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Abstract

This is Albion Gidley Singer at the pen, a man with a weakness for a good fact. The first fact is always the hardest: you must begin somewhere, and such is the nature of this intractable universe that you must start with a thing admitted but undemonstrable. Myself, for example. I am a thing admitted, I close a drawer on my hand or slice my chin with my razor and admit myself to be, but it is a source of grief to me that I am undemonstrable, in spite of hands scarred by drawers, and blood spurting from my chin.

KATE GRENVILLE

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This is Albion Gidley Singer at the pen, a man with a weakness for a good fact. The first fact is always the hardest: you must begin somewhere, and such is the nature of this intractable universe that you must start with a thing admitted but undemonstrable. Myself, for example. I am a thing admitted, I close a drawer on my hand or slice my chin with my razor and admit myself to be, but it is a source of grief to me that I am undemonstrable, in spite of hands scarred by drawers, and blood spurting from my chin.

I inspect the things I own, but they do not give me back myself. I grasp a poker, or the Dresden shepherd on the mantelpiece, and snap off the flute in his silly pink hand, but such things remain strangers to me. I am a hollow link in the endless chain of proof which stretches back to a time when Albion Gidley Singer could not be imagined, back to simians swinging through branches, back to the jellies eddying in the currents of brand-new seas.

Mirrors show me a stranger, and there are long dark nights of hissing emptiness, of the voids between the stars, when I am hot with panic. *God!* I cry silently then, into the quality down of my pillow, which has swallowed so many cries for help. *God!* In the morning, with yellow sun lying silkily over the end of my bed, the hissing voids retreat beneath the sound of sea and kookaburras. I don my wing-collar, that keeps my head on my shoulders, and remind myself that I am a philosopher and a gentleman.

Hollow man that I was, I found true love at last with Eadith: Eadith of the rust-coloured hair, simple Eadith who admired Albion Gidley Singer for his place in the world and his immaculate wing-collars.

Eadith! When I met her she was laughing and if she had not been, I might never have known love, because when she was not laughing her mouth was like a fish's, with a tendency to turn down at the corners. Laughing Eadith was chasing a feather that cavorted out of her grasp at each jump she made for it, in the park under the paper-barks, where feathers often floated down to the grass from the birds that perched and soiled overhead. I watched, because I did not wish Albion Gidley Singer to make any kind of fool of himself, rushing in and catching floating feathers like a madman if in fact this woman was brushing away a fly, or simply a lunatic who was trying to catch God, perhaps, as he sported with her.

I stood watching, then, with my cane planted at an observer's angle in the grass, and this rust-coloured woman in her dark-green costume laughed and leapt in an inefficient way at the feather buoying itself up on the currents of air she was producing. She laughed so that I saw her bad teeth, and the artlessness of her beginning to shine with effort and frustration and the consciousness of being watched by a gentleman with a cane. *Madam*, I said, and took a few steps closer, so that I could see that she was not in her first youth, *Madam, may I offer you my assistance?*

She was no coquette, this woman in her ugly green, and she smiled so that her face creased, but looked me guilelessly in the face as she said, *Oh sir, you are kind, it is that I collect them, you see, and make pictures from them, and this is a Sydney feather, and a very good one.* As she spoke the feather wafled down between us and with one decisive movement I had it caught in my hand. *Maps of Australia*, the rust-coloured woman was saying, *and of course religious motifs, my father was a clergyman of the Church of England.*

She smiled with her bad teeth, as if I would know all about maps of Australia and clergymen, and would care, and she smiled in a warm vague way that would have been an invitation in another woman, but she was too artless and plain to know how to make an invitation with a smile. She smiled and lingered, this woman with small unlovely eyes the colour of soil, and wished to go on talking, I could see, about her feathers and her father.

I saw her hands, like a child's, square, the nails cut short. They were not the clever hands of my wife Norah, soft and skilful with embroidered parrots, and deft among the combs of her complicated hair, and they were not the hands of Agnes and Una, with cheery painted nails and a thousand small secrets of skill with a gentleman's manhood. They were the hands of a lost soul who made maps of Australia out of feathers, and smiled at gentlemen in a way that said she knew nothing of the world. *Maps of Australia*, I said, and she nodded with eagerness. *I have been needing Cape York Peninsular, and now you have given me the very tip that I needed,* she exclaimed, and I thought of another tip I was beginning to feel I would be prepared to give her. *I should very much like to see such a work,* I said, *as a map of Australia in feathers,* and my voice was mild, Albion Gidley Singer at his mildest, for this was a woman no man had to labour with. She smiled and her face was pleased to be spoken to, and she was proud to take Albion Gidley Singer home to her tiny rented room by the sea, to show him her treasures, and her unfinished map of Australia.

Ah, Eadith! She was like a peach, in need of a shave. The down softened the contours of her features and gave her an expression of softness, a vagueness, that I liked: and, of course, I longed to reach out my hand and feel that fur under my fingers. Eadith was not beautiful, if she had been she would not have been spending her days making her widow's mite go a little further in this damp seaside place. She would not have remained a widow, growing slowly old under her fur without the flame of the touch

of a man to bring her to life. Nor was she a wit, my poor Eadith, or even a person of brains like my ugly daughter. Eadith was a silly woman, given to clucking at babies in the streets, embroidering small dainty pointless bits of things, and gathering pictures from *The News Of The World* on the subject of the Royal Family. *You can tell they are Royalty*, she said, showing me the smudged photographs. *Do you agree, Albion, you can see the royalty in their faces.*

It was her silliness, her earnest silliness, that I loved her for: she became solemn and pink, persuading me that the Royal Family had royalty in their very jaw-bones, and her mouth tightened in pride, smoothing the idiot pieces of embroidery on her knee. *It makes the time pass*, she explained, with her head on one side smoothing a rose-petal embroidered in dark-green, and I wanted to seize her in her solemnity and turn her simple spirit towards me. *My peach*, I wanted to say, and see her flush with pride at being the peach of Albion Gidley Singer, and of course never guessing why she was my peach rather than my angel or my rose.

But, now we sat, still, with my yellow gloves lying on my knee between us as I hoped Eadith's hands would one day lie. *Let us take the air*, I said, and Eadith brightened like a fanned fire and jumped to her feet in a way Norah would never have done, with enthusiasm at an idea of mine.

There was a sea-wall with a promenade, and on one side the sea slapped and pounced, and on the other we could see the narrow strip of the town, and then the railway line keeping the houses hemmed in, and beyond the railway line the mountains rose up steeply, lowering down on us in a way I disliked. I turned my face away from those overhanging mountain slopes and faced into the sea breeze as Eadith was doing, she was *taking the air* as if it was medicine, in great gasping breaths. *Oh*, she laughed suddenly, pink in her cheeks, more peach-like than ever, *Oh Mr Singer, I am come over dizzy, it is all that air*, and she stood with her hands balancing on the air in front of her breasts so that it was clear to me that Eadith was a minx too, and was probably not dizzy, or only with passion. I took her hands, then, and pressed her against me, saying *Mrs Heron, it is all right, you will be well again shortly, just rest for a moment*. I spoke into her hair and against my fine woollen chest I could feel the thrust of her breasts, heaving up and down against me in an inflammatory way.

The drone of the sea was making me irritable now. *Eadith, it will rain, we must return*, I said, and could not look at her eager artless face, that showed up my perfidy and the depths of my animal lust. *Eadith, I would hate you to get wet*, I said, speaking mindlessly, my mind on other things, but Eadith's mind was on nothing but me, and I felt her looking up at me watching the words fall out of my mouth, and I was comforted by such embracing attention. *Eadith, I said, I would like, I cannot say, I am too full of it, too much feeling, Eadith*. Poor innocent Eadith, listening to my riddles and trying to read my face, I saw the power fill her face as water fills a sponge, saw her think she understood, and I stood within my falsity and

felt her eyes smiling all over my face, and her loving innocent spirit come to meet me. I *adore*, I murmured, so I knew she could not be sure just what she had heard. *Adore*. Her eyes watched my mouth and I caused it to smile a non-committal sort of smile, that would keep her puzzled. *You are an intrigue to me*, I said, and her face was radiated with pleasure, hearing the words, and I mumbled some more, but knew she would not break the spell by saying *Pardon? Pardon, Albion?* I let her hear another teasing word then: *Besotted*, I said and then I bowed my head as if overcome, and Eadith could do nothing more than clasp her hands, poor fool, and wait for me to become clearer, or burst into a passion of tears on her shoulder.

I did neither of these things, but straightened at last and looked at that heavy sky lowering down on us. *Well*, I said, and took a small step away from the woman gazing at me, and from that small distance gazed back into her eyes for a moment, smiled another mysterious smile, and then bit it off under my teeth. *Well, Eadith, I would not have you get wet for the world*, I said in a voice as tender as milk. *And I know you wish to return now. I can see you do not like to say so, but you are eager to go back*. I smiled, and saw her frown a little, and I smiled more, because I knew there was nothing she wished more than to go on standing with me, but she did not know how to contradict me.

On the way back to her dank rooms we stood by the shallows watching the smooth grey surface of the water scattered by the flash of fish cavorting there, a shoal of silver backs churning the water. *Look*, Eadith said, and took advantage of the moment to lay her hand on my arm, as if I could not see those roistering fish. *Look, Albion, fish!* I stopped, and lifted my arm a little so she felt emboldened to leave her hand there and I could feel her tremulous through my tweed. I felt myself becoming a man in my trousers, feeling her quivering against me, and said: *It is some kind of courting ritual, Eadith, it is their mating dance, they are preparing to copulate*. Ah, what an unscrupulous rascal I was! I felt Eadith flinch, but not flinch so much that I did not know that she could be mine, whenever I wished, now: talking of those copulating fish had tested her waters for me, and she had not flung away in disgust, had not even removed her hand from my arm: I was an unscrupulous rascal, but she was a trollop of the first water, like all the women I had ever known: she just concealed it differently under her plain peachy cheeks. I smiled to myself then, a special and private smile which I saw her wonder at: but I had her bluffed, this foolish fond hairy woman, and she would not dare approach that secretive smile of mine and ask what lay behind it.

Gulls wheeled and rudely screamed, a small ungainly boy ran past and shot us a knowing glance, and the shadow of the land lay dark on the water. *Come then, Eadith*, I said with rather more volume than I had intended. *Come, Eadith*, I repeated more gently. *Come, let us return now, and discuss the nature of your void, and mine*.