

The Past

Martin Harrison¹

The drive back from Melbourne is a patchwork of histories. Back home, after three days on the road, the paddock's new grasses are wind-free, still. At last green. "It's as if it's all making up its mind," someone said to me day or so ago. Yes, I thought to myself, it's true there's a kind of tremor in which this return to green is conducted. Much of Victoria was green, tentatively so. But as we cross the border, the blond dry quality returns: the slopes are straw-coloured, silvery blond. When we turn off to the beginnings of the high country, we skim an unmarked frontier back into green. In the journey's speed, there's both stasis, no-change and, at the same time, there's constant change. In the larger world, there's tentativeness because no-one knows how long these conditions will last. Rainless years, die-back, dry dams, swarms of roos, crop failure, stock reduction, fires, mice plagues - the list is so negative, the particulars so "bush", that you can't help but smile. Can it get worse? It seems - well, how to put it? - that there's a weather *of things*, as well as a weather of prevailing wind, rain and pressure patterns. There's a weather of the mind and of personal senses, a weather of this other psychological "world": namely, a weather of intimate feelings which change and sharpen each person's idea of the world. If it weren't like this, everything would be equally noticeable. Everyone, for instance, would have registered the news of locust swarms far west of here and seen the handful of scattered, windblown outriders flittering across the half-way-between-ankle-and-knee high grass in the back orchard here. But, no, they're here for a few days only. Not many people see them.

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I wake up with a heavy sense of - already the word I want for this feeling has gone back into sleep. Anxiety, a sense of inextricable failure, a heaviness mixed with guilt about something I should have done and could never have succeeded in doing: all of these are part of the name I'm searching for. A single word to name the feeling ...

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“What have I done wrong?” is what I am feeling, or, more exactly: “Where have I gone wrong?”

Some deep internalization’s occurred and, momentarily, a rift, a wedge, of embedded emotion stirs up, like a swirl of sand from a fish disturbed in the creekbed, which then filters through the first few hours of the day. I’m a child again, waking up to the electric, tingling sense of negativity – of anger and resentment – which my parents wallowed in for weeks on end with each other: irreconcilable difference, fret-saw of irritability, slur and sneer, moody non-speaking! What a life! Did they ever make up, forgive and forget? A burdensome, bruised cloud pressed into the back of my mind: that’s the name for what I’ve woken with. And the pathetic, doglike sense (only children can be so abject) of somehow having to make it all right, to make up for it ...

So let’s say that the nameless mood is a key element in the breaking down of anxiety. Nobody can be so sure of things, so in control. No-one can expunge, in every regard, the daily sense of living a life divided, of having another life which, always accompanying us, goes into shadow as soon as we turn to look. It’s as if we carry in us a forgetfulness the other side of a rift beyond which memory works without connections. We try to recall and immediately we are wordless. We read the character and then we guess ----

(two pears, two small pears, still hard – hanging in their pale-green
leaf sprays of old wood)

(a gash of fruit across the mind)

(the poet’s words about his mother’s death: *those hands, that face, the
gesture of a life which isn’t any other life but exactly this one*)

(the sense that the others, the dead ones, never lose their intimate link
with us)

(how much love is tied to their presence)

(a chipped stone flake)

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Along the road winding beside new green paddocks, the already dry dust spurts blowing away quickly, like words just out of reach –

“the past will always exceed the everyday” – much as if, in an abandoned house, a phone’s still ringing.

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Yet the green keeps on expanding. All the wreckage of dreams, fears, complex constructions floats through it like abandoned machinery, rusted by the sky. Fences and cars go down in it like holiday makers on a beach entering the water, slowly, inching their way, with a hundred different gestures of surprise, a hundred different screeches and laughs. The sound of so many things sinking into time never ceases to fill one’s ears: for at a certain point, things only remain visible because they are half-eaten, half-formed, half-vanished (they’re all the same process) in time. The simplest impulse reaches from one end of consciousness to the other, from one moment at the remembered beginning to the on-going moment of immersion. I wake up, for instance, with a single feeling of concern and with the parallel sense that the feeling is, itself, a signal – like a sail trajected between water and sky, like a plough skimming between surface and air.