
to turn the clock back, and start again.

“Oh, Marjorie, I can’t bear it!” Karen says,
and a shiver runs through her thin body.
She takes her glasses off and rubs her eyes
and hides her face in her hands.’ And Marjorie
was sniffing, holding back a tear, and
Gloria was obviously wrung out, too,
but she had a strange look in her eyes –
they were wet with tears, but they glittered –
she was happy, that was it, her grey eyes
sparkling! She laughed, and hugged herself,
and held her face up to the sky. Then
she sat down at last, with a shudder.

The sun drifted out from behind a cloud

and a warm light spilled across the park.
We frowned and blinked in the glare, like
strangers wandering out from a midday movie.

‘My notes, please, Doctor Masterson,’ she said,
and took back those sheets of type and scribble.
I noticed that her hands were shaking slightly.
Masterson stared at her. No one said a thing.

‘Let’s start at the beginning, then, shall we,
where I have this extraordinary dream.’ Gloria
smiled, adjusted her glasses, and began.

Stella

We'd gone – half a dozen of us – from a gathering at Doctor Masterson's, headed for The Newcastle, when a shower swept across the park and drove us into the doorway of the nearest building. 'It's Florenzini's!' said the Saint – 'Let's go in and wait out the rain.'

The restaurant downstairs was busy with its usual noisy crowd of students, artists and hangers-on, but upstairs the bar was almost empty. A jukebox played a Miles Davis track from the Fifties. An old friend of Doctor Masterson's wandered in and joined us – he was known as the Captain of Industry, a bulky man with reddish hair and a smouldering cigar.

Max was speaking. He was new to the group, and still burdened with a half-told tale he had to tell – there was a sin he wanted to confess, or perhaps a crime. We weren't the ideal audience: Professor Flack

glancing idly through the *TLS*,
the Saint restless and European, Sandra
making quiet asides, lighting a cigarette:
one joining another at the window
and murmuring together. From outside,
the sound of buses sweeping through the rain.

‘I was stuck in a narrow corner,’ Max said,
ravelling a skein of woe he’d been
entangled in earlier that afternoon.

‘I was mad about Stella, and I knew
she loved me. But differently – women
are women – and for different reasons.
But what was I to do? She’d gone back
to that fool her husband, the “editor” –
dilettante, scribbler, amateur capitalist,
her wonder boy ruined every paper
he touched, a trail of wrecked companies –
yet people called him a genius! He skipped
from one deck to the next as the ship sank –

‘Damn it all, she didn’t break it off,
she did worse, she made it just possible
but painful to go on with the affair,
small towns are always hives of gossip –
every country town a prison-house –
cut off like that, stranded on the
rocks of loneliness and hostile snooping,

what was I to do?’ he asked, sadly.
He poured his drink into his mouth, wiped
his chin, and plunged into reminiscence –

Stella’s apron tied back at her waist,
the way she ran a comb through her hair
and laughed like a self-conscious starlet
in a 1940s beach picnic movie, the surf
embroidering the line between
what life gives us – what we get –
and what we can’t have, and the summer sun
spilling through the green crests of the waves
as the water folds over and dissolves into foam.

‘These memories are all she left me,
ashes in the mouth, and those promises,
when we met, we seemed so young –
I’ll start at the beginning,’ he said –
The beginning? I felt that his love,
or the lack that made up his need for love
must have begun in some distant schoolyard,
in a tightening circle of desertion and
torment, but to begin where he began –

‘I lost my lovely wife and made a packet
on the horses in the same week, so
I retired to Hartford, a small town
near the coast, I’d grown up there,
I knew a few people – so I settled in

with a pack of cards, a wine cellar,
a library – well, a load of old books
I'd been wanting to read for donkeys' years –
Toxophilus, Burton's *Anatomy*, James Jones,
Joyce Cary, Callimachus and Cavafy –
but things never work out quite
the way you plan.' Sandra reappeared
bright-eyed from the Ladies' Powder Room
just in time to catch the reading list, and
approved cheerfully. 'I've been reading
Portrait of the Artist,' she began – 'Wrong
artist, I mean writer,' Max interrupted,
'Pearl Harbour and the Liffey aren't the same –'
'Writer, whatever, you know the Irish,
cunning, often exiled, seldom silent'
Sandra went on, checking her lipstick
in a mirror. 'They suffer an affliction
hardly their own fault – the self-hatred
of a proud people too often
invaded and humiliated,' and she reached
for her drink, an Advokaat and Cherry Brandy.

'Do go on,' whispered the Saint, to Max;
and to Sandra: 'Dear, you finished it,
and they took the glass away, umbrella and all.'

'I joined the Bridge Club,' Max went on,
'I needed company more than cards, I think,
but then the subtle social need is always

the underlying motive, from gambling
to work, from sex to psychotherapy.
Fishing and photography are
the only truly solitary vocations.
Have you ever tried to chat with
a fisherman? Or shared a darkroom? So.

'I couldn't even play bridge at first –
I was miserable, it rained, cloud
drifted in over the breakwater,
I was brooding too much on things
that had passed away long ago.
The Bentons were very social – dances,
evenings at the Club – it was their need
for drink that drove them, it seemed to me,
though they couldn't bear to drink alone
together. And they played bridge, though
they made a bad pair, with their bitching.

'I partnered Stella the first time
I tried to learn the game, one evening –
a wet winter night – rain blowing
through the garden, screen doors banging
in the wind – the perfume she wore,
there was something fresh and innocent
about it, a delicacy, but underneath
a smoky, dark colouring – God help me,
I fell in love like that!' He snapped his fingers.
'Half an hour, that's how long it took.

Stella. Benton's lovely young wife.
Twenty years ago, it must have been.'

'Oh, the Forties,' the Saint broke in,
his accent – Hungarian, perhaps –
lending a sarcastic curl to what he said.
'Spivs in flying jackets, dud penicillin
at ten quid a dose, black-market nylons –
a phoney culture, rotten right through,
that laid the ground for beatniks and drugs –
jazz, dark glasses, French philosophy –'

'My shout,' said Doctor Masterson. 'Bruno!
There was a bustle and a bother, fresh drinks
were poured and passed around. 'I remember
she was drinking Dutch gin that night,'
Max went on. 'You forget so much, and yet
certain images – symbolic, perhaps –
link with something primeval in the mind,
and become soaked with meaning, unforgettable –
there must be some psychological theory
to explain these things, eh, Professor?'
Flack looked up from the crossword. 'Mmmm?
Theory? Well, the new ones are jerry-built
on the amateur science of linguistics.
I'm not sure they've invented one
to handle nostalgia. I could whip one up,
if you like. Let's see – "Reified Desire:
Temporal Recuperation and the Other."

How's that?' With a chuckle he sank back into the *Times*. Max frowned. Was he being sent up? He couldn't be sure. He went on. 'The lamp, for example, I hadn't noticed when I sat down to play, and I'd seen it perhaps a dozen times before – but now I noticed, with an inexplicable sharpness, its exact shape – I could draw it for you now, twenty years later – a blackened bronze figure of a girl holding up a globe that glowed softly . . .' 'Oh, a Gloria lamp,' Masterson mused, 'we used to have a girl once, in the group – ' but Max had ploughed ahead –

I can see

the peach-tinted light along her arm,
and hear the faint tapping of her nails –
bright scarlet polish – on the card –
would she deal it now, or hold it back? –
a diamond, I think – perhaps a heart –
but it was red, exactly the tint
of her nails and the lipstick she wore . . .
she drained her glass of gin – rain
beating on the roof, wind thrashing the garden,
so loud that you could hardly hear
the chatter and the laughter, the clink
of glasses being filled . . . so long ago . . .'

His voice drifted into silence. For a moment

we all seemed lost in a mist of memories.
Sandra broke the spell. ‘Oh,’ she shivered,
‘an angel just walked over my grave.’

‘Love hit us both at the same moment,
or should I say passion, or infatuation –
but we only learned that later,’
Max said, ‘so we sat there
playing a weak, erratic, losing game.
Then the stratagems, hesitations,
a kind of delirium, where not quite knowing
is the most delicious phase, your life balanced
exactly on the knife-edge, a kind of terror,
your heart pumping, the room full of silence,
but such a heavy quiet – unbearable – ’

‘Ah Christ! The limo!’ cried the Captain,
and bolted for the door. ‘Well,’ the Saint
murmured, ‘now where’s the Big Chief
off to?’

‘Has to shift his car,
left it outside with the engine
running, his *limousine*,’ Sandra said,
giving the word a French inflection.

‘You’ve met him, haven’t you?’ enquired
Professor Flack, in a low, private tone.
His eyes were a weak, watery blue,
and they fixed me in an analytic stare.

‘The Captain’s an old friend of Masterson’s,
worked in Intelligence together in the War,
in the East, apparently, lost his son
in Korea, missing in action, never found,
don’t you think that would be terrible,
never really knowing? I mean, he might be
cranking out propaganda in some dungeon
under the Yalu, chained to a bench . . . The father
threw himself into business, like a shark,
they reckon, never comes up for air,
tossed in the art game, so they say,
never picked up a brush again –
a dealer I know said What a loss
to Australian Art, Incalculable – but
you never know, who can predict,
talent’s a dickey thing in my experience,
of course the first wife’s another matter.
How’s your drink, all right? Hullo,
they’re at it again.’

I turned to catch Max
arguing with the Saint. ‘Rubbish, this
dream of yours,’ Max was saying,
‘just because a sequence of images
is tangled and bizarre, and laced or
doped with a confused, cloudy mood,
do we have to listen to it all
respectfully? Real life, yes,
recollected in tranquillity, or

rather, passion, there's a guarantee
of relevance. A tale that really happened!
What can be more meaningful than that?'

'Slow down, Max,' Sandra chided, 'Your
motives are showing, and you're growing flushed.'

'What I mean,' the Saint went on
reflectively, brushing his collar, 'is that
under the struggle to drag our lives
above the level of daily dull endurance
an appetite arises for the subterranean,
and so we press against the dark glass doors
of the unconscious, that let us glimpse
what is hidden, yet disguise our worst urges –
dreams are our own gestures magnified
in that glass, that countryside –'
he waved at a large landscape painting
hung at one end of the bar, the frame
like a picture-window giving onto a view
of a pale coast, cottages stacked up
along a strip of grey sand, the wind
flecking the sheet of blue with whitecaps –

'Max, continue!' shouted the Captain,
who had returned wet from the rain.
He waved a damp, half-eaten cigar.
I noticed his disarray for the first time –
his tie had come undone and hung loose,

and talked her husband into giving me a job
on the paper he managed. To be near Stella,
that was the idea, but it backfired
dreadfully. Oh, I saw Stella,
but it cost a packet, all the tackle
you need, and I made a mess of it,
I broke a new enlarger and I ruined
seven rolls of film in the developer.’

‘Oh, photography, you men!’
Sandra put in – she was on her third
Advokaat and Cherry Brandy, and her cheeks
had a warm flush – ‘If ever an art form
was crippled by its plausibility!
I’ve spent a lifetime in a darkroom –
the history of the medium’s a tug-of-war
to free the image from its corresponding
form in the so-called real world,
but politics – who looks at that?
As vital an ingredient in any
photographic lab as sodium sulphite.
Look at the States in the early Fifties,
Sid Grossman shooting the working class
at play, frightened off the boardwalk
by McCarthy and the middle class,
retreating from Coney Island to Cape Cod!
And Lisette Model, already a refugee.
“The Fifties?” she said, “It was terrible.
You didn’t know what to photograph.”’

‘Well, I shot what I was pointed at,
Max replied, ‘it was a country paper –
cows, Mrs Clompitt’s chrysanthemums,
the fish Doctor Rampart caught (but not
the doctor’s best catch, his gypsy mistress,
a fortune-teller from a travelling circus),
the dog show, the cat show, pigs . . .

‘but the jinx! Every roll of film –
I got the speed wrong, or the flash
short-circuited, or the developer
was exhausted and needed replenishing.
And Stella – I could feel her slipping away,
and each day I loved her more, my heart,
it was horrible, watching her indifference
grow. And the amateur capitalist,

‘he knew, he found out about us
somehow, how, I can’t imagine –
he sent me further afield, interstate,
once, with impossible assignments –
he sent me to a seance to photograph
the “ectoplasm” or the “emanations”
on infra-red film, of course I took
the wrong film, there are several types,
apparently, a scientific one,
colour, monochrome, and so forth,
and then a game-fishing competition,

it was raining – he was laughing at me,
I can see it now – I had to get
the shark’s-eye view, looking up
through the ripples at the idiots
and sea water leaked through the lens,
how was I to know? I ruined it,
a Nikon, an expensive camera,
a present from Stella, when we first met.
He was pushing me too hard,
the bastard, and I snapped, I fought back,
I tackled him one day, and had it out.
Do you know what he said? Can you imagine
what the office-boy scribbler said to me?’

Max’s eyes were bulging out of their sockets,
and though their magnetism held the others
in a staring group like a disordered
‘Night Watch’ redesigned by Grosz,
the Captain seemed immune – his voice murmured
at my ear: ‘Something I want to show you’,
and I found myself being led down
to the basement. There, Florenzini’s
grew more complex than I’d remembered
or imagined – rooms within rooms,
one bar concealed behind another,
doors marked ‘Private’, ‘Club Room’,
‘Gallery’ and ‘Staff Only’. The Captain
led me by the elbow through this maze
and down a further flight or two of stairs.

‘Ignore this rubbish,’ he muttered, his mouth working from some inner psychic pressure, his voice cramped by the atmosphere of the place we’d entered. It was a gallery – long, narrow, hung with a dozen paintings – though the pale blue underwater lighting, the heavy curtains – acres of indigo, decorated with tiny yellow diamonds outlined in green – and a huge bowl of purple gladioli in a corner gave it the atmosphere of a chapel, or the Tomb of Mausolus. A faint scent of cigars hung on the air. How had we got here? Only a moment ago I’d been with Max drinking in the upstairs bar, and now I was the prisoner of a man mumbling unhappily and dragging me past a large Blackman – a giggle of schoolgirls in a florist’s shop – a Whiteley fluent with the jargon of advertising, and a tiny etching that I felt certain was a Rembrandt. We paused – he put his arm around my shoulder and I noticed with a kind of shock that his hair – dark reddish-brown, like an orang-utan’s – was in fact a toupee, dyed rather crudely, and badly fitting. His moustache, it now seemed to me, was dyed too. ‘You know art, I believe,’

he said. ‘What d’you think of this, eh?’
We’d come to rest at last, in front of a painting,
a lurid and dramatic dream scene –
a large impasto piece, heavily worked,
and layered over with a coat of varnish –
its gestures both Romantic and Expressionist,
though the style was oddly fresh. Figures
collided with bulky slabs of landscape
and struggled with a clutter of symbols.
Clowns wept, harpies cackled, and demons
writhed and gestured from the branches above.
The background was a pool of swirling black
out of which glowed red and yellow stars.

‘Worrying, isn’t it?’ the Captain said,
looking at me with a peculiar smile.
Then he looked at the painting again, and sighed,
and ran his fingers through his absurd hair.
His forehead was sweating, his chin
badly shaved, and I noticed dark circles
of exhaustion under his eyes – he’s been crying,
I thought.

‘Well, this woman I used to know
painted it. It’s clever, lots of thought
went into the figures – social comment,
half of them are artists or philosophers,
half bureaucrats and journalists –
Patrick White said that in Australia
the schoolmaster and the journalist rule

what intellectual roost there is –
there's technique to take your breath away,
and there's passion – well, anger, at least.
But is it the Real Thing? God knows.

'I said it was good. Years ago, now.
I said it was greatly talented,' he went on,
and tossed back his glass of wine. 'I said
it was very brave, in the generosity
of love, but love is blind, they say,
and art's for looking at, not bleating about.
But then I don't really understand art.
I should, I suppose; I own enough of it.
What are those card players supposed to
represent, eh? That Fat Man,
whom d'you suppose he really is?
The Devil? She had visions, you see,
she'd telephone, always late at night,
the dead hour, she'd wake up the house,
babbling in that broken lingo she spoke:
disasters – a fighter plane shot down,
a crowded ferry capsized and sunk,
an oil rig exploding in a ball of flame –
Paint it, I'd say, trying to whisper,
sketch it out, embroider the bloody thing,
make a painting of it, distance yourself.
And always these figures, the Fat Man,
the Devil, the Lost Child on the edge
of an abyss, flames colouring the sky . . .

'I told her to see a doctor, a psychiatrist,
a priest even, someone to talk to.
My wife's an understanding woman,
but these phone calls at the dead of night –
we'd arrive home from the opera –
Wagner, say, the Valkyries clattering
across the roof of Heaven, and the phone
would be jangling – I presume it's for you,
my wife would say, drily, and sail away
down the hall, and the voice a babble
from the receiver – we had an old black
bakelite telephone, my dad
grew up in Yonkers, in New York,
and got to know Leo Baekeland,
the plastics inventor, so this phone,
we kept it for sentimental reasons – the words,
they poured out of the heavy handset
in a stream, what could I say? Paint it
out of you, I'd say, halfway
between a shout and a whisper, let it out,
give the devils a name and a habitation.

'So what are they pointing at? Is there
some kind of symbolism in that?
Estelle, her name was, God help me,
gone these many years.' Six figures,
grotesquely masked, were pointing at a table
in the lower centre of the picture.

It held a carafe of pink wine, a broken loaf of bread, a heap of playing cards.

‘It’s more tangled the more I dwell on it,’ he went on. ‘She had the baby, but then she farmed it out, with relatives back home, I suspect, though she’d never tell where exactly, in which vermin-ridden, plague-rotted cluster of muddy huts . . . “How could I bring it up,” she’d say, “Living like this, my suicidal rages, a slave to the Demon Alcohol, and a willing one” – that’s how she’d talk, when she was desperate – “eating crusts” (– I pushed money on her, I had enough, she threw it back at me), “and the men” (– there were other men, what could I do? Love!) “and those devils howling from the walls, he’ll get infected, like me, at least he should have a chance to grow up normal, to earn some happiness,” she’d chatter on, half the time crying, half the time laughing so you couldn’t tell what state she was in except hysterical, you could bet most times somewhat hysterical come hell or high water and you’d be right. The Greek, you know, means womb-struck, or near enough.’

I looked at the painting again – the light

seemed to be dimmer, in the tomb-like room,
and in the gloom the figures had blended
with the background in a complex pattern.
A clown in the shade of a loquat tree looked up
from reading a book, a finger holding his place,
or perhaps pointing at a moral lesson
too finely wrought to read, posed
like an Elizabethan dandy. A spanner
poked from a pocket, a pair of spectacles
dangled from a chain.

‘That’s her boy-friend,
a good likeness. A hippy mechanic.
A Buddhist text in one hand, a bottle
in the other. He said his Harley-Davidson
was his Poem of the Open Road. Dreck!
But that was her world, the Seventh Circle
of Bohemia, Reich the Priest of Orgasm,
Coltrane, coffee and Existentialism.
The theories! Everyone had one.
We drank, we danced, we talked till dawn.
They talked Karl Marx at me – me!
I knew Hegel like the back of my hand,
and Marx, Engels – “Know thine enemy!”

‘Then she fell pregnant. Well, the father,
who was to say what was God’s intention?

‘I went to visit when the baby came,
at the “Hotel Methedrine”, I called it,

a house full of ratbags and derelicts.
He thought the child was his, and I remember
thinking how slowly the truth would grow,
as he turned into a boy, then a youth –
“teenagers”, they call them now – then
into a young man – by then the evidence
would be staring at him. What would she say?

‘They had a party to celebrate,
a jazz group played in the studio
around an old Bechstein I had bought her,
and a foraging throng of babbling beatniks
spilled around and milled in the yard.
I was taken to the front room – bedroom,
cloakroom and parlour – to see the child.
The couple – how can I explain? The drugs –
forgive me, but you don’t seem the type –
the effects of an excess of methedrine –
the speed was real speed in those days,
no horse tranquillisers then –
and real methamphetamine hydrochloride
has a number of peculiar side-effects,
apart from keeping you up till Doomsday
to hear the trumpet sound. Use it for long
and you’re left in a state of alternating
brilliance and truly sickening depression
with paranoia smouldering around the edges.
It also eats your brain – actual holes,
big enough to push your finger through –

a medical student once – well, never mind.
It also makes you chatter like a parrot,
and it produces a relentless grinding
of the teeth, sleeping, waking and talking,
a grinding back and forth, back and forth . . .

‘There they were, the parents, the loveliest
woman painter in the world, and that cretin
the trick motor-cyclist, smiling alternately
down at the baby, and up at me. The child,
having imbibed with his mother’s milk
a love of peasant music, a savage temper,
and a fair dose of the booze and speed
that were always blended in her veins,
was smiling up at them adoringly,
its little gums grinding back and forth,
back and forth . . . it was horrible.
I went back to the party. I got drunk.
I threw up in the toilet. I went home.

‘I need a coffee, something to clear my head,
what about you?’ the Captain said,
and steered me to the lift. ‘The espresso here,
marvellous stuff, cut it with a knife!’
The lift was mirrored on all sides,
so that we seemed a thousand strong,
a fourfold army of ourselves stretching
rank on rank into the glassy gloom.
We went down a floor or two – at least

the lift seemed to move downwards, meaning
we should have been moving deep underground,
but when I stepped out into the lobby
I caught a glimpse of the evening sky
through a distant window with red drapes –
sunset on the Harbour, molten light,
a motionless airship advertising
something – a book, a brand of beer.
The lift, the Captain's badly-fitting wig,
his strangled intensity, his crooked tale,
had left me feeling dazed and confused.

The Captain called a waiter over. 'Paul,
Paul,' he cried out, and laughed loudly,
and grasped the young man around the shoulders.
'What d'you think?' He displayed the waiter
like a farmer showing off a pig.
He pinched his cheek. 'Damn the Dentistry!
See a bit of life, work hard,
play like a possum, life won't wait.'
Under his rain of laughter the boy – Paul –
smiled cheerfully, and clasped his silver tray
across his belly. He was pale, plump,
and sweating slightly, with gold spectacles.
'Bring us something nice, a little spicy,'
the Captain ordered, and Paul beamed,
bowed quickly, and trotted to the kitchen.

'What could I do?' The Captain lit a cigar.

He sighed. ‘Dentistry, his mother wanted.
Her teeth are giving trouble, but we already
have a good dentist, an angel of a man,
a Doctor Caisley. Let the boy do Medicine,
let the boy paint – God forbid!
from the mother – let him – what was it
Somerset Maugham said? A friend of his –
a wealthy woman, middle-aged – asked
what should she do about her son,
keen to be a writer – poet, novelist –
“Give the boy a thousand a year – ” enough
to live on in moderate comfort, in those days –
“then send him to Europe,” Maugham said.

‘Young Paul’s been to Europe. Paris.
Rome. Couldn’t stand a bar of it.
London? Hated it. California likewise.
Joined a band, gave that away.
Now he’s in a monkey suit. I fixed it
with Papa Florenzini, the old man.
Be firm with the boy, I said,
I don’t want a slacker for a son.
At least he’ll learn manners, and restraint,
which is more than his mother ever gave him.’
He gave me a long look – ‘You’ve guessed,
I suppose – ’

just at that moment

Max’s voice was heard, and soon the group
appeared around the door, arguing,

gesticulating. ‘Captain, O My Captain,’
Masterson called across the room, ‘pray
do join us in a little snack!’

But it was this loose perambulating
group of pilgrims who did the joining,
rearranging chairs and moving things
until I was separated from the Captain
and our table was full to overflowing.
I loosened my tie – the place was crowded,
and a rich scent of cooking filled the room.

‘Try the smoked eel,’ suggested the Saint.
‘Not as good as I’ve seen served
in a certain tavern in Budapest,
but passing fair.’ Professor Flack beamed,
and his eyes flickered around the table.
‘The retsina they serve here is remarkable,’
he confided. ‘In Macedonia, during the War,
I tasted the very same brew. Tinted
the faintest shade of pink, like the dactyls
of rosy-fingered Dawn herself. Delicious.’

Florenzini’s was famous for its fish
and soon a great platter of lampreys arrived.
They were exclaimed over and quickly dispatched,
and Paul and his cohorts scuttled back and forth
like slaves at some Pyramid of Hunger.
The retsina, brought in tall jugs,

washed down the courses of fish that followed one on the other – an *Aguilla in Tiella al Piselli* – eel in green peas, a specialty, then salt cod in *raïto*, civet of inkfish, and a tiger prawn salad.

‘Max, you were speaking of Stella,’ said the Captain, when the table had quietened down and the *granita de caffè* had arrived. ‘You were speaking of Love, but Hunger claimed us. We were dispersed, like the Jews, a Diaspora in Florenzini’s. Now we’re gathered again in the name of Discourse. We are fed, and ready.’

Max – always the stage-manager – carefully applied the flame of his platinum lighter to a Cocktail Sobranie – gold-tipped, lilac-tinted paper, a scented blend of Egyptian and Greek Xanthos tobacco – blew the smoke in a wreath around his head, and launched himself on the slow, dark waters of reminiscence.

‘Stella’s husband, Harry, his name was, puffed up, arrogant, sick with hate. The sin of anger. I killed him. God help me,’ Max said.

During the long, cold hush that followed

I noticed that the restaurant was almost empty. What time was it? Late.

‘Not meaning to. Not consciously, that is. But who knows? I was a demon at tennis, fit, not like you see me now. His father had died at forty, bad heart, collapsed in the prison yard, chopping wood. He’d been in jail for just on seven days. Embezzlement, fraud, something to do with business, dishonest, the partner suicided. The son, growing up, you can imagine, ashamed, determined to make up the lack, wash away the stain. What went through his mind, when he was growing up? He turned out a bully, he was built like an ox, he met any challenge head-on, angry, determined to win.’

Max took a draught of the retsina. The moisture condensing on the jug had made a ring of water on the tray, and he traced a pattern with his finger. ‘A heatwave – seven days of temperatures over the century, it burnt your skin even in the shade, a breath from Hell. I challenged him, a game or two of tennis. After an hour he was losing badly. The heat was boiling up from the court,

asphalt, almost melting in the sun.
You could smell the hot tar. "Harry,
let's call it off," I said. His face
was a sick colour, a blotchy mix
of grey and pink. "Damn you," he said,
"play on, damn you, you bastard."
He knew about me and Stella, you see.
What could I do? "Leave it," I said.
The courts were on the outskirts of town,
behind a half-acre paddock of derelict
trucks and broken-down bulldozers
that Harry had picked up at an army sale
and hoped to make a killing on, one day.
The courts were empty in the heat. "Harry,
leave it," I said, "we can pick it up later."
But he played on until he thrashed me.
I let him beat me. Why not?
I'd won, hadn't I? I drove him home,
and left him at the front gate. "I'll
call you tonight," he said, gasping.
"Swine like you have to be taught a lesson."

What did he mean? What was he planning?
Revenge? God knows. I drove off.
He never made it to the house. The boy,
his son found him face-down on the path,
the brick path, about an hour later,
when he came home, he'd sneaked out,
he should have been at home practising

his scales, he would have heard his father cry
out, before he fell, out of key,
a sound never written in a music book.
He could have telephoned the ambulance.
The doctor, the paddles, the shock –
the subjunctive mood, it's full of pain.
“If only . . .” and so on. And so forth.
Time is one-dimensional, a one-way street.
Once a thing is done . . . The poor kid.
He'd sneaked away, he was smoking
and looking at a *Playboy* magazine
behind the shed, cruel innocence,
who is to blame, the heart? The faulty genes?
His dad's father cheating on his friends?’

Max stared at his drink. I could hear
a clock ticking somewhere. Sandra stirred
and spoke in a whisper, so quietly
that she might have been speaking to herself.
‘What happened to the boy?’ she asked.

‘Poor little bugger,’ Max said.
‘He went strange after that. I tried,
I tried to bring him out of himself,
but it didn't work. I took him fishing.
I gave him a camera, I taught him
photography, he took pictures of things
dead, run over, a cat crushed
and left by the road, fish heads.

I bought a gun, took him hunting rabbits,
but that was no good, he'd turn and fire
into the trees, he'd empty the magazine.
I was afraid he'd do something terrible.
The more I tried to reach the boy, the more
he pulled away. Stella was the same,
she put up the shutters.' Max frowned,
a plaintive tone gave his voice an edge.

'She took the boy off on a trip,
one of those bridge club cruises
you read about, where fifty rich people
learn the game from bridge professionals
cruising in the Caribbean. Stella
knew some guy, so she got the trip
teaching people bridge, she was good,
and I guess they sympathised. Fine.
She wanted to forget, she said, the boy
needed a chance to grow, to get away.
Next thing I know I get a letter.
She's met this fellow in Miami,
a businessman, a rich card player,
real estate dealer, speculator.
She was infatuated, I could see that,
poor Stella, half mad with grief –
the opportunities for error – well,
there's no need to fill in the picture.'

Max topped up his glass and drank.

'I happened to be in Southern California
some time after that, on business,
so I called on the happy family.
The boy, he'd picked up an accent,
talked like a Yank, it was embarrassing.
To me, that is; not the new father,
he said he liked the kid to call him Pop.
They'd gone there from Miami for a reason,
to catch the boom, Stella said, land,
a real estate explosion in the making,
the way she talked, like a wave, a tremor,
if you were sensitive you felt it coming,
like a train deep beneath the earth,
the crash of steel cars colliding
underground, and in that maelstrom
vast financial forces could be tapped,
and a tidy profit plucked from the wreck.
Don't you want the boy to have a chance,
she asked me, good schools, a job?
A fool could make a fortune in a week,
the new husband chuckled, no problem.
Stella looked terrible, I could see it
if no one else wanted to, apparently
the husband drank, and naturally Stella
hated it – we found ourselves alone
for a moment and I took the opportunity
to pour my heart out to her as I had
so long ago – Leave him, Stella,

my darling, I said, and come with me.
She used to have an understanding nature,
but America had changed all that;
she seemed self-centred and ambitious.

‘She couldn’t break away, it was clear;
she knew she’d made a terrible mistake,
but admitting to it was another thing,
she pretended she was mad about him –
his crude manners, his moods – and it seemed
she had to match his drinking with her own.
I couldn’t stand to see her like that –
trembling, red-eyed, bitterly unhappy –
at one point she tore off a bracelet
I’d given her before – carnelians –
when we were in love, and flung it away.
I got filthy picking up the stones
where they’d fallen underneath the fridge.

‘Well, her husband – Stanley was his name,
a stocky, hearty fellow, well built,
thick hair on his arms and shoulders –
Stanley was badly short of staff
down at the office, and as it happened
I knew how to sell a block of land.
I said I’d help out – What are friends
for? – and Stella needed some support,
to be frank, to help her face herself
and her responsibilities – the kid,

for example, was turning more American every day, the less attractive qualities, I mean – he was keen to make a million before he turned twenty-one, trading used earth-moving gear, tractors, trucks – and this from a young man who used to play the cello like an angel. If only God had granted me a little time, that’s all I wanted, time . . .’

Now it was the coffee he gulped at. He showed his teeth, discoloured by tobacco in a snarl like a yawning dog.

‘I felt like a sucker,’ he complained.

‘All that love I’d given her, it didn’t mean a damn thing, I’ll admit

I got upset by some remark of Stella’s, I should have kept calm, the doctor said to take it easy, my heart was playing up – deep breathing, count to ten, relax – but who cares, it was broken anyway.

Something Stella said. I saw red.

Hell, she was a lovely woman, even shrieking like that – “Go!” she said, “Go away!” – I still have the scratches, look – ’ he showed us his neck – ‘but it was the drink speaking, and the heat – it could get so dry in that house, an electrical feeling like a migraine,

a hazy, gritty heat, the desert
gaping beyond the patio, and the wind,
the Santa Ana wind that used to blow,
roaring up the dry valleys through the eucalypts –
something she said, I don't remember,
I think I broke a few things, Hell,
I was always clumsy, and then – my – heart – ’

He reached into the air with his hands,
pawing, sweeping an unseen treasure
towards his chest. His face was flushed and damp,
he seemed on the edge of an emotion
that might crush him if he let it
take one more inch of his body –

‘My damned heart slammed to a stop!
The pain! Everything black! The next thing,
I wake up in a room like a morgue,
terrified, dry mouth, nausea,
plastic tubes coming out of me,
and pain – a shark tearing at my chest,
and a debt – my God, American
hospitals, thirteen thousand dollars!
When I came to, I phoned around –
Stella had disappeared, moved again,
back to Miami. The Californian
real estate deal had fallen through
badly, it turned out, a severe
miscalculation on Stanley's part,

and the three of them had shut the shop
and shot through with a half million bucks,
and I – I had a State Fraud One-O-Seven
hanging over me – all for helping
Stella’s husband sell a block or two
of rather dry country in Nevada,
what should I know about Nevada law?
They repossessed the trailer home, the car,
a ring I’d bought for Stella – gone, the lot.

“Lay down your burden,” the orderly said;
“agree with everything the doctor says
but just don’t lift anything heavier
than a highball and you’ll be fine.”
I did some listening – not to doctors,
what would they know in the area
of coronary attacks? Sure, they study,
they have a licence to take your money,
but watch them tour the wards – a nod,
a smile, they feel your pulse, they feel
your wallet, kiss my arse and wave goodbye.
But the nurses and the orderlies,
they *live* with death day and night,
they see every little symptom,
they wheel in the living and they
trundle out the bodies. Look at this!

Here Max tore open his shirt
and bared his midriff. The sudden gesture

took me by surprise. I had half
doubted his story, but here was evidence –
a scar like a giant zipper that tore
from the exact centre of his chest –
it was heaving, he was gasping for air –
down and under his ribs, to disappear
behind his back. ‘Thirteen thousand bucks!

‘I lost Stella, I died on the table.
What’s it like in Hell?’ He laughed at his joke.
‘I only saw the ante-room, the lobby.
Decorated with old *National Geographics*
and dirty magazines with torn covers.
Hey, I’m kidding! What should I know?
I’m alive, and poor Harry’s dead.
That’s all. For what? For nothing.

Look at me, a bankrupt. But alive.’
He laughed – a high, wheezing sound,
as though some invisible assailant
had their hands tight around his throat.

‘For nothing, all that suffering,
the bridge games I could never follow – ’
he was struggling to form the words –
‘the wind, the rain pouring on the roof
of Harry’s old Nash – ’ here his tale
foundered – ‘the kisses, the cheating . . . ’
A handkerchief came out, and mopped his face.

His chest was heaving, and I realised he was crying in great deep gulps, shuddering, but quietly, like someone not wanting to be overheard. 'Where's the Men's Room? I gotta go.' Sandra directed him. The spell was broken.

Flack went out for cigarettes. The Captain talked quietly to Sandra by the door. Paul joined them, and the older man put his arm around their shoulders. I was thinking what an odd trio they made, when the Saint, quite close to my ear, startled me.

'Do you know the motives that Adler ascribed to the compulsive fantasiser?' he asked, in his careful, hard-to-place accent. 'Of course not. Few people read him any more. The high-flying eagle is a moth-eaten old bird now, asleep on his perch in some dim museum. This was an early formulation – later he recanted, but mistakes – as Freud reminds us – are much more important than they seem. Adler of course was a disciple of the Great Sigmund, but who could stand the heat of that blaze for long? And Freud, such a jealous Father, always driving

the fledglings from the nest. Personally
I have always felt that intellectual
pursuits are vain. Not in themselves,
but because they are so obviously
a long way around, an unnecessarily
circuitous route to the satisfying
of the real needs – Greed, Desire.

‘So the greedy Max weaves his nets.
And we are all departing now,
I think. The rain has stopped.’

The Captain drew me aside as we were leaving,
and led me to a painting hung high
at the end of the hallway, past the lifts.
‘Look at this before you go. Tell me
what you think.’ I looked, and wondered –
did I know the artist? A large oil,
strongly coloured, framed between a pair of
crimson drapes – a water scene, the late
afternoon light spilling across
a bay – boats – a large cargo ship,
and on the funnel was the emblem
of a publishing conglomerate,
one of the Captain’s better business ventures.
The sky was heaped with golden cloud, and thronged
with aircraft, mostly 1930s biplanes,
and a distant decorated zeppelin.

'It's real, but emblematic too,' he said,
'it all means something else. Art makes
life worth living. So does passion.
Not sex – I mean the whole thing.
So does a stock exchange collapse.
Why do we speak in riddles? That's the question.
Unanswerable. Let's catch the others.'

As we stumbled down the rain-wet steps
of Florenzini's, murmuring in small
intent groups, the last rays of the sun
slanted across the street and lit the park.

E N D

The two poems that complete the book, "Breathless" and
"Rain", appear in the printed version of the book, but not
in this free PDF version.