

Gauguin's Menhir, Tahiti

Gauguin's Museum in Papeari bay
 Is either a pious or a sardonic fraud:
 Not one of the works he sold here, gave away
 Or swapped for crusts, it seems can they afford.

Among poor prints the traveller finds instead
 This granite god's uprooted monolith;
 His deity is lost to mind: the dread,
 Menace and awe outlive his vanished myth.

So Gauguin's wit, savage as his palette
 Survives him here; these efforts to atone
 Might draw its bitter rictus even yet:
 'I asked for bread, they have given me this stone!'

Twice exiled, twice abandoned, twice bereft,
 Strangest of strangers in this tropic sea,
 No more improbable tourist ever left
 The skies and apple-crofts of Brittany,

To stand here ringed with bread-fruit, vine and palm.
 Nature in full profusion of colour and scent
 Blazes outside, seaward there sleeps the calm,
 Teeming lagoon; but this indifferent,

Implacable menhir, alien and alone,
 Withdraws into itself, rejects, denies,
 With the uncompromising strength of stone,
 All this alluring island paradise.

He too saw through it; caught with his painter's eye
 The shuffle of boredom towards the pit of dread;
 The eternal honeymoon's improbable lie
 Prompted his rage: he painted in its stead

Something the travellers did not wish to see:
 Tupapau haunting Loti's waterfall;
 Satiety; *fiu*; inertia — but he
 Painted his own predicament most of all.

The genius who left his age behind,
 A middle-aged school-boy playing truant from school,
 Who founded his Abbey of Thelème to find
Fay ce que voudras was an iron rule.

Calvin was there before him; though he wore
 Festoons of flowers and danced in grass skirt,
 The creed was still that grim Mosaic Law;
 And lurking waist-deep in volcanic dirt,

The old gods in the jungle beckoned still,
 Had never accepted sin in the past tense
 And 'free love' substituted for 'free will'
 Was their predestination, and made sense.

A will to undo, a longing to destroy
 Looked at him from the eyes of a doomed race.
 He painted pleasure, their nearest approach to joy
 And melancholy, their only notion of peace;

The women so sombre, stupified with love,
 Cursed with thick ankles and ungainly feet.
 With all the pity he was capable of
 He painted their grossness and their grace complete,

The aimless terror, the emptiness below
 The orgy and the *himéné* alike:
 ('Whence and where are we? Whither do we go?'
 'What shade broods in the shadow, poised, to strike?')

Loti's dream-isle was dying: he painted her
 With love and rage, for he was dying too,
 The festering corpse of *La Nouvelle Cythère*.
 Though no one else had guessed at it, he knew

This island, flourishing beyond belief,
Was but a hat of flowers, a leafy crown
On a bald, basalt skull. Beyond the reef
A huge sea-mountain's flanks plunged down and down

And a volcano god, whose fires were dead
Rooted in magma where his brutal weight
Drove his splay feet deep in the ocean bed,
Stood brooding in the dark and nursed his hate.

Papeete 1971

A. D. Hope

THE WIVES OF THE KING OF KARAGWE

encouraged
by a guard wielding a fat whip
suck through a tube
a constant supply of milk
unable to balance
on their bloated legs
human seals
flapping and wallowing
souls abandoned
among great breasts and vast buttocks
dreaming of watery poisons
of time grown thin.
Oh, the plump hours!

Mike Doyle

THE COMB AND THE SWORD
(for Vincent O'Sullivan)

Tall girl, bronze mirror, hair
swept in her comb, sea-wave
in sunlight's moving beam:
that pride in itself beautiful,
excitement at the beauty she looks upon.

You set the scene at Troy. Well
enough. Coiled at her throat
the snake-brooch, a foreboding?
Lurking nearby the figure
of Cruelty, blade in hand.

The moral: cruelest,
young beauty wantonly destroyed
at its moment of full flowering?

In a bladeless world that girl
hair by hair would lose
loveliness. In the slow stroke
of comb through hair, in the tides
of water & light, rising,
falling, rising & falling,
in her hand shifting the comb
stroke upon stroke. That's where cruelty is.

Mike Doyle

MORNING

Sleepless toward the end of that summer, he knew how, always at the same time, a humming sailing cadence would approach softly but persistently along the passage. Finally, it came floating and falling through the dark doorway, reaching a pillowed single pair of ears

nightly murmuring in the humid air

delusions of the refrigerator recooling its twelve cubic feet of a workaday planet which, as he realized, was rotating very slowly to stop at last in interstellar cold (now the nick in the ceiling could rapidly become a ragged gap, and from behind the broken rooftiles, the dully gleaming wedge of a glacial bulk would press down)

when the sun regained its icy season

sleepless toward the end of that summer, he was possessed with such a longing that he left the house which had become electric. He walked, however, from a lightless portal, out into the opening foliage of a normal dawn.

Alexander Craig

Willoughby's great-aunt Kate in Patagonia
 suddenly passed on, sent air freight
 the family cimbalom. W, naturally,
 full of Stravinskyan designs, didn't
 account for the retinue which followed:
 non-stop chromaticising clarinet,
 scraping rhapsodicist of a violin,
 crowd of nodders behind. In the midst
 of his next cacktale party he flipped
 the lid open: JOHANNES PYMBAL BUDAPESTI
 ME FECIT

(the pilaf he served was full of pips)
 and the crowd grew cold. To end it:
 violin said his mother had dropsy,
 clarinet was named in some treble register,
 while the grey nodders (drum and bass)
 had designs of their own. Now,
 descending the bluegold ruts of Anacapri
 comes the accordion man.

Philip Roberts

TWO WOMEN

Mrs. Punch in a blonde perm:
fifty miles by railway
she prattled on that night.

A daughter travelled with her,
almost pretty, less one tooth,
hayseed for a winter's tale.

While mum was gathering wool,
she stood in the corridor
gawking at gawky boys,
appallingly vulnerable,
a supermarket cashier
but stranger to wit or scruple.

Mother, widow, chatterbox
tugged at an unseen string,
full of hope for that fledgling,
smoothing our trip with anecdotes
but letting the pain show through.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

DOUG AND JANIS

Their table was in the plastic, ambiguous
Saloon Bar/Ladies' Lounge of an Elwood pub;
It rocked a little under his elbows;
She clutched her bag very tight:

"You don't really want me to go away?"
"Of course not, sweetie, never in the world,
And yet somehow I keep thinking . . ."
Keep drinking, he surely meant,

Filling his pot over and over
While she tinkered with what might have been
Bloody Marys but could have been no more than
The safety of one tomato juice.

"You'll miss me, won't you?" "I'll miss you terribly."
One would have had to be as blind as a bat
Not to see how quickly that beer went down,
How frozen-face he smiled.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

The Start of The Second World War

Often after dinner, a mild quarrel,
my father walked to the corner of the street,
leant against a little post and thought
and smoked: this was his peace.

I built forts in our backyard,
dug small trenches, threw crackers at lead soldiers:
that was the size of war.

I wondered, drew lines of troops
and tanks on recent maps.
Then I read a sign outside the newsagent
which told me the war had been declared.

Nothing upset the usual—
my father standing at the corner,
those holes I dug in the garden.

There was so much serenity
far from the Battle of the River Plate.

R. A. Simpson

The Veterinarian

the veterinarian moves
between the islands of fur
about the calves he says nothing
conversing more in geese
and the swelling part

he is never doubtful
in front of patients

he stands
and he watches

his speech is the dead leaf
blown across a field
his bags leak straw
and moist sawdust

D. S. Long

SONG WITHOUT WORDS

The cool midnight after the day's
inferno of normal summer heat.
Here, even at noon's incandescent
height, the rooms were full of a
cool-edged mellowness. I day-
dreamed of the night's perfumed
air blowing through our aeolian,
disembodied selves remindingly,
remindingly. But I talked myself
and you dry. Obsessional with
words, hag-ridden and riding down
the hours again. When all about us
the cool personae of the midnight
breeze entered the room and sang,
beyond the rattling snake of words,
no words but a vocalise of every
summer's night beside a calm
ocean, an airy distillation of
thing-sounds, pine siftings, wave
surge and lapse, grass growth and
the unfolding of petals — nothing
special — And mixing with it all
the chiming silence after clattered speech.

Bruce Beaver

ALWAYS

Always there will be somebody young and beautiful enough to make you feel younger than they are. To make you say poems instead of write them, to an audience of one — Are there more for the written ones? But this writing them down is a kind of loving, a kind of making love on paper, while the other, the spoken poems are the closest you'll get to the troubadour's song, the ecstatic ad lib solo, the jazz flight of the single instrument, the voice incapable of chords though like some birds almost accompanying itself, the words overlapping from the song-swollen throat. Always some season will set it off with or without an accolade of flowers' or fruit blossoms' perfume. Even the keen, chill no-smell of winter whets the edges of your words so they cut through to sun and heart's flight.

Bruce Beaver

Against the Stiff Upper Lip Principle

I warn you now: I will not take it well.
I will not circumspectly close the door
On what I feel. No fine *esprit de corps*
Will keep my grief in bounds or turn on hell
A public-school *sang-froid*: I will not serve.

I will not cheapen what it meant to live
By so repressing loss that it should seem
The outcome and residuum of a dream.
Though gentlemanly each thrust as a gangland shiv,
I will not look away. And I will *not* forgive.

Bruce Dawe

DRIVE-IN

Perhaps the way it happens in the movies
 is like, but not quite near enough, to life.
 There was that lovely lady, Glenda Jackson —
 bare arms around another in the bed —
 broken and gay in turn as want was switched
 on and off like a shower or another habit
 needed; but on which one might not depend.
 And in one shot, the length of her golden haunch
 made up a whole horizon by a fire
 where she, and the one who was to cast her off,
 endured a moment's warmth, as you endured
 my fingers under the skirt exploring the wound
 that you said still ached from the little light
 of our afternoon's discovery.

So I desisted.

And home again, naked, you went to bed
 so I could wrap you, wanted, in arms' illusions
 so safe that all seemed left to want was sleep.
 That's how it is, I fear. The wants are not
 final, momentous longings, but an inducement
 to dream out disappointments.

From tossing much,

I left you to your dreams: again, downstairs,
 I sit with the bottle that diminishes
 me and my needs as the tired night expires,
 resolved to give up movies, to sit at home
 dulling desires with obliterative wine.

Louis Johnson

POEM FOR THE NEW YEAR

Your face has strong lines: the cheekbones
 High, and almost Slavic, underline
 The direct blue of the eyes.

I have,

I am told, an aggressive chin
 And stubborn thumbs. Strange how
 In each other's hands we become
 So malleable.

Such observations
 Reach us from the world through mirrors,
 Messages, the reflections of words
 And resolutions.

I know of resolutions
 That they fail when we mirror each other,
 As when, face to face, we decide
 Our too difficult love must end, and I
 Return to my family.

Dumbly, then, it is hands
 Reach out and hold: words revolve,
 Wear thin, dissolve into atmosphere.
 We had best define what is true —
 Both the difficulty and the love —
 And live with them.

I cannot live

Without love. Helped, I can learn
 To outstare the difficulty.

Louis Johnson

BEACHED

Friday, on the beach — and there's a footprint!
But it's mine, filling slowly with foamy water
that may have slip-slopped past my native coast
on its way here to seep into these toe-marks.

I too have made the Tasman crossing.
At least, I think so; unsettling to admit
(as I scuff through flustered water-margins)
that after seven years one's not assured
of having both feet on this or any ground.
Only five toes are impressive here.

Hab I *got* dem *ole* deracination bloo-*hoos*?
How elementary are my longings and belongings?

I paddle over pebbles,
bones of contentment
sucked at by sea-lip:
their glow is outlandish.

Then a final cadence:
waves withdraw, leave them
to sun and sand.
Lustre drains away.
They are dingy stones.

Ian Reid

THE LONG LOVE

For Alan Davies

Too deep an immersion in
the Romantic poets, or
an insecure relation
with mum, the conjunction of stars
at the hour of genesis, or
something within genetic structure itself —
we know of course which one
of these wild hypotheses we
would soonest back, but neither
knows better than Yeats how to cope
with the notion of life-long attachment:
all that's over, let it fade.

Well yes, of course. But how
did Yeats himself go? How
are you going, going to go, how
will I go myself, with all
the chips down, half of life
still to be played, and played without a wife?
Not too badly I hope. One thing
I've learned from you though, talking
about Freud, about this and that:
if you can't beat them, join them.
Meanwhile, on with the game.

Evan Jones

'Thought is Surrounded by a Halo'

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 97

Show me the order of the world,
the hard-edge light of this-is-so
prior to all experience
and common to both world and thought,
no model, but the truth itself.

Language is not a perfect game,
and if it were, how could we play?
The world's more than the sum of things
like moon, sky, centre, body, bed,
as all the singing masters know.

Picture two lovers side by side
who sleep and dream and wake to hold
the real and the imagined world
body by body, word by word,
in the wild halo of their thought.

Gwen Harwood

MEDITATION ON WYATT

“Whoso list to hunt”

Here and everywhere I meet your crazy scent
 except in dreams — you are too near to dream —
 I split envelopes and you fall out

introducing your music, such operatic flowers
 in the fields of discourse! Your dashes and stops!
 Whose is the emblem of a running hound?

I have your world either side of my nose,
 to heel! to heel! my sealcoat shining
 through harping grasses the fields breathe open

I root and feast no respecter of persons
 the rankbrained rulers rankriding bitches
 swallowed the festering single eye

down and out deep and bitter the taste
 I have run through your dream and muzzle you out
 to groundlevel light and lie on your belly

silky and patient and the dim people
 sketch us in pencil, Master and Faithful Hound.
 When the horn blows we are equal to that sound.

Gwen Harwood

In the Terai

Our throats full of dust, teeth harsh with it,
plastery sweat in our hair and nostrils,
we slam the flaps of the Landrover down
and think we choke on these roads.
Well, they will be better in time:
all along the dry riverbed
just as when we drove past this morning
men and women squatting under umbrellas
or cloth stretched over sticks, or nothing,
are splitting chipped stones to make smaller chips,
picking the fingernail-sized fragments
into graded heaps: roads by the handful.
We stop at the village and buy glasses of tea,
stewed and sweet; swallow dust with it
and are glad enough. The sun tilts lower.
Somewhere, surely, in this valley
under cool thatch mothers are feeding children
with steamy rice, leaning over them
to pour milk or water; the cups
tasting of earthenware, neutral, clean,
the young heads smelling only of hair.

Fleur Adcock

VICTORIA SONG

Who goes round my house all night?
long walker, short walker;
one in moosehide boots, and one
in shoes that sound so tight:
long and short walker.

Who whistles at my house all night?
long walker, short walker;
threshold steady under moon
the window packed with light:
long and short walker.

Whose hands go yellow in the night?
long walker, short walker;
in dreams their feet begin to run
ankle-deep and bright:
long and short walker.

Vincent Buckley

NORTH-WEST WINTER

Smell — streaks on the apple
milk scabs in the cup
all night the windvent
buzzes like a heart; the clean
sheets wait to feel my skin
stretch with their heat.

I am earthed here
indoors, in the snow heaped
like white sand, the walls
salt-white, the unsensual
electric surfaces, the hint
of thunder in the room.

And my mind occupied with
tadpole fish-form
openeyed child
shows me, in the light's oval,
shadow of the milk
flowing into the cup.

Vincent Buckley