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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

HERMETICALLY SEALED or WHAT THE SHUTTER SAW (After a photograph of 1911),
REINVENTING THE WHEEL, A REAL VISIBLE MATERIAL HAPPINESS

Peter Porter

HERMETICALLY SEALED

or

WHAT THE SHUTTER SAW

(After a photograph of 1911)

The stifling air of Brisbane, cleansed by time,
Shows the family *Main* Easter-Islanded in sepia,
Slow shutters making them North British as indeed
They were, though stiffly suited as befits Colonials
Steeled for success. Through this the mercantile's
Made magical; it puts a fearful competence
In frame – behold a portrait truly *feierlich*
And God-like, humanity a Middle Class ex-voto!

Pater Familias, moustachio'd, dewlapped, forty-four
But seeming sixty, the God Mark Main turns everything
He looks at into Glasgow – surrounded by his family,
His liver undercutting his immortal soul,
He practises theocracy. He is informing us
That through the doors which whisky opens, soon or late,
Comes Death the Factor, a leading trader and therefore
Your family must be properly dressed to welcome him.

His stern and English wife, Mae Simms, uncloned
In whitest lace, a Beatrice of new-built Randwick,
Overlooks the paddocks of her hopes. She has the discipline
Of Start Again, a cure for each indisposition.
Fate washes us to peccant shores, but we must keep
The absolute commandments – sons and daughters are
What's left of angels in a fallen universe.
The sun shines through us, yet we are the North.

Enthroned in poll position on the left,
Their eldest child, their daughter Marion, sets her face
Into a tuneless cameo: dark-skinned and Pictish,
She gives posterity and photographer no hint
She is an anarch of dejection, a humorist
Of hopelessness. Her bust is tightly fronted, balcony
Of soft dictatorship. She is my Mother and will stay
Younger than I forever, her hand enclosing mine.

Behind the seated seniors, two sons, Eric and Neville,
Endorse expectancy and youth, the ichor of their promise
Destined never to dry. Waistcoats, watches fobbing off

The larrikin enticement of their sex, they're blessed
 With god-like blindness: they will never see their graves
 In France. Perhaps none in the group would know them
 On death's wharf. 'Magnificently unprepared', a poet said,
 Yet never life's long littleness so frozen.

Dolly and Winnie, indomitable and plastic sisters –
 Dolly a headscarfed *Carmen* extra, Winnie the beauty
 With a gaze as basilisk as Passover.

Harder than teenage light, their understanding
 Of our fallen natures keeps them well abreast of
 War, Depression, Real Estate, Survival –
 We have to die, they say, but seaside houses
 And golf courses shall be our proper recompense.

Little Roy, who will disgrace them all and as
 My Uncle Mick will be a Tattersall's Club bookie
 After meningitis makes him Proteus, is just in front
 Of Edna, baby of the family, a sweet, buck-toothed
 Forensic angel – strange that the chief executive
 Of God in this our family *Tenebrae* should be
 The youngest. From infancy she'll know how best
 To fend off pain with laughter, work and kindness.

With seven children who will produce only six
 Grandchildren, the parental psychopomps beckon to
 Their descendent, a paltry straggler of the age
 They were so proud to own. Time's not an integer
 Of sure forgiveness, but perhaps they wish
 The world were spiked with magic, and that their
 Materialistic gods might break from larvae to become
 The fattest schoolboy silkworms of their hopes.

REINVENTING THE WHEEL

The age demands that we invent the wheel.
 Why not? It wasn't properly done before.
 What seemed a wheel undoubtedly proved useful
 And ubiquitous – but just because its rim
 Was round and, fitted on an axle, could be made
 To carry such incriminating weights
 As clockwork, prams and gun-carriages,
 While offering spokes for saintly martyrdoms,
 We should not credit it as a gestalt.
 Each age has one key aspiration – ours

Is to look away from our contraption
 To find the Platonism of all things.
 Or, as Browning must have noticed, when
 Chromatic sound is all around us, who can
 Collectivise the orthodoxy of
 C Major? Does anything exist anterior to
 Its root abstraction? Nothing is made
 Till everything is sorted. But we are lucky,
 The template is reborn in everyone,
 Creation starts at each implosive birth,
 Anno Domini's precisest calibration.
 We are before The Fall and falling ever,
 Ante Bellum of the Corporate Wars,
 Faustian with tampered DNA.
 Hardy cried 'Ere nescience be re-
 affirmed, How Long, How Long?' The answer stares
 From creatures' stalking eyes, The Third Way's
 Pigeon-holes, Murder's *Make It New* –
 Nothingness is lost in history,
 Fortuna's Wheel is never finished turning.

A REAL VISIBLE MATERIAL HAPPINESS

The poetry which we say makes nothing happen
 Is being interrupted in my flat
 By Sondheim tapes played loudly just above.
 If I were Rilke I'd personify Love
 As the old Objectivist Geheimrat
 To whom all self-admiring hands come cap-in.

That way I'd solve the highly systematic
 Problem the modern poet has of how
 To fill his poems up with real things
 But serve abstraction: so one writes of wings
 Alongside sunlight, CDs, a red cow,
 The Broadway noises coming from the attic,

You should rely on stuff to keep you happy.
 Excitement fades away, you can't take joy
 Morning after morning. Sotheby's may call,
 The cat-scratched sofa look right in the hall,
 Dreams be scattered like a lost convoy
 And everything improveable stay crappy.