

certainly. That was here. The only line was the one that went downward, straight down through you into the earth. He clung to that with a dumb tenacity.

He reckoned this way because he was of a reasoning nature, taking pleasure in the hardness, the harshness of it, stripping himself of all illusion.

But in relying only on the body, he reckoned without its power, which he had already seen in other circumstances, to go its own way and think for itself. One day, in one of those moments when he had fallen out of space into mere time, when his mind lapsed in him and the moment he was in lay open to the flow of things, he raised his head and saw just ahead of him, coming from the opposite direction but in the same line, so that they must inevitably collide if one or the other did not leap aside, a figure he recognised, or thought he did — a big-shouldered, white-haired fellow for whom he felt a flicker of inexplicable warmth and interest. The feeling surprised him; and it was because he was diverted by it that he failed at first to see who it was.

It was himself: far off in a moment that was years ahead and which he was, it seemed, inevitably making for. He had no sooner realised this than the figure was on him and he felt his body open and let it through.

He did not look back. It was forbidden, he knew that. If he looked back they would both be lost.

Still in a state of astonishment, he kept his eyes dead ahead, and when the next breath came, he took it. But a little of the warmth and affection he had felt still glowed in him.

'Well,' he told himself, 'if that's how it's to be I've got no option, have I, but to stick it out?'

D. Malouf *The Great World* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1990)

Digger's most precious possessions, since he had only the one short note of his own, were the letters he had inherited from Mac. Folded small, he had carried them from camp to camp and got them safe through all searches.

He knew them by heart, of course. No trouble about that when he knew so many plays off and had in his head the names and numbers of the whole unit. The letters were just a few hundred words. But the words themselves were only part of it.

Reading took time. That was the important thing. Constant folding and refolding had split the pages, and in the continuous damp up here the ink had run and was hard to read. Each time he took them out, especially if his hands were shaking and wet, he ran the risk of damaging them. But he liked the look of the unfolded pages, their weight — very light they were — on his palm. Even the stains were important. So was the colour of the ink, which differed from letter to letter, even from page to page of the same letter, so that you could see, or guess, where Iris had put the pen down in mid-sentence to go off and do something. So what you were reading was not just words.

He would close his eyes and imagine her being called to the door. The baker's lad, that would be, with a basket on his arm and the warm loaves covered with a cloth. (He would tear the corner off a loaf while they weren't looking and pop it warm into his mouth. Lovely, it was.) Or one of the boys would be calling. Ewen looking for his football socks — weren't they dry yet? — or Jack nagging for a coconur ice-block. Digger let his mind rove. He knew enough from what Mac had told him at one time or another to find his way about the house. It was one of the ways, just one, of getting back.

He did not gorge himself. He read one letter only and took his time. But there were days when he needed to gorge himself, and then he would read all five at once, then over again.

It was a strange business. Since the letters already existed in his head before he even started on them, it had to be a process, almost

simultaneous but not quite, of letting each word fall out of his mind just before he came to it, so that he could discover it anew.

Playing music must be like that. Even if you had played a piece a thousand times over, and your fingers knew it on their own, you would have to clear your head of all knowledge of the next note so that your fingers, when they found it, could surprise themselves.

'I've planted sweet-peas,' she wrote on St Patrick's Day.

That was over two years ago. The sweet-peas would have sprouted, climbed the trellis, come out, filling the yard with their sweet smell, then died again; but he could still smell them where they had gone back into the earth, and still see them as well in the colours the named, pink, mauve, white. He could see the whole wall of them, pale green, with leaves that were scratchy to the fingertips, like the legs of a praying mantis, and the light shining through; the trellis repeating itself in shadow on the sun-blasted weatherboard; the poles tall as a row of men, but sweet-smelling, opening their buds that were set flaglike at a stiff right-angle to the stalk, white, mauve, pink.

Cur, in a tight little bunch, they would sit in a glass in the front room. He saw the room empty, with the curtains drawn against the sun, which could be strong, even in winter, and the glass with its two kinds of light, one air, one water, and the pale stalks and paler blossoms on a table in the centre of it. He would stand in the hallway and breathe the smell of sweet-peas and it revived him.

When the sun went down and the room grew dark, the glass was still there, the water still central and a source of light. He would lower himself into its coolness, its clearness, at the centre of the dark, quiet room. In the rooms on the other side of the hallway opposite, the breath of sleepers: in one room Iris, in the other the boys, Ewan and Jack, still safe in their boyish dreams, and out the back in a third room, the closed-in sleep-out, Mac's records and his piles of books.

Back and back he went to that house he had never been in. He let Mac show it to him again, room by room. They were shining, both; all cleaned up, their hair combed wet, their feet washed.

There was a wooden rack over the sink with plates in it, thick white ones. They leaned there, drying, and had been washed a thousand times with a block of Sunlight soap in a little wire cage-like contraption, and rinsed, lifted out of the water and left. Beautiful, they were. He could have sat at the table and just looked at them forever, over and over. Because it happened that way, over and over.

Regularly, three times a day, the plates were taken down, set on the cloth, used and washed again. That was the beauty of it. Order, repetition.

But how boring! The same thing, day in day out, over and over! For him that was just the beauty of it. The cloth shaken out in the yard and the sparrows flying down. Light on the lovely glazed and crazed smoothness of the plates in the rack. The calendar on the wall turned to the right month, and that day, black or red, coming up in their numbers, weekdays, weekends, the next page already there, and the next and the next all the way to Christmas.

In the dark, while the house slept, he waited quietly in the kitchen, his spirit touched by the light of those plates, in his hands the dryness of a bit of stale bread. There was a whole bowl of it, set out for the morning, to feed the chooks. His spirit broke off a bit and swallowed it - the chooks won't mind, he thought, though he could hear them shifting their claws on their perches in the dark.

Once, standing there, he heard a movement behind him and Iris came in in her nightgown. She didn't see him, of course. She walked right past him to the sink, took a glass, filled it with water from the tap, and drank, very slowly, gazing out into the dark yard.

He watched her as if the ordinary act was miraculous. It was miraculous. It staked his thirst.