Poems

Thomas Shapcott
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Abstract
TWO PARKS for Rosemary Wighton, MOUTH FEATHERS
Two Parks

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TWO PARKS
for Rosemary Wighton

1. ITCHY PARK

It was a triangle of sloping ground with a dozen starved trees;
We called it Itchy Park. There was a pole
with iron chains and the ring you held to whirl
like a chair-o-plane. There was the splintery seat we'd use
to jump from or get up into the brittle branches – these
never led anywhere much. It was a scraggy dull
landmark but it was on our way to school.
It had bindi-eye and every other needle grass.

Driving up Denmark Hill, a visitor, what
would you notice of Itchy Park? You'd speed uphill
without a glance. I think I would as well
except that the swinging pole has gone – heat
from a submerged anger complicates the loss.
Despite our denials, we are trapped by ownership,
whose other name we guess.

2. ADELAIDE

You saw us from your car, hand-in-hand
striding through parkland to the tent at Writers’ Week
a middle-aged Jack and Jill, mismatched but enjoying it.
You told us later that the image was almost
a bucket of flowers, a pail of champagne
and we remembered that day as a picnic
you joined us in.

The striped marquees
the crowds under the planetrees and the yelp
of plastic cups underfoot – Adelaide was always festival
with streets slapping bright banners above our heads
and ‘event’ part of ‘environment’.
I stayed later, beyond the Festival
and the park without canvas, empty of pedestrians
or groups talking or listening became that space
you had known beneath our rubbing and revelling.
It was the well that Jack and Jill had come to
the quiet place, not a hill (wells in this world
are dug only in valleys or declivities. The hill was elsewhere).
The park, truly, was filled with flowers
in the time of flowers, and with champagne
in its season.

MOUTH FEATHERS

Once shy, twice bitten, ten times bitten.
The old sayings twist in the mouth
like a dry feather shoved in
making you spit.
‘Only joking!’ they said in the playground,
‘Can’t you take a joke?’ That’s what they said.

I take this odd feather. It has floated in from
outside.
Nothing could be more ordinary:
like a playground of kids, teasing.
Nothing could be more strange.

I hold it up in finger and thumb. It is a science
of intricate connections, a nib
inviting the words, though we have forgotten nibs
and there are no more knuckles blotched with ink. It is
one strong channel thrusting its point down
till we think of darts, arrows, the skin pierced
and a sort of necessary ritual that has
something to do with taste.
Or it is the last dream, feathers as wings
and flight into the ventilation points of the stars
or at least an eagle’s glide. Why did we lose
on the genetic graph towards flight?

He who hesitates is pinned to the ground forever.
Even in orbiting satellites we hold a little cup
of our weighted atmosphere like the kid
gripping six marbles in his pants' pocket, knowing
they are his only security against the Big Boys
and the feather torture.
He who hesitates is not lost to a lot of fantasies
and one tiny boon of fate: he who hesitates
can have the power to look, look again, to review
and consider strategies for next time.
Daedalus hesitates before affixing wax to the wings,
Christ hesitates before the final commitment.
Ten times bitten and always shy
the doves of this world have outpopulated
those endangered eagles. An eagle's feather
is the quill, and the doves' soft down
fills the pillow on which I lie.

JOACHIM RAFF, A HOMAGE

You do remember – it's in the older encyclopaedias –
that the Pastoral Symphony, for most of the Nineteenth Century
meant Raff, not Beethoven? It's not on CD
and was never on LP. The generation of 78s of course
were weighed down by sheer logistics of volume
and space on a record shelf: a 1930s Wagner opera
might take 26 discs, each heavier
than two entire RINGS on CD.

In this context, Joachim Raff should be
one of the new exploitables, a fine case for recycling.

After all, Vivaldi is a new product of the LP era
not the Eighteenth Century knitting-machine culture.

Just as Wagner, indeed, came to life, we acknowledge,
in late 1950s stereo when effects were news
and the right singers still available.
The result's history, as well as Wagner's ideal: profit
not loss.