



# Average Human Heart

left hand stories

Ross Bolleter

# *Average Human Heart*

*Left hand stories*

*dedicated to Antoinette Carrier*

Ross Bolleter

Copyright Ross Bolleter June 2016  
Cover photo by Antoinette Carrier, copyright Antoinette Carrier,  
April 2016

### *Breathing the breath*

My first accordion was a yellow mother-of-pearl Hohner. Its bellows leaked, so that as I push pulled with all my eleven year old might, it blew the breath of love in my face. Later I taught it to smoke by gluing a burning Rothman's cork-tipped cigarette to its bellows.

### *Tango*

On the rainy July morning of my eleventh birthday I was playing my accordion in the darkened lounge room. The doorbell announced sobbing voices. From behind their screen door my parents oh-noed as my aunt and uncle told their story, not quite drowned out by the rain's roaring. I kept playing the tango to show I wasn't listening, and to silence what I could hear too well. My tango protected the entire family. It tried not to hear of the death of my cousin.

### *Rhapsody in Blue*

I learned the piano accordion from the gifted young virtuoso Giuseppe de Sondrio. He'd sit at his big black desk, looking out over rusting rooftops to the Town Hall clock, which would finally chime out the end of my lesson. Meanwhile he laboured at his arrangement of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* for accordion and orchestra, filling up the close-printed orchestral score with his bold elegant notation. As I stubbornly learned to play Schubert's *Serenade*, *Rhapsody in Blue* piled towards completion on the left side of his desk. No matter how badly I played the serenade, I could never disturb his perfect concentration.

### *Charity*

In the hardware store I buy screws and washers, and a raffle ticket. I don't register the charity, but the store clerk does, and tells me his son has leukaemia – “No, not fatal – only nine months to go in his four-year course of treatment. He's mostly good – that is, except for the steroid rage. He goes to school and holds it all in, but at home he lets go. He knows what's going on, but still he can't hold back. But what's home if he can't be furious at us all some of the time.”

### *Regulations*

Confronted by the close-printed regulations for Self Lock Storage, I jokingly asked Alby the desk clerk if it was OK for me to store explosives in my newly acquired bunker.

“Nope.”

“How about severed heads?”

“That's fine. You know, my sons are undertakers. They take me out to see that kind of thing – ‘soups’\* too.”

He winces.

“Bad back?”

He goes pale.

“Nope. I had an op and they cut out half my bladder and my ureter. Got to be careful how I move. Yep. Severed heads is OK.”

Rain falls at the precise angle of the zinc corrugations.

\* A ‘soup’ is a corpse in the first stage of decomposition.

### *Secret business*

In the garage at Wyalkatchem, in the remote West Australian wheat belt, she comes out to serve me. Twenty odd, she's wearing a black t-shirt. Half asleep, she fills up my tank. In the shop there's a sign on the counter – *Do you want to speak to the owner, or to the woman who knows what's happening?*

“I want to speak to the owner.”

“I'm her.” She points into the darkened repair shop.

There's a guy just visible lubing an ancient land cruiser.

“That's my hubby. I'm thinking of cutting him in.”

No turning back. “Then I want to speak to the woman who knows what's happening.”

“I'm her.”

“How is it that this is what so often happens in marriages?”

Silence.

“I guess that's a secret.”

“It's our only one.”

### *Concern*

On a farm out at Mukinbudin, my friend Arthur and I walk across the dry paddocks. At the remote boundary, we encounter a dead sheep – actually just the fleece and a few bones splayed. Arthur addresses it softly – “Not feeling so good today, Digger?”

### *Time*

I buy my daughter a Seiko watch for her twenty-first birthday. On its dial it has irregularly spaced hours.

Amanda takes one look at it, and exclaims, “Yes, the hour before lunch is definitely longest!”

### *Glamorous days*

My friend D. retired from the public service a decade ago to care for his aging parents. Both of them have died, and he has neither the heart, nor the energy to clear away their possessions. The house is a dark shrine, extending room to room.

On a sunny autumn afternoon, we drink black coffees in *Caffissimo*, and gaze out on the crowds crossing the bridge, heading home – “Glad not to be part of it?” I ask.

“Well, yes, but I spend most of my time worrying about my unlived life.” I look past him into the apricot clouds that fill the tall window, and say: “In all this radiance it seems impossible that lives could fail.” “You mean death?”

“No, breakdown of relationship, going broke, failure in love...” “Then we could definitely do with some gloaming – dark by five o’clock, slopping through flooded gutters, hats pulled down against the sleet, umbrellas thrust out in front...”

### *Code*

Clandestine, they set up their lives through e-mail, using coded passwords. They talk a blur. One day, nothing from her, then nothing. He keeps on pouring his messages towards her – “Get back to me love – what, are ye dead?”

### *Her dream*

M. dreams that she’s in an ancient mansion. She hears someone weeping, and goes from room to room searching for them. Finally, she wakes to her own weeping.

### *Rabbit tango*

I buy my lover’s daughter a dwarf rabbit for her tenth birthday. Maeve, after trying to exchange her for a baby at the Left Bank Cafe, decides to keep her, and because her

fur is a dark purple grey, she christens her Cloudy. I bring Cloudy into the house, and sit down with her in my lap at the piano. I keep my arms close to my sides to stop her from jumping out, and finding impossible places to hide. Because of this, the tango I play her is straitened. Even so she settles deeper in my lap, her eyes darkening over. Maeve grabs her from me, shouting, “She’s losing her thoughts!”

*Breakdown music*

My Alfa Sud breaks down five times in a fortnight. Each time I get it towed to my trusted mechanic, Rino, who so far has replaced the distributor, the coil and the alternator, and can’t understand why the Sud, like a dying animal, seeks the verge.

I await another mystery tow truck, but there’s no such thing as waiting – not while the Sydney International Piano Competition’s on ABC FM, and the latest stripling virtuoso can lead me ensnared through Debussy’s *Des pas sur la neige*—snow countries where my obedient footprints fill with night.

”Out of there, mate. Let’s get this show on the road!” The Sud sways like a pig on a butcher’s hook, and I’m riding high, trapped in Hines’s hot golden-dusted cab. Someone’s trying to jam his two-way with Nirvana’s latest hit, while he gives me (the second time this fortnight) his verbatim lecture – “How stupid you are to drive a European car, but best thing ever for my business.” He dumps it, rear end poked out into the peak-hour traffic.

Liszt’s arrangement of Schumann’s song *Dedication* (“Thou art my soul; thou art my heart. Thou both my joy and

sadness art ...”) wells from the Alfa’s radio. Rino comes out, lets his face fall into his big black, greasy hands, and turns back the way he came.

### *Service*

My friend Bob waits far back in the queue in the hardware shop. There’s only one shop assistant in attendance. Frustration builds because each time the phone rings he answers it, and deals with its request. Meanwhile the queue grows.

The guy in front of Bob has a mobile phone. “Phone him,” says Bob. “Give him your order, and while you’re at it, ask him if he’s got any quarter-inch gutter bolts.” The store’s telephone number is up there in bold over the counter, so the guy in front of Bob dials it on his mobile, and tells the counter attendant, “I bought an Eastwing Replica hammer from you – paid eighty bucks for it – and it broke the second time I used it. I want you to replace it. And while you’re at it, I need half a dozen quarter-inch gutter bolts.” The phone order goes on in full view of the counter attendant, who immediately brings out a genuine Eastwing hammer, and half a dozen gutter bolts, which he places on the counter. The guy with the mobile goes straight to the counter and picks up his hammer. Bob follows him and pays for the gutter bolts. And they leave together under the furious stare of the queue.

### *Artist’s life*

On the long drive from Budapest, my composer friend Michal told me about the Slovak artist P., whose life consists of wrapping white river stones in wire. He does this mindfully—one at a time. Each white stone is the life of one Slovak Jew killed by the Nazis. If he considers only

present day Slovakia, it will take him twenty years to complete this task. It will occupy him longer if he takes on Greater Slovakia, much of which is now part of Hungary.

“Where does he store these stones?”

“That’s the great question of his life. He consults obsessively with architects and engineers to gauge whether his two-room flat will bear the mounting burden. He fears the collapse of the upper storey, and hears the joists groan in the night.”

### *Great Aunt Meditation*

When Michal was driving me out from Bratislava to show me eastern Slovakia, he asked me a lot of questions about Zen and how to live it. I found his questions challenging—such questions always are—but they were more so because I spoke no Slovak, and he spoke just enough English for us to deal with practicalities.

When he asked me, “What is Zen?” I replied: “The countryside looks splendid now that the sun had come up.” As always, after one of my responses, he remained silent. However, as we neared Lengow, his home village, he said: “I like the jokes in your religion, but I don’t think I would do the meditation.” Sensing my disappointment, he went on – “But I would do Great Aunt Meditation.” “Well, what would that be?” I asked doubtfully. “Great Aunt Meditation is chicken meditation. My great Aunt spends all afternoon in front of her fire. For hour after hour there she is in her chair, looking like she is asleep. But she knows where very chicken is, and which way the wind is blowing, and what loaf of rye bread the pantry mouse is munching.”

In Lengow, I met Michal’s Great Aunt. She was frail, and almost totally blind. Michal talked family with her in

Slovak. She responded in rivers of Ruthenian. I listened in English. She plied me with Polish vodka. If you can't understand, at least you can drink!

Michal asked me to explain Zen to her. I said, "Ask her if the birds are singing in her heart!" Maybe he did, but she just poured me another vodka. As she laboured to get another log on the fire, Michal told me that it took her an hour-and-a-half to get to church. I asked how far it was, for the village was tiny. He replied that it was about a hundred metres. "Is it because she is blind, because she can barely walk?" "Yes. But mostly because she keeps stopping to enjoy what she can make out of the shadow and light. She picks up pebbles so she can feel them, talks to the dogs and cats, and to anyone she meets. It's a long journey."

### *Tongue with no bone*

After he had been knocked down by a delivery van, I accompanied my father in the ambulance to Royal Perth Hospital. They put him in 'treatment'. There was no one in charge, so I broke regulations to keep him company.

Sitting up in bed, he looked like a distinguished conductor. His grey hair was swept up onto the high white pillow. His nose beaked commandingly. Although no one could find time to get him a bottle to piss in, four of the staff came to him with their clipboards to ask him his age. Generously, he gave each one a fresh response – 21, 98, 47 – and finally, 200.

### *Hearing aid*

My father is nearly ninety. I don't know how much longer he has to live. I want to talk to him about dying – what he feels about it, and what he might want us to do after he's gone. I pay him a visit, fearful of raising this, but feeling I

must. As I come through the door he shoves two hearing aids into my hands – “Fix these.” I struggle with the snail shaped moulds encrusted with wax. Fighting my disgust I finally get one to work. Together we settle it into his ear. I want to raise the important matter with him, but I can’t find the way. My chest feels tight as I battle for the words. I ask him,

“Did you know Frank McShane died?” Frank was a distant relative of his.

“No.”

“Did you know him well?”

“A bit.” The hearing aid is feeding back.

“What do you feel about dying?”

“What’s the alternative?”

“Do you worry about dying?”

“I try not to think about it.”

“Would you want to be awake when you went?”

“I’d rather be asleep.”

A long pause. The hearing aid is feeding back again. It sounds like Percy Grainger’s free electric music. My dad cups my left hand over his ear making the pitch of the feedback go down. He releases my hand and it rises again.

He goes on,

“They say there’s a corridor.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that. They say there’s a light.”

He looks puzzled.

“Light!” I try to clarify it.

“Laugh?” he comes back, uncertainly.

“Light!” I say it more clearly. He looks confused. I make oval shapes in the air.

“Glow,” I say. He takes out his hearing aid, and tries to resuscitate it with a rusty three-inch nail.

“Light!” He looks perplexed now, and quite deaf –

“Love?”

### *Small change*

After my mother's funeral I told my brother and his family this story in the Cafe at the Gates of Salvation. I'm at the laundromat just about to start my wash, when an old aboriginal guy comes up to me wearing a battered slouch hat with the black, yellow and red flag of Black Australia on the front. He beckons me outside, "C'mon boss – see, they've run into your car." The young Vietnamese couple apologetically point out my smashed out right-front light of my ancient rusted Suzuki Hatch. I point to the buckled mudguard, and say to the woman, "Save the insurance. Fifty dollars." "Talk to him." He looks doubtful, points out the long scrape on the side of his car. Then I notice a young child strapped in the baby capsule, and say guiltily, "Forty dollars – better than losing your no-claim bonus." They scramble the forty dollars together and present it to me as we say our uncertain goodbyes.

Rich at last, I climb the golden hill to lunch. The old black guy steps in front of me, asks me for five dollars. "Sorry," I say. "Two dollars then." "What for?" "Bus money. I got clothes in the laundromat, no different from you." I pull out two dollars and odd change. "Give me all that." "Why?" "Because they wouldn't have said anything to you at all. I got you their money." I give him five dollars, then push up the hot hill for a Charlie Tricoli's cheese and mortadella roll.

Afterwards I buy a wallet from the Amnesty International Op Shop to hold the remaining dollars. They've only got one wallet left. The stitching has come unpicked, but it's got a golden boomerang emblazoned on it. It costs me twenty cents.

My brother says, “Bring the Suzuki over and I’ll unbend it for you.”

My niece cuts in, “That’ll cost you fifty dollars.”

### *Double act*

Canterbury Court Car Park was a brown-stained concrete eyesore dominating the block just north of the Barrack St Bridge in Perth, Western Australia. The car park’s rusting metal rods poked up into the clouding and unclouding skies. Because it had concrete cancer, it rained concrete blocks onto cars parked below. Desperate folk—distraught in love, sunk in debt—leapt to their death.

Canterbury Court was imploded in 1990. For years the land lay vacant. Finally a Myers’ Megamart was built there. In the words of my young friend Nathan— “Beamed in from another planet.” As *he* was, when he turned up for his first piano lesson carrying a broken violin. That lesson was abandoned to free improvisation, as were the many others through the ensuing months and years. Nathan always referred to our sessions of free improvisation as “piano lessons.”

His mother bought him a Gulbransen piano from the Salvation Army. We hoisted it onto the back of a ute, and drove it past the car park’s oblivious security guard, then up the rough-cast concrete spiral and out onto the roof. There we played unprecedented duets for businessmen, who momentarily noticed, but couldn’t take it in. They went straight back to their working concerns, to being worked by their concerns.

We’d ride the shuddering lift smelling of urine, only just making it to the roof. Staggering around, swiped by cold wind, we’d finally settle down to entertain acres of rusting roofs, and obscured advertising hoardings—like the ad for

spectacles that no one could see from the ground—and the odd seagull hopelessly off course. Occasionally we'd see a steeplejack trying to fix the wooden barrier, risking his life.

The piano weathered a winter on the roof. Water leaked through its canvas cover, and it shed its casing in long strips and coils. One frozen morning I tugged back the tarpaulin and disturbed a young aboriginal boy asleep, curled up in the dead leaves in the bottom of the piano. He woke up as the wind got in. We stared at each other, neither of us able to speak. Behind me someone coughed. I turned to face an aboriginal girl, maybe eighteen, and couldn't avert my stare of alarm as her hacking cough went on, and her face soaked over. She swallowed, tried to speak, finally got it out—"Hey man – watch me spit man." While the little guy took off down the stairs.

### *Yuwa*

My friend, Thomas and I were driving to the Red Centre up the Great Central Road, which is actually for the most part an unsealed limestone and gravel track. In the heat of late afternoon we were deep in the samadhi of the road, oblivious in its long brown gut. Coming over a hill, we were confronted by two bodies lying across the warm road. Thomas braked sharply and one of the figures, now visible as an aboriginal man in his middle years staggered up just inches from the bumper bar of our 4WD, waving his arms. She lay there for a while, as if dead, then swayed up, hair covering her face, whining, whimpering.

Too dry to speak, he whispered, "Got to get back to Warburton," but with our Mitsubishi Pajero packed to the gills we couldn't fit them in. Suddenly, she was gone from view. Immediately the left rear door was ripped open.

Thomas's tools clattered onto the road as she tried to claw her way up on top of our suitcases. Her companion dragged her off, as she howled and whimpered rhythmically from behind the snarled mats of her hair. I felt the guilty weight of being a white Pajero tourist (why not stow our suitcases behind a rock, and retrieve them later?).

We gave them Thomas's fresh pure water, and then again, and again. We asked if we could take a message for them to Warburton. The man laboriously wrote in my diary -

To Kevin from Terry

Message Please inform Danny or Philip or Livingston to help us. We are about ...

when a white 4WD came over the hill, and the driver agreed to take Terry to Warburton.

The girl we now know as Bettina squeezes on top of Thomas's gleaming suitcase, and after praising her one and only ever loving father – extolling him as a crusader and a lawyer in a hoarse cracked voice, then damning her mother as nothing but a trouble maker – she's torrential. Gulping down water, eyes too bright for bearing, she asks Thomas where he's from. "Germany! – you good guy. My teacher Mr Delaney, he from Germany. You, where you from? Australia? – well you OK --- I teach you words. OK?" She points to her lips – "Muni," and spells "M-U-N-I." "Muni," I repeat. "Yuwa!" (Yes!) she shouts. Then *kurru* (eye), *pina* (ear), *mulya* (nose), *tjarlinypa* (tongue), *yarangu* (body), *kapi* (water), *yilkari* (sky) – her eyes huge and liquid, shouting "Yuwa!" each time I got it right.

She gulps down more water. She's unstoppable. She'll teach us all her words before we reach Warburton. And

what's more she urges us, "You tell that woman with red hair\* we good people, we good community. Yes, we tell her, but telephone lines broken. You tell her. You tell her."

"My dreaming is watersnake, blue watersnake. He lives inside me. He jumped up so happy when I saw your black toyoda." "Stop – back, back!" she shouts. She rolls out of her air-conditioned nest. Leads us barefoot over prickles and hot granite to her grandmother's waterhole. She scoops up the shining water, drinks it. By the time we peer into the dark hole, it's already filmed over.

And down the biscuit coloured oblivious track – *mutuka* (car), *yivarra* (road), *tawumpa* (town). "Yuwa! Yuwa! Yuwa!" Under a sky like a fresh graze, she guided us into Warburton's bare State Housing. "Goodbye," we called after her. No response as she walked towards the big black woman in a floral dress, hanging out washing, staring back at her – silent, unrecognizing.

\* Pauline Hanson, Australian politician noted for her racist views.

### *The best improv*

Working late at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts I decided on a midnight coffee in Northbridge. I came back to find I'd left the door open and in the darkened auditorium, an old aboriginal man, wearing a Salvation Army great coat was coaxing a shivery plangy tune from the Ruined Jefferson. Immediately, Security and the Police (competing as to who got there first) burst in through the open door.

"Do you wish to prefer charges sir?"

"No – best piano improv I've heard this year."

The old guy gives me a grin and shuffles out, a Schweppes bottle sticking out of his left hand overcoat pocket.

*Unfinished business*

I respectfully approached the Ruined Piano in the tractor shed at Nallan Sheep Station and took hold of the fall to lift it. It was so rotten that it came away in my hands. I shoved batteries into my Marantz recorder and slung a pair of microphones over the dusty rafters. As I played, white ants journeyed in concentric circles on the front panel of the Jefferson (Chicago '26). Golden haired Emmy, the eight-year old daughter of the sheep station owners April and Dave Petersen, came in out of the majestic heat, and stood on the cool floor of the tractor shed watching me. I knelt to pull back the bass strings, then released them, like firing off huge arrows. The piano roared and groaned. After some minutes April strode over to the shed and muffled Emmy's ringleted head in her huge flowered dress, as though shielding her from an atrocity. I knew that April wanted to speak, was about to speak. I pointed frantically up to the Nanyo and the Sanyo microphones with my right hand, while trying to finish the performance with my left. Finally, she broke in – "Have you finished?" And I had.

*Maniac piano thumping bastard*

During the drought that never ended at Nallan Sheep Station I confess to recording on the ruined piano at night. I'd hide in the freezing iron shed, crouched under the piano waiting for Dave, the sheep station owner, to go to bed. Straight after he'd stumbled back up the homestead steps I would drag up an oil drum, feel the broken teeth of the Jefferson under my fingers, then play *con bravura, con passione* for the applause of millions of cicadas, through the shivery shuddering graveyard shift.

When the week was up I paid my friend Nathan's and my accommodation. Dave, having shot two hundred sheep that morning, with hundreds more dying out at remote windmills, was so drunk I could see through to the inside back of his skull. "That mad bastard you brought with you. The other night I was going to bed. I heard thunder, rushed out onto the veranda. The sky was clear full of fucking stars. You should shoot that maniac piano thumping bastard."

*Inviting the Bell to Speak*

In the decayed gold mining town of Cue I reverently greet the ancient owner of Bell's Emporium. He doesn't reply, just points me towards the dusty shelves of tinned dog and Spam beneath the rusting overhead wires of the disused pneumatic money dispatch.

In the past, Bell would tell me stories of Cue's legendary past, such as the one about Jack Woods the dark eyed butcher who got it all his own way. After Jack had shot a cow he'd fire a rifle to summon his customers. They'd sing out, "Jack, sling us over three pound." With a thud the axe would descend anywhere among the still quivering flesh. Then Jack would place a three-pound chunk of beef on the spring balance in such a scientific manner that it moved the indicator down to "six pounds." Then he'd sing out to the hungry miner, "No trouble me hearty. Six pounds! Six nines are sixty-three – Six shillings and threepence!" And so it went.

Now his wife speaks for Bell, her face small and tight, her eyes sliding off if I try to meet her gaze. "I leave out notepads for him all over the house. It's not so difficult" –

she opens her arms to show *bigger plate for more food* – “It was his voice box or his life.”

He looks up blubbing eyed from his desolate post at the old comptometer, his neck sinewy, his hairy adam’s apple bobbling like a sexual organ. He doesn’t wave back as I mouth, “Goodbye.”

### *The hive*

I loaned my Yamaha grand piano to a New Age aficionado of John Cage. He wanted to create a piece where several hundred bees would be encouraged to take up brief residence in the piano – fifteen minutes, no more. As they blundered confused and enraged into the strings they would create a resonant hive. The audience would have to lean forward, and strain to hear the faint sounds of their suffering.

Two days after the performance, I got a phone call from the artist to say that no-one could get the bees out. They’d put bowls of water inside the piano and rocked it from side to side, but so far had only dislodged two or three infuriated bees. I threatened to sue the Institute for the replacement value of the piano, if it was ruined.

Panicked, they smoked the bees out. Swarms of them crossed the railway line, flying straight down Wellington Street towards the Indian Ocean. A hundred or so remained to die in the dark sticky catacombs that would have become honeycomb given time. I brushed out their dry sticky bodies, whispering and crackling. My daughter Amanda cleaned the sticky brown puddles from the polished pine soundboard with a worn-out toothbrush. The tone sounded very sweet and rough, at the same time.

### *Camel piano*

The best ruined pianos I've encountered have been in outback West Australia and the Red Centre. There, the extremes of drought and flooding produce great roaring hulks. Here as elsewhere, pedigree is important. The brand names of those pampered aristocrats of the piano world – *Ronisch*, *Steinway*, *Lipp* appear regularly on the finest ruined pianos.

At the Old Telegraph Station in Alice Springs I discovered the first piano in Centralia – a *Ralph Allison*, made by Wardour and Sons of Soho, London. Innocent, with a sulky expression – a so-called boudoir piano – it has a chintzy orange cloth under elaborate fretwork on the front panel. The top register sounds Chinese, the bass like someone ripping up a kerosene tin with secateurs – heart stopping. The piano was brought from the railhead at Oodnadatta to Alice Springs on the back of a camel. It occupied one side of the hump, while a drum of water balanced on the other. Although it's only a mite of a piano, this was certainly an arduous, even heroic journey for the camel.

### *Family tartan*

Though we're not Scots, in Edinburgh, before my son Julian's wedding, we were discussing what our family tartan might have been. Julian: "Black with a sprinkling of dandruff, Dad"  
"Not dandruff, JB – galaxies."  
"Perhaps snowflakes, Dad."

## *A Hunting We Will Go*

Otto is the sole inheritor of a castle in Bohemia, which, together with the surrounding estates, he is reclaiming through tortuous legal process. I have been his guest for a week now and although I am a teacher of Zen Buddhism I've been eating the boar curry that he cooks up for me nightly. Cooking the boar takes some time because he's shaking from the whisky, and half-blind in the fog of his cigarette smoke as he crashes the saucepans in the dark of the cupboards.

When he suggests that we go hunting I can think of no honest reason to refuse. Compromised, I squeeze into his Mini Minor and pray for rain. He lights up, turns on a tape of Glenn Miller, which with the windows wound up is deafening. He sings along with "Little Brown Jug" – "Ha ha ha, you and me..." Is he mocking me? I am ashamed of hating him. Finally I say, "Don't you have anything else to put on?" "But I like this music. It's the music I grew up with." Before I can reply, we're at Miric's, the forester's place.

Miric and his wife sit down with Otto and me in their back garden. They converse in Czech. All I can make out is that they're concerned about a bulldozer abandoned in the forest. They talk on. Lost in their cigarette smoke I fume, and pray for rain. Unbelievably, it rains. I breathe out. Otto says, "Lucky I brought you a cape."

Otto's gun bumps on the strangely angled, rough-cut steps, as we grapple our way up into the shooting hut. In that bleak little box I shiver and sweat in my rain jacket, my heart thick with fear and anger. He cautions me to be silent. I silently wish a universe of deer away.

A baby doe wanders softly across just in front of us. Otto doesn't lift his gun. "Beautiful. Beautiful." I say to myself. And slowly other does and their babies cautiously emerge from the forest and head for the stream.

He doesn't move. The wind polishes his face. Suddenly "Look! Look!" And the ancient stag, his hide scored by years of glancing shots, doesn't appear. And I say to myself, "It's wonderful, wonderful."

Otto says, "When I'm up here I feel closest to God." Arrogance surges from the waters of my relief, and I retort, "I thought everywhere was the same distance." I lean over and shyly tap him on the knee. Unmoved, he continues, "The interesting thing about God is that you can have any opinion about him."

Later, we walk back through the dark pines. We pass trout pools shining in the darkness. He mentions the aristocratic traditions that oblige him to cull deer on his estates to preserve the balance of nature. And how he once shot an old buck through the heart, yet still it careened on, trailing blood far into the forest, before it collapsed and died.

We stop for a venison dinner at the Fontana Restaurant. Over beers and the last of the Chivas Regal he talks of his life – of women and how seducible they are. Over a late cigarette he says, "If it comes to it now, I'm seventy and can no longer get it up." "Do you regret that?" I ask him very carefully. "Why should I regret it? I can regret lost opportunities, like women I never bedded, but how can I regret who I am, how I am." And, although he'd be inclined to disavow it, everything settles into warmth and closeness.

### *Hasta la Victoria*

After I heard about Victoria Jordanova's composition *Requiem for Bosnia* in which she employs a broken piano, a harp and a child's voice, I was eager to meet her. Just as soon as I arrived in San Francisco, I rang her, and she invited me to her apartment that night. Allured, I heard her *Requiem* – the orphaned child singing desolately in the gutted classroom, its walls devastated by mortar fire.

She signed her *Requiem* CD, "For my soul mate Ross," then played a piece where a Serbian bride jumps up and down wearing her dowry—gold coin necklaces that jingle and clatter in time. We warm to serendipity and bitter beer. She's pale with long dark hair, and that exhausted with passion look, as she tells me – "I've taken such crazy risks in my life" – then blurrily, "Music, love—". "Yes, I have too" – I drift in, in echo.

She cuts me off. "Get this. *Requiem* was made when I was working at an exclusive *lycée* just round the corner. I was teaching French and Music to spoiled, rebellious kids, and I hated it. I sweet talked the school authorities into buying me a Bechstein Grand for classroom use, but mainly so that I could use it on the quiet for composing. The piano removalists – idiots! – dropped it down three flights of stairs. It lay there completely smashed up in the stair well for about three weeks, before I got the idea of recording it. Later I added the harp, and the child singing a stupid song."

She laughed in her throat and went on, "I have a friend, a Californian, whose relationship with his girlfriend has been collapsing for months. They fight all the time, and have stopped having sex. But still he says he's working on his

relationship. Working on his relationship? I'd say, massaging a wooden leg."

### *Yearning*

I missed you so much that, even though you're home, I'm still miserable.

### *Fugue*

I go with my Zen student Mary J to visit her mother in the nursing home. Mary J introduces me to her mother's friend, Mary F, a concert pianist till she lost her right hand in the blitz of 1942. Mary J introduces me as her Zen teacher. "Ant eater?" puzzles Mary F. She thanks me for shaking hands with her with my left hand. She says that she plays Debussy, and makes waving movements in the air with her left hand, but not the Ravel, resigning her only hand to her lap. She tells me that her composer brother wrote her a four-voice fugue in 5/4 time – for the left hand. Joan, Mary J's mother and Mary F's closest friend, has lost her memory, or at least there are great holes there – mainly in the mornings, the pained confusing mornings, when she thinks that Mary J is *her* mother, and rings up ten times during breakfast, desperate to know why she's been abandoned in this German back block. But Mary J is her daughter, who's worn out from assuring her that she's Joan, safe in Nelson, New Zealand – and that Mary F is her friend, who has her mind, if not her right hand, and who knows what's what – that ant eaters are Zen teachers, and that she is Joan, who has two good arms and legs, and her balance to boot – even if she's a fugue for many voices. Mary J reminds Joan that there's credit for her at the front desk. Joan, leading Mary F by the left hand, totters off to collect, and have a lasagne in the restaurant attached to the nursing home, in what must be Bonn.

## *Bird*

When I finally got to meet Milan Adamciak, the father of experimental music in Slovakia, I was shocked to find that his arms were thinner than a child's, and that his body was pitifully emaciated. A blonde beard, completely out of control, grew over his mouth. Yet after that first moment of recoil, I registered only his blue green eyes, showing their pleasure as if a little breeze was blowing across a clear deep lake. He squeezed my left hand and said in uncertain English, "Good, good – doing something together." Under a West umbrella in central Bratislava we talked for five hours, chasing black coffee with black coffee, with never a beer. He told me many stories, but this is the one I remember best.

"When I was twenty-one I strapped my cello to my back and climbed a couple of thousand feet up onto a ridge in the high Tatras. It was just dawn. I unstrapped my cello, sat on a rock and played my lowest C – soft and long. And the birds stopped their song – utterly. You could have heard a leaf move."

The hairs stand up in electrified attention along his arm. "When I found the courage to play on at last, the birds shyly joined in, so that after a time, I couldn't say how long, I was a bird."

I brush the hairs on his arm – yes.

## *Left hand of the Universe*

Adamciak had to be pulled from the pub to play in the first performance of my *Left Hand of the Universe*. On the

shadowy stage, he repeatedly attacked the grand piano with an axe.

### *Snowballs*

The Montenegrin taxi driver told me that the name of his once impregnable country means “Black Mountain.” Black Mountain may be cold, but the Adriatic is warm, and perfect for swimming, in summer. Furthermore, one of the nineteenth-century kings of Montenegro knew each of his subjects by name. How he misses Montenegro. His ancient cab was filled with the overwhelming aroma of coconut snowballs.

### *Happiness*

In the ten minutes it takes to drive from Bassendean to Bayswater, the Indian taxi driver and I animatedly discuss money and happiness, even getting to discuss Epicurus’s views on them. He told me the following story: “I drove this Chinese girl across the metropolitan area to collect a key, then back to her place. The fare came to seventy-five dollars. She asked me if I would like to come inside to give her the receipt, but I said no. Then she asked me if I would like to come in for half-an-hour. “No,” I told her, “I am very happy with my wife, and she is not so expensive.” When we reached my place, I asked if I could pay by credit card. Leaning over to give me the receipt, he said – “I can give you that address if you like.”

### *Misunderstanding*

Glenn: I think people have misunderstood Einstein’s “God does not play dice.”

Ross: No dice?

Glenn: No God.

### *Sign*

Matthew complains to his father, Glenn, that his older brother hogs the computer:

“It isn’t fair.”

“Did someone tell you the world was fair?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see a sign saying that when you were in your mummy’s tummy?”

“Yes.”

“What side was it on?”

“It was on the left.”

“It must have been in very small print.”

“Yes it was.”

“How could you read it?”

“I’ve got tiny eyes.”

### *Last long look*

There’s hardly anything that I can recall of the six years (“the formative years”) that I spent playing piano at the Parmelia Hilton’s Garden Restaurant. Maybe only that night when a businessman, after rummaging for something in the inside breast pocket of his suit coat, tumbled backwards off his chair onto the deep red thick pile carpet. Ray, the bandleader said, ”Just keep playing.”

The waiters rushed in a shoji to screen off the body. The drunken head wine waiter gave it mouth to mouth resuscitation. Patrons no more than three feet away, affecting not to notice, burrowed deeper into their lobster mornays.

As we were leaving the stage, the burned out old bass player, who at seventeen had been a fighter pilot in the

Battle of Britain, when the chop rate was at its highest, remarked, “We really killed’m that set.’

Even today I wonder what was the last tune the businessman heard in this life.

Was it “More” or was it “Cabaret”? I’ll never forget the last long look he gave me.

### *Georgia*

When I was playing piano in pick-up bands at the Federal Hotel, I was obliged to accompany the hotel owner whenever he felt like playing violin. Missing bars, he would scrape his way through *Georgia*, quite out of tune. I would support him reverently, but here or there, quite unpredictably I’d smash down a double fistful of notes, making a hairline fracture, then instantly resume sending demure streams round the sagging pylons of that old sweet song. Finally, he stopped asking me if I’d play *Georgia*.

### *Left Hand of God*

At the Federal Hotel, I heard John Gill play rags by Scott Joplin. During John’s break, I climbed up on the barstool beside him and asked him, admiringly, “How did you get to play like that?” He blew the head of his pint of dark brown Dogbolter, paused, then said, “You need the left hand of God.”

### *Shine*

Quite at odds with Scott Hicks and Jane Scott's film, *Shine*, David Helfgott, the West Australian virtuoso pianist who broke down in his early twenties and came back from hell in his forties, was taught by the illustrious Hungarian

pianist and teacher, Alice Carrard, here in Perth, Western Australia. This is true of both the teenage years before he went to study in London, and of the long sentence in the asylum and the sheltered workshops that followed his breakdown.

During the late seventies when I was studying classical piano with Mme Alice Carrard, my lesson followed his. Feeling like a little dog pursuing an elephant, I'd arrive twenty minutes early so that I could hear him play. Invariably he'd be dressed in a dark suit, his black shoes shined to a high gloss. He was pale and shaky, yet his playing was canals filled with bright red and yellow pleasure craft, kids hanging off them; and barges, luxurious and calm, gliding funereally down waters smooth and black as vitrolite.

Madame Carrard worked ever so gently with him, correcting him only when she had to. Whenever she did, he would cave in, saying over and over again, "Sorry Madame, Sorry Madame". Then, because he was close to tears, she would have to help him embark, once again.

\*

In *Shine*, David – as played by Geoffrey Rush – is reverently listened to by patrons of the bistro where he begins his comeback. I remember very different evenings when David played at Riccardo's, the bistro managed by Dr Chris Reynolds. Chris gave David a home, and Riccardo's provided him with his first gigs. Some of the patrons treated David as a freak, coming only to gawk at his antics. Almost all of them ignored his fervent, erratic accounts of such challenging masterworks

as Balakirev's *Islamey*. David, smoking two cigarettes at once, a third burning a hole in the new Yamaha grand, would good naturedly overarm his way through a huge nineteenth century classic, almost inaudible through drunken conversations jammed with new yachts.

One night as he was playing the Balakirev, his wife Gillian stopped loudly promoting him to a table of arts bureaucrats, and jumped to her feet, loudly clapping her hands, and shouting, "Faster, David! --- Faster!" Like a dog shamed, he dropped even lower onto the keys, his guilty, panicking fingers notching the tempos even higher.

\*

Who could forget that jaw-dropping scene in *Shine* when David Helfgott (as played by Noah Taylor) takes on the "Rack Three" in a London command performance. It's the outcome of months of exhausting, exhaustive practice, and we sense that it's beyond his resources. But he captures us with his first solo entry and holds his own as the challenges mount into an intensifying wall, that he keeps on climbing.

Suddenly he's there – frail, sweat running off him, riding that thundering elephant. Then something snaps, and there's only the *thoomp-da-thoomp* of the piano keys going down. Everything else is silent. For an unending moment – *thoomp-da -thoomp-da-doomp* – then, suddenly, the "Rack Three" comes roaring back, and he rides it triumphantly home.

We cry tears of relief, but in that momentary abyss was the ruined piano, broken backed, giving its all – *thoomp thoomp*

... *thoomp da thoomp* – but it’s never enough. The corrugated-iron kitchen wavers through the tears of a child, saddled with such monstrous love.

### *Silent witness*

In the spring of 1914, Russian imperial troops were stationed in the Pamir Mountains, in territory that we now know as Tajikistan. At that time, unusual cargo was being shipped along the eight-hundred kilometre mountain route from Osh to Khorog. Driven on by the soldiers’ gun-butts, for two months ten workers carried a piano through the mountains, so that the Khorog fortress commander’s daughter could play Chopin on the “Roof of the World.” On the night of the piano’s arrival, attracted by the strange sounds, a crowd of curious mountaineers gathered by the fortress walls. Nonplussed, they eventually went home singing the traditional laments of mountainous Badakhshan.

Several years later the Red Army pushed the tsarist garrison out of Khorog. The piano remained in the officers’ club covered with red cloth, and was forgotten. Years later, a border guard lifted the black lid and played those stern graceful marches from the October Revolution, that were close to every heart. The old Bedekker had started its second life.

(Story provided by Jason Cotter, adapted from Yulia Ulyannikova’s translation.)

### *In the Empty Quarter*

Before I visited my son Julian in Dubai where he was working as a landscape architect, I read *Arabian Sands* by Wilfred Thesiger. Julian had lent it to me, and we were

both inspired by Thesiger's stories of crossing the vast desert of the Rub' al Khali – the Empty Quarter.

We decided to travel to Liwa, where Thesiger rested up after his arduous journeys. Julian drove us there in his red SEAT Ibiza, and we saw the date palms, and Arab men in immaculate white dish-dash-ahs, but never a woman. We bought some scraps of timber to light a fire. Then we took the bumpy limestone track towards Aradah, and made camp in the mountainous red sandhills.

After broken sleep, we clambered up a dune to watch the red-rimmed Arabian dawn. Warmed by breakfast, we were playing chess when an ancient truck chugged into view. After the driver and Julian exchanged greetings in Arabic, the man chattered on, smiling. We let him take our photograph with Julian's camera; then we took his. Finally he said, cheerily, "Truck cold," and gathered up our new blue blanket, walking off with it over his arm. As his truck pattered off, Julian and I just sat there staring at each other.

#### *One note at a time*

I dream I'm playing 'Our Day Will Come' on piano in a Latin band – one note at a time. The musicians are exchanging glances, and the bandleader finally points to a didgeridoo, and asks me if I can play it, but I can't. Later in the dream my son Julian is playing brilliant funky reggae with the same band, yet I insist on teaching him how to play 'Our Day Will Come' one note at a time, backwards, with the left hand. Politely, he refuses to go along with it.

#### *Her red accordion*

In the evening she asked me if I would play "You are my Sunshine" on her little red accordion, and I obliged. Then

she told me, “That was the only tune my dad could play, and he’d play it for my mum. She was the better accordionist, and played in a local band. Dad was a policeman and a crofter. Mum was pretty and vivacious, and unhappy at being pregnant so young. There were three of us little ones, and she was often impatient with us. I was ten at the time. Came down stairs in the morning. There’s no way to tell this. My dad was sitting in the armchair with a shotgun. There was blood coming out of his ears, nose, mouth, from everywhere. Blood was smeared on the AGA. I kept calling him to wake up. There was no television, so no way to understand this as death – just something’s so wrong, and I have to find my mother.

I went into the dining room – mum was lying on the floor with a hole between her eyes. I didn’t know what to do, so I started to boil an egg for my little brother’s breakfast. I think I boiled it too hard. Then I went upstairs and woke my little brother. I took him across the fields to a neighbour’s, leaving the baby behind. We never went back to the house again.”

### *Jesus Country*

Travelling through the red country of Central Australia in my friend’s 4WD, we spot a stone cairn with a white cross spray painted on.

Malcolm: “Jesus Country.”

Ross: “Pretty unredeemed out here.”

Malcolm: “Not much sin.”

Ross: “Not much opportunity.”

Malcolm: “Maybe a bit of sloth and gluttony among the wild life.”

### *Australian story*

When she pronounces his name correctly, the Czech musician tells A. – who is Eurasian, of French and Indonesian descent – “You’re true blue.”

### *Guard cat*

My daughter Amanda asks about my neighbour’s Maltese terriers, whose yapping wrote off my lounge room recording sessions, “Do they smell?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, “I don’t need to get that close to shoot them.”

Amanda: “All small dogs smell. If they’re going to have a small dog to guard their house, they might as well have a cat – a guard cat.”

Debussy, our beloved household cat, sidles out of the front door, and cruises down to the local café. There, after a night of burglaries, sits Vince, enjoying a decaf-soy-flat-white, close to his place of work. Debussy presses himself against Vince’s serge leg, then says in a deep embittered voice, “They’re out.”

### *Eating out in Paris*

My daughter and son-in law were having dinner with my friend and I in a Turkish restaurant in Melbourne. My friend, who is Chinese, told us the following story: “After I graduated from the University of Singapore, I travelled to Paris. I was short of money, and hungry. I finally pooled my resources to buy a roast chicken, which I took to a local park to eat. Just as I was about to begin, an old woman, who was passing, said, “Bon appétit. “

My daughter responded: “When I was visiting Paris, I bought some French cheese – very smelly. Not wanting to pollute the apartment, I hung it out the window overnight.

The next morning it was gone. When I leaned out of the window to check, I saw a pigeon dead on the grass below.”

### *Orientation*

On old European maps Asia – the orient – was at the top. When I was a mousy kid in primary school, I remember singing “The Song of Australia” ... “and grassy knoll and forest height are blushing in the rosy light, and all above is azure bright.” I used to mishear “azure” as “Asia.” “And all above is Asia bright” – unknowingly setting my own naive and azure course.

### *Keeping time*

Only those with good time-management will get to experience eternity.

### *At Tjunta*

At Tjunta (‘thigh’ in the language of the Ngaanyatjarra people), Paul the wild white-haired pathologist is falling over in the car park. He staggers up, yet in spite of his two sticks, one leg crosses over the other and down he goes again. The new chum, Mike, in his 4WD that sheds roof racks and tyres has followed him here. Knows his story. He tells us that Paul had a massive stroke that landed him in Kalgoorlie hospital. When he realized there was no rehabilitation, he discharged himself, and did it his way, hammering his Troopie up the Gunbarrel Highway, 800km of some of the roughest roads on the planet, to find a place to rest up for a few months and to write on forensic pathology. That’s what he teaches at the Sorbonne for six months of the year.

When we arrive he’s resting close to Lasseter’s Cave, in the shade of an old river gum that’s bent over, its pallid trunk almost horizontal. A huge branch, really another rivergum,

grows out of its contorted back, shadowing the cave where Lasseter holed up for his last desperate journey. What we know is that he led an expedition into desert country west of Alice to find an immense gold reef he had discovered thirty years earlier. After a run of bad luck most of his party left, and he ended by pushing on towards his goal with one companion. In the end they fought violently, and the other man returned to Alice.

Lasseter battled on and claimed in his diary—fragments of which were discovered buried in the cave at Tjunta—that he eventually found his reef (it was smaller than he remembered) and pegged his claim. At dusk, in the midst of his triumph, his camels bolted, taking almost all his food and gear with them. For some time, it seems, an aboriginal tribe looked after him, but they finally had to leave him behind when he became too much of a burden. Eventually, almost blind with Sandy Blight, and dying of thirst and hunger, he rested up in the cave at Tjunta where aboriginal people cared for him. That sad little hole smells of ancient ash and rancid fat.

When his strength returned a little he set out with only 1.7 litres of water hoping to meet up with a search party at Mt Olga. Still helped by aboriginal people, collapsing, struggling on, he didn't even make it half way. His remains were found later, concealed by branches. At his side lay a revolver, its chamber empty.

In the middle of the open night  
cold so bad it cuts my eyes so that  
I must squint to find the Corona.

Warm now – walled in with water

I consign my soul – “Ready to go” I say.  
A voice responds, “*Vishlacht* – “\* I know that  
things will now move that way – a pact – my  
heart loose happy in its falling rising ...

\* *Wisch* – a piece of paper; *wischen* – to wipe  
*wischen der Schlaf aus den augen* – to wipe the sleep from one’s eyes.  
*Lachen* – to laugh. *Die Sonne der Himmel lacht* – The sun shines  
in the heavens.  
*Ihm lacht das Gluck* – Fortune smiles on him

*Tenant*

*We do not know what souls may be tenanting these bodies, and for  
finishing what part of their unfinished journey they may seek our  
company. (Sri Ramana Maharshi)*

Peter, the Bald Dog, scratches and moans without relent.  
His back is raw and bleeds thinly. He pants continuously,  
and from time to time he lets out a piteous yowk. He  
smells like he’s rotting. After my mother died, my brother  
and I decide that we can’t look after Peter. Neither of us is  
prepared to take him in.

My son, Julian, and I come for him, but he’s nowhere to be  
found. We dig his grave under the lemon tree. Just as we  
finish he appears before us, blind and quivering. We feed  
him a pack of sliced ham, and half a Christmas cake. A last  
meal. He makes the most of it, gulping down the ham, then  
cautiously working his way through the cake.

When he’s finished we lug him, resisting and confused, into  
the back seat of my Suzuki Hatch. Julian sits with him,  
stroking him and talking to him reassuringly.

The green sodium pentobarbitone that the vet injects into Peter's front leg takes no more than seven seconds to kill him. Dr Endacott closes his eyes, and we wait five minutes for the tremors to pass. We wrap him in an Amnesty Op Shop curtain, provided by my daughter, and load him into the back of the Hatch. We force open the disused double gates of my dead parents' home, and carry Peter, slung in his hammock, into the yard. We lay him tenderly in his sandy grave.

Julian says, "You want to say something Dad?"  
I'm stymied, but babble out, "You've had a good life mate, travel well."  
"That's about all you could say for any life, Dad."  
And we cover him up.

*For my cat "Possum"*

You skulk in the long winter grass, track smells down the skip's steep insides to the wet foliage rotting on bent red stacker-chairs. You return through rain to find your smell on the settee, knead the blue shawl, stare manic-eyed at the loud TV – its parade of bears, ponies, a ferret looking nervous, one dog in a woolly coat – no cats, though what's that to you who don't even know you're a cat – rather a supreme intelligence wandering the world in search of a mackerel breakfast.

*Accident report*

The accident occurred in the remote West Australian outback. They were husband and wife, teaching in the same tiny school, beginning term break, heading for the coast. She couldn't remember their conversation leading to the accident, only the sudden gravel spray on the underbody, then their car turning in midair. When she

reached over to check him, his forehead felt soft as a bulldog's. She was strung upside-down in her seatbelt. Night came. A train with its front light glaring shunted through nearby scrub. An hour later it returned. She kept leaning on the horn.

### *Intermezzo*

The barber asks me, "What'll it be?"

"A full hair cut, beard trim, moustache trim – and while you're at it, a shave."

Guy who's waiting: "A good thing I brought a book."

"It'll need to be *War and Peace*."

"Just cut off his head and get it over."

### *A dream*

Dominating the beach is a Kentucky Fried, with the Stars and Stripes emblazoned on it. Behind this arrogant façade, it's dusk in a 1950s European railway station. Deco in style, its shadowy platforms show hints of yellow and green. The station and its implicit city go back forever. Trains arrive and depart; crowds embark and disembark in obliterating silence. I sense the presence of my friend. It's death. We don't have to say it – it's all right.

### *Bolero*

The Thames flows old and cold. St Paul's emerges from drizzle. In front of the Tate Modern, tourists photograph each other standing with a black saxophonist, who plays bebop, bossa nova, and Ravel's Bolero, pulling everyone into the same dance as they cross the Millennial Bridge. That's until another black guy rolls up in a wheelchair with a Tate takeaway coffee in his lap, and tells the saxophonist to get off his patch. They argue as the crowd streams past. I go into the Tate to get a coffee. When I return, the

crippled guy is playing sweet Caribbean dances on Jamaican steel drums. Suddenly, he swerves into a much more virtuosic account of Bolero than the sax player, & the crowds just keep on weaving from St Paul's to the Tate.

*An offer*

My Sicilian friend Giuseppe told me this story from his youth. An orphan, he arrived in Australia at nineteen, and worked as a tailor. He was exploited by the department stores who paid him sweat shop rates for his alterations. To support Giuseppe, and to give him a break, my accordion teacher recommended him to Maurice, a wealthy elderly friend of his.

Maurice, on meeting the handsome nineteen-year-old Giuseppe, immediately ordered six suits, and invited him to his home in a prosperous inner suburb of Perth. During the fitting, Maurice made a pass at Giuseppe, then issued an invitation. If Giuseppe would live with him, Maurice would leave him all his money. Giuseppe fled and broke off all contact.

Forty years later I meet up with Giuseppe. He tells me, "Three weeks after I left him, the old man died. If I had taken his offer I would be a wealthy man." "But you would have had to sleep with an old man." "But, now I sleep with an old woman. What's the difference?"

*You can't beat the blind*

Tony Steffanoni worked as an accordion tuner and repairer in a warren of musicians' studios on the top floor of the old Bon Marche Buildings, just north of the Town Hall in Barrack Street, Perth. During the late fifties when I was learning the piano accordion from Harry Bluck, you could

hear three or four young accordionists blazing away at the same time in different studios. And there was Tony, his studio reeking of parmigiano and blackboy gum, repairing our accordions in the middle of this cacophony.

I'd visit him to try and wheedle him into letting me play his ancient Ficosecco ("dried fig") accordion. If he'd let me play it, I'd attempt to dazzle him with the "Bel Viso" polka. His old miner's thickened fingers couldn't go the slick paths of my pampered eleven year old's. Because he was, as he put it, "short of words," he'd correct me by grunt and gesture. When that didn't work, he'd show me how by playing a shuddery reel to reel tape of Lunardi, the blind coloratura accordionist from Castelfidardo, playing a Scandalli Super 6 accordion with his left hand, and an electric organ with his right.

Each time the hissing tape ran out, torn flap flapping from the spool, Tony would say, "You can't beat the blind."

\*

After the left side stroke, that, as he said, "cut him in two," Tony lived on for another three years. Because he would shout uncontrollably, and try to attack the nurses, he ended up in a psycho geriatric hospital. "I want to die. I am scared to die," he would say as I pushed him round the block in his dead weight wheelchair. The sun ducked in and out of the clouds. The night moved in on little feet.

Years after his death, Tony comes to me in a dream alive and whole - face ruddy, eyes shut tight with unbearable happiness. Some part of me whispers he's dead, yet I companionably poke my fingers into his soft stomach, pressing in his thick khaki work shirt. We know each other past knowing and loving.

### *Fantasia-Polonaise*

When we were fifteen, Joe Nastas, son of a Yugoslav market gardener, and I, the son of my English dad who sweated, froze, and went deaf as a fitter, turner and stove-tester in the stricken Metters factory shedding rusting iron onto the hill overlooking our home, performed such classics as Von Suppé's "Poet and Peasant" and "Light Cavalry" overtures as accordion duets. Our teacher Harry Bluck called us his "virtuosi" and to widen our horizons shouted us tickets to the Liberty Cinema to see George Vidor's "A Song to Remember" – Hollywood's life of Chopin that showed him in thrall to the imperious Georges Sand, never seen without her riding breeches and a riding crop – Chopin himself, incubated half to death, welling deathless nocturnes and ballades. Prevailed upon by his admiring compatriots he broke free to do a long last winter tour to free his homeland from the Russians, slogging through polonaise after polonaise – each one the last – blood jetting up the keys. At the end Franz Liszt, his friend, played Frederic's own final mournful nocturne to him as he sank released into easeful death. Joe and I descended on Keyboard College and, without needing to be asked, abandoned our accordions to pound on the College's Beale Piano – built with a metal plank for Australian conditions, and sounding like someone kicking a kerosene tin. "Franz Liszt!" he shouted, being the fairer and stronger, "Fred Chopin" I hoarsely yelled back, as we left-handedly shook hands, our right hands careering, finally stumbling over the rough spruce and ice slick uplands in Matterhorn chromatics – our little skies wobbling with parapets, tiny red flags whipping the quivering blue –

## *Mazda*

The night before, fearing a dead battery I parked my Mazda facing downhill outside my ruined house. I used to reckon that when it broke down I'd just roll it down the hill to the Mazda dealership at the bottom, and they'd receive it as a flying gift. Trouble was they charged me a \$1000 for a more formal visit, and my fantasy faded. When I awoke next morning, and this took some time to register, the Mazda was no longer on the verge. Maybe it had broken free of its handbrake. I walked down the hill fearful of the carnage that must await me below. Nothing. I retraced my steps, and it took an age to dawn on me that the Mazda had been stolen. After a week I received a call from the police to say that the Mazda had turned up in the Inglewood Hotel car park. A poet friend ran me there. Whoever stole it didn't know they had to waggle the key in the ignition to get the fan belt to operate. Like this, they cracked the head and cooked the motor. When I got in, the Mazda's cab reeked of cigarette smoke; whoever had stolen it had adjusted the seat way back so my feet could barely reach the pedals, and most provocatively, the radio had been tuned to an unfamiliar and utterly catastrophic commercial radio station.

## *By the light...*

On a Sunday night in July 1969 in Esperance, I was walking home drunk from a party out of town. Because I couldn't trust my feet to the broken edges of the road, I was walking down the middle. After a while I noticed that the bush kept brightening, until it became dazzlingly bright. I was convinced I was having a mystical experience. It took me some time to register that in fact I was being slowly followed by a police car with its lights on full-beam. The senior constable asked me my name and occupation. When

I replied that I was a high-school teacher, he was incredulous.

I awoke late, and caught a taxi to school, dragging my clothes on in the back seat. On arrival I couldn't find my class, and went hunting for it. Finally, I opened the door of the music auditorium, and found the whole school watching the moon landing. I vaguely made out the blurred figures of Armstrong and Aldrin taking their first giant wavering steps for mankind on the moon's powdery surface, and I thought to myself, leaning against the back wall of the classroom, still reeling drunk, with everything going in and out of focus – I know just how you guys are feeling, oh yes I do ...

## *Coda*

### *Afternoon with A.*

We walk to Dubrovnic Butchers from our neighbouring suburbs. You are fifty-nine, me sixty-four. Our knees complain, but we make it. When I see you, I say to myself, “You gladden my heart”

We embrace then climb the two steps into the shop’s musk. Salami, chorizo and crimson saveloys are straight or coiled in the dimness. We order kranjski with mustard in white bread rolls.

Among the park’s twenty shades of green, we eat, and talk dementia and aesthetics. On the train you notice that, barring me, each person in our carriage, including you, is from another country.

In an old part of town there was a tobacconist’s, where, as a teenager, I bought black Balkan Sobranies. That shop is now a stationer’s where I buy a red fountain pen, with you silently looking on.

We catch your work bus home, too engrossed, too closed in our long story, to notice we’re tired.

## *Ten Prose Poems*

These prose poems originate in Christopher Konrad's and my *Realms of Forgiveness Imperfectly Glimpsed*: a sequence of linked prose poems.

*We remember you*

Crabs scabble in the bar among the black silver ashtrays, the upholstered stool's made from whale penis coming away. The companionway climbs against the leaning shoulder of water – such persuasive weight – mate we remember you now so long tucked away in mud. Bewdy bewdy & let's not go there. Under the circs the eyes had it till he climbed the steps suddenly gazing into the black can't-see-sky, the weight of him going down with a thump. What would you have me say? What mouthful of words would undoubt you? In the cathedral the eulogy saying all that it should not – what, would you have me twist my tongue round words that sway in such cragged authority that we must look down shamed, sneak a glance then down again creek-crossing truth and reason: ten sleeps whose dreams wash & splash on smooth black orange & purple lozenges of stone dipping tipping in the flood, each breath the breathing torrent, each step a lifetime that can't – on pain of god knows what – incriminate the long light angling dust, capturing crow caaark, the passersby chatting glassed off: inside & outside warmly gathered to wave before the airport miles – gates upon gates – so that even with travelators we never arrive silver grey through mist?

*Paper hearts*

No streets lead to where she sits vast wearing twenty white paper hearts, one for each family member face down in the lagoon so jammed with bodies they can't get a boat through. A baby ripped from her at the storm's height fetched up caught in a forked branch under the house, asleep. A bit shaken up – but as the anthropologist put it, “All babies look a bit shaken up.” (We are trying to see it from all angles, & all at once.) The wail goes up up, a tightening gut string – green tabby melons, overturned cars

& stalls gone in the market's mud defile. The jungle hides a humpback bridge. Near the river that flows backwards her son beckons the mallard ducks – “puss, puss” – as his brother pounds a dead fish on the traffic island, shouting to the cars “Smash it. Smash it.” – their cries fading.

*Blind summits*

The still grey lets it all come to rest. We see each little shining palace the rain makes to hang from a twig. Our questions are all blown out, or down to one bare forked question only. Drum the glass, summon the jolting blossoms. Waves overwhelm the head, flood the submissive beard, all for the want of high destruction: the abyss displayed – a virgin flank among swift blue-black floes, slopes of sheer mauve into thin air, dark foliage above the tall wood fence—calling among us. Dawn stirs, indigo shade's criss-crossed with hibiscus, vivacious tender. Against the bleary sky black groves, bone crops: blue mounting on blue giving way as the lane breathes out its chilly breath. The jarrah house is hammered up. The little cats run unharmed. Bush tracks, their bacon and egg flowers come up overnight to light the way to limestone cliffs, their sheer white glimpsed: enormity inhabiting at ease. The river of heaven's our least breath.

*Little more than a cat*

That saw-tooth of a factory, one light in an acre of dark heat, humiliation from our workmates, so that we carry our head low even where there's no one to see. The stoves blow up burning off our eyebrows, balding us. Through all, our sons meet to run their chromatics up the piano and make the parapets of Liszt & Chopin quiver under their assault. Art that congeals. Our wives take in the washing of immigrants. A child in a big family is little more than a cat

& the blue interstices they gaze through brim with escape. I follow my son departing tear-streaked with his poorly packed suitcase. I want to tell him that I am here for him whenever he needs me, not about sacrifices made. Too late for all that it is. Tramps huddle out of the rain, suckle on port. The wind bullies the trees. Old night ocean furrowed by the gale brings out the violinist's lament in the inveterate pub.

*Arden*

The wind throwing about the sunlit leaves, yellow berries exploding on the wooden deck though their stains are purple drunken vomit adrift on the retreating tide – its roar – yet not headed towards any green world either. Love gives her the eyes to understand & even this weak man's buoyed by her desire, not that she'd grant clemency or quarter. The two of us astride an oak branch swaying, our argument balanced: "For ever & a day? No, give me the day without the *ever*, the high glint of the canopy, this pucker of time I call *now*. Our lives emerge among the echoes of a struck bell. I give ground out of love, a sadness born from the cold shadowed dusk, she more clamorous than a parrot against rain.

*Annie Thompson's reverie*

The evening's too soft for telling. Ravens climb unavailingly. The high green foliage swarms like water. I'm pregnant. You're fighting in court to free us. Everything holds its breath just waiting to be breathed out. Nights we talk over it till Wedderburn soils our mouths with just his mention. My legs hurt. We've just cause, yet how it wears us down. Head on the tea stained table I watch those tired reapers pitchfork the last sheaves of this day's rye. Poppies bruise slowly into *tink tink* dusk. What

holds you so late? Last night I dreamed you were the ocean & I stood there naked among your waves & splashed foam up over my breasts, over & over. My big black beleaguered man, my sweet rum spice man among men – what holds you so late, while the empty frozen road stretches out oh so white with the moon?

*Rex*

That American in Prague the bottom rusted out of his baby Fiat so your feet could touch the road if you dared, as he drove off with my rucksack & passport, but I caught up hobbling over cobblestones kicking away reeking garbage, him still complaining Czech women are always trying to get an American husband just to get to the US of A – “just write to Kansas every six weeks, keep them on board, keep your boyfriend here.” He seduced the mother & the daughter, woke to the hiss of the daughter showering – “but seventeen-year-old Czech girls have a headful of fantasies, imported glamour, underarm smell. A rose in a test-tube.” Holed up in a forgotten apartment no fire all winter, he wrote a scattered manuscript – “Never worn out his halo of five stars hovering over the Vltava the night of his murder, the confessional sealed with his lips.”

Globular warmth in the base of my spine. Nettles and wasp direct my gaze up to a family of tombstones: one with a fish, one with a hanging plant, one for Moses Bondy – cemented into an embrace among a hundred collapsing errant stones: “A family sticks together – right? Why don’t you pull off your shoes, watch with me an hour.” He sold me a Swiss watch that will go forever and stopped as I turned the corner.

### *Evidence*

In the still grey the eucalypts huddle darker. Ridges bend into valleys mounting to further ridges with white avalanches of scree – all this being without evidence of campfire ash or pannikins. From our white 4WDs we drop bundles of final instructions for the disposal of their estates and order the young unemployed men in with their gasoline and flame-throwers. All that stirs in our fatigue is resentment at having our compassion forced as if it were the renegades' due, most especially those celebrated by local poets. Having battled up so many ashen tracks, we must be lost. It's impossible to keep out the cold, or to stop yawning with these emotionless tears flooding our gaze. Stopped in the scant frozen grass we await orders. As I hunt among the greasy over-folded maps stuffed into the glove box, it begins to snow.

### *The black and the white*

After the plates have been cleared, the health inspector's wife told me: "I fell in love with Paul when I saw him on top of that bathing shed back in Riga – ready to dive. In that one moment, our life. Now he gives his nights to chess – how can I blame him? – being health inspector in Katanning isn't good. He has to manage the code without knowing the language properly, and those hotel and café owners are up to their tricks to get him sacked. Well he got the café closed down, rats eating off the greasy stove, you know, but it almost broke him down. He plays only when you come round. Mostly he plays the games of Mikhail Tal chess champion of the world from our home town Riga, and he tells me so much I don't understand – *the knight on king five gone for nothing against the Russian.*"

Over the board his cigarette smoke fogs, then clears.  
*Nothing to think about now* – he awaits my resignation,  
recollecting the port at Riga where a rusty freighter thumps  
against the straining wharf, and he's swimming the freezing  
channel with the furious precise strokes of youth, the  
lumbering dark clouds whipped to cirrus.

*Blue blue love*

We are not dead, only sleeping twisted. Clear the blue  
skylight, brown smoke stains the glass. There's fire in the  
chopped paddocks, ruddy reflections on ancient walls for  
the unhooked wagon's aflame. With the farmhands'  
pursuit, where can we settle our bones, our cases of  
clothes? Their dogs emerge from bare canyons. At the end  
of all tracks, five-pointed star bones uphold the tent of  
night; yet still we leap – no celebratory band expiring in  
blarps – into the gulf. Cypress branches run through our  
fingers to nuance our fall – *ewig ewig ewig* – such unblinking  
warm light until that woman's voice furious at us from the  
wooden mansion really a desk drawer, a bureau set into the  
bumpy turf. But those ascending stairs, those blue glass  
bottles piled up blue? Our eyes stream blue all but gone to  
violet, valley streams pink as ginger. Paint my knees scarlet,  
stain my lips itchy with cold sores mobile gold ... leave me  
knee deep in vodka.

Oh stack them tenderly  
so well do they agree;  
now all the white while  
they have pleasures only  
dreamt of while alive.  
O lay the lily O,  
O lay the lily low.

## *Two Stories*

### *The Phoenix and the Accordion:*

In China in the far distant past, the Emperor Huang-ti dreamed of a phoenix (feng-huang), that mysterious bird whose plumage is a blending of black, violet, yellow, white and red, and whose call is a sweet harmony of five notes. In the dream the Emperor could barely make out the splendid colours of the phoenix, but he clearly heard the sweet, hoarse call and woke in rapture. Weeks passed but he couldn't shake off the memory of that fathomless ancient song, and he was filled with longing to hear it again.

Finally he summoned the leader of the Imperial Orchestra, one Ling Lun, who was not only a fine musician, but a talented instrument maker. After some all night discussions, the Emperor, showing faith in Ling Lun's abilities, commissioned him to create an instrument that would capture the rasping, swooning qualities of the phoenix's voice. To achieve this, Ling lun had to make a arduous journey to the Kun-lun mountains, far out on the western edge of the Emperor's domain, where the phoenix was known to live, bathing in the pure waters of the mountain streams during the day and spending the night in the cave of Tan.

It was in just this cave that Ling Lun spent an uncomfortable night haunted by wild dreams, until, just before dawn, on hearing the phoenix sing, he was awakened. Legend has it that Ling Lun claimed that that rough, yet utterly insinuating call came from the depths of his own being – and here his words stumbled – that the call

was *him* - that he completely disappeared into its fierce rapture. He wept and shook uncontrollably for hours before stumbling down to the stream to cut bamboo into a variety of lengths. After that he spent many days blowing through them to recreate the pitch and timbre of the phoenix's song. After that he carefully bound the bamboo pipes together and painted them so as to capture the closed and vibrantly coloured plumage of the phoenix. When he finally blew through the bundle of twelve pipes, he knew beyond doubt that his search and labours were at an end.

The Emperor found that the tones of what Ling Lun called the *cheng* didn't quite match the hoarse and rapturous song that he'd heard in his dream, but he praised Ling Lun's talents and ordered a hundred copies of the *cheng* to be made by the finest court craftsmen. In this way massed performances (*kung-hsuan*) – moving expressions of accord – are said to have taken place amidst the bamboo groves and along the edges of streams that ran through the Emperor's pleasure gardens.

Centuries later, the *cheng*, offended by Zen Master Huang-bo's description of its sound as “harsher, more frightful than the bowel-cutting cries of a thousand monkeys“ took flight over the Kun-lun Mountains, its five-coloured tail flashing against the vast blue skies of central Asia, until over Samarkand it collided with a giant albatross that was seriously ill and hopelessly off course. The *cheng*, bleeding and battling to maintain altitude, fluttered helplessly over the Red Sea, then trailed blood all the way north to Vilnius (in present day Lithuania), where it landed to convalesce. The nineteenth-century German poet Friedrich Muller wrote of the *cheng*:

*Blissful ever loving moth,  
living on the in breath,  
dying on the outbreath.*

He is said to have painted a white moth onto the black bellows of his cheng, so that, as the bellows moved in and out, the moth appeared and disappeared – now alive, now dead. The story goes that he played such heartfelt raspy melodies that old couples fell in love all over again the moment they heard them. Moved by this, he christened his cheng “akkordeon“, “akkord“ meaning “harmony” in his native German. And it is with this apt name that the cheng has come down to us.

There’s a tantalizing story, possibly apocryphal, of the precocious nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud, who, along with loving Church Latin, badly spelt pornographic books, old operas, empty refrains and simple rhythms, became addicted to the sound of the “akkordeon”. Legend has it that he based his *Alchimie du Verbe* – where he establishes correspondences between vowels and colours: *A* indigo, *E* white, *I* red, *O* blue, *U* green – on the strength of a vision he had while hearing a drunken accordionist play “The Phoenix Dance”. This piece is now acknowledged to be a primitive forerunner of what became *Tango Nuevo* in the late twentieth-century in the hands of Astor Piazzolla and Juan Jose Mosalini.

Writing about the Phoenix and the Accordion in the twenty-first century reminds me that this sometimes despised, but immensely popular instrument has flourished in dozens of countries and in musical genres as diverse as Zydeco, Tango, Scrammelmusik, Klezmer, Juju and Polka. It’s at home in the rites of love and death – in weddings, parties and funerals. In the West it seemed that it had been

been killed off by the electronic organ and other keyboards in the sixties, but in the last twenty years or so, it has resurrected itself from its own ashes. The fact that it appeared in the arms of the Virgin Mary in a notorious poster advertising the 1998 Adelaide Festival attests to its eros, its allure, and its unlimited power to stir the passions.

In the words of that sweet old Italian song

“La Fisarmonica” (“The Accordion”):

*“When you hear the sound of the accordion, it brings up such love in your heart that your eyes go round and round, and your legs tremble -- When Veronica calls you (and here’s a note on security), there’s nothing else for it but to keep an eye on your accordion, and go and get a cup of coffee for both of you.”*

### *Tango and the Labyrinth of Time*

Back in the 1980s, I formed a tango band with violinist Angela Dillon and double bassist Andrew Tait to play the tangos of the Argentinian bandoneon master and composer, Astor Piazzolla. I was playing accordion in this band. We had trouble deciding on a name until a fellow musician Kavisha Mazzella suggested that we call ourselves “Baraka.” As we wished its pronunciation to be obvious we spelt it “Baraaka.” We had reason to be happy with Kavisha’s choice of a name, for “baraka” is an Arabic word that is rich with musical and mystical connotations.

The music journalist, Robert Palmer refers to Tangiers’s cunningly balanced architecture of surfaces, arches and crenellated towers that serve as a transformer of the energy of the Muezzin’s call as it echoes through the city as “baraka”: a psychic current that certain holy places, sounds and people absorb and hold like storage batteries.

Soon after Baraaka’s first gig I discovered that the Spanish word for shack, shed or barracks is “barraca.” During the same week I began composing a tango in the style of Astor Piazzolla (Labyrinth Tango) – to be played by Baraaka. I also began gathering references in order to write an article on music and synchronicity, and in this regard, I remembered that Borges had written an essay entitled “A New Refutation of Time” which dealt with an experience of the same event as simultaneously past and present. I had a vague memory that Borges’s essay was in his collection entitled *Labyrinths*, and I planned on tracking it down.

I went to the West Australian State Library and discovered that *Labyrinths* didn’t appear in either their collection or

that of the suburban branch libraries. A few days later while browsing the shelves for poetry in the Inglewood library I found Borges's *Labyrinths*. Even staring at the spine of the book I had trouble believing that I had found it – “*but it's not in the catalogue.*” I opened it and found “A New Refutation of Time“ and in it Borges's account of his (or his protagonist's) experience of eternity in a suburb not far from where he had grown up. Referring to “a street of low houses indicating both poverty and contentment” he writes:

I kept looking at this simplicity. I thought, surely out loud: “This is the same as thirty years ago...” I conjectured the date: a recent time in other countries, but now quite remote in this changeable part of the world... The easy thought “I am in the eighteen nineties” ceased to be a few approximate words and was deepened into a reality. I felt dead, I felt as an abstract spectator of the world; an indefinite fear imbued with science, which is the best clarity of metaphysics. I did not think that I had returned upstream on the supposed waters of Time; rather I suspected that I was the possessor of a reticent or absent sense of the inconceivable word eternity.

...That pure presentation of homogenous objects – the night in serenity, a limpid little wall, the provincial scent of honeysuckle, the elemental earth – is not merely identical to the one present on that corner so many years ago; it is, without resemblances or repetitions, the very same. Time, if we can intuitively grasp such an identity, is a delusion: the difference and inseparability of one moment belonging to its

apparent past from another belonging to its apparent present is sufficient to disintegrate it.

The suburb in which Borges had this experience isn't named, but the suburb where he had spent the afternoon prior to the experience was Barracas – “a locality not visited by my habit and whose distance from those I later traversed had already lent a strange flavour to that day.” I later learned that Barracas is also a port suburb of Buenos Aires where, in the late nineteenth century, the tango was born. Poor immigrant workers danced the tango in in Barracas's brothels and bars. In its port context “Barracas” means “the giant sheds in which wheat and wool were stored.”

Finding Barracas in Borges's “A New Refutation of Time” in this labyrinth of uncatalogued books felt uncanny. It not only illuminated the past (lights suddenly flaring back down the labyrinth) but also suggested a metaphor from which I could grow a piece. Formerly, I had devised pieces where improvisers played at the same time, without being able to hear each other, in different parts of the world – as nets for synchronistic events. Now I had a net of synchronicities from which I could create a piece of music.

The result was my piece *Labyrinth* that was released on my CD *The Country of Here Below*, in which I had two Spanish readers – one of them Polish by birth – reading, loosely in canon, Borges's experience of eternity. And, yes, I did complete *Labyrinth Tango* for the Baraaka Tango Band, and we premiered it at the John St Café in Cottesloe on June 1 1988.