Poems

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Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol20/iss3/28
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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, dwelapped, 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, ba1cony
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 kindliness.

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.