

BURNING DESIRE

A REFLECTION ON WRITING, INSPIRATION AND IMAGINATION

MIDNIGHT IN THE CITY. August 31st. The last day of winter turns in an instant to the first day of spring. Most taxicabs have fled the centre of the city in fear of the drunken marauding mobs that prowl the streets in search of fun and transport, throwing bottles, cans, shoes, rocks at cabs foolish enough to be about. There is a hint of warmth in the air, but the wind that blows around the corner of Bourke Street and Spring Street brings a chill to the throat. It seems to me there is a smell of limes. Policemen in the shadows guard the historic public buildings. A high gust rushes up the wide, steep steps to the soaring pillars of Parliament House. And with that gust is suddenly revealed, as if blown there by the wind, in vast skirts of white satin which gleams as it flaps about in the half-dark, a bride.

Like Cinderella in her flight from the palace ball, the figure in white flits across the staircase, her feet invisible, her veil a cloud of ectoplasm in the midnight air. She is so small, so elfin on the empty steps. She stands—her billowing skirt is troublesome in the wind—and the groom in his traditional black and white materialises from the shadows, like a servant, to assist her.

They dither, trying to control the white satin sail that is about to engulf them. Or is the new husband going to take his young bride there and then on the steps of Parliament House at midnight on the first day of spring?

But need I tell you? Swiftly from the shadows comes the man with the light and the camera. The bride and the groom have had the wedding ceremony; had the banquet; had it all recorded on video. Now is the time for the midnight photographs on the steps of the public building. A sleek black Lincoln Continental backs up towards the bride and groom, its red tail lights the two eyes of a silent reptile. And yes, the camera man gets the picture of the bridal couple as they enter the back seat of the Lincoln Continental. Will they

drive away now? Is it done, over, in the can? No, they are out on the steps again, and there is more direction, more wind, more darkness, more light, more standing, moving, smiling, kissing.

This woman has been awake all night, and up at six this morning. The man was up all night drinking with the chaps. By the time they reach the bridal suite in the penthouse of a luxury hotel they will be quite worn out. And still they pose and pause and posture on the steps of the Parliament, leaning towards the camera, fluttering in the breeze.

Is somebody making a movie? No, this is just real life. Sort of.

The junction of the two street makes a T, with the neo-classical grandeur of Parliament House across the top. Down in one corner of the T is the brass and neon of the Hard Rock Cafe, and in the centre of the road, in the middle of the tram lines, another wedding party is assembled. Several men in dinner suits, a flower girl in frills, yawning, her bouquet dangling onto the road. A large bride in luminous, voluminous satin. And the centre piece here consists of two black and silver Harley Davidsons.

And the photographer, also in dinner suit, with large moustache and long hair, and his camera on a tripod in the middle of the road. Now what I have described is what I saw. I don't know when the Lincoln Continental drove off with the first couple, or when the second couple roared off on the Harleys. But I wondered at the meaning and the function of the time out from living for the purpose of posing and recording in the middle of the night. I needn't wonder, really, since photographs and videos are by now part of the wedding day—like the marriage ceremony, the banquet, the honeymoon. In the case of these couples the honeymoon would begin after the scenes at Parliament House and the Hard Rock Cafe.

I shouldn't worry about the postponement of desire for the sake of theatre and posterity. The postponement is all part of the build-up. On the first day of spring the brides will wake up after a ritual de-flowering on the bed of the bridal suite (forget the true de-flowering which took place too long ago to recall). And the photographers and the Harleys and the Lincoln Continental will be gone, spirited away in the darkness.

You are left with two sets of two human beings. Each man and woman is related, linked, by, we assume, desire. I want you; I need you; I love you; you are my heart's desire. Many steps in this mating ritual have been refined now to the moment of the fulfilment of the desire; and the last public step was the display at the T junction in the centre of the city at Cinderella's midnight hour. It was the turning point, and the last seal on the agreement.

Do you take this woman; do you take this man? Do you stand on the steps

of Parliament House, on the tram line in front of the Hard Rock Cafe? Do you do this at midnight? I do.

The honeymoon—oh what a piece of strange erotic poetry that word is—is the time for the fulfilment of desire. Marriage counsellors will tell you lots of other things about honeymoons, and, for that matter about the place of desire in the marriages of today. But the deep-down-bare-bones-knickers-off original truth about honeymoons was that they gave you a chance to attain your heart's desire.

If you had to pick a colour to illustrate desire, you would usually pick red or purple. And sometimes brides advertise the desire factor by carrying red flowers, or at least giving a red posy to the flower girl. (The dangling posy outside the Hard Rock was red with a burgundy ribbon.) But the signals of the fires of passion, the glowing coals of desire, are slight at weddings. (The abundance of red roses on Valentine's Day bring to mind a massacre.) Our traditional wedding colours are the absence of colour—black and white. The badge of desire, the heart on the sleeve—this is bad manners. The sight of blood, the sign of life exposed—this doesn't come out at weddings—or at funerals either. The ritual events of our days and nights are bleached and blackened in order that we might bear them with strength and dignity. Blood and fire, love and desire—are so messy and wild, after all. Savage and primitive.

I watched the tail end of the rituals of the two weddings, the last public appearances before the actual sex scenes, and my attention, clearly, was arrested. The city had a hellish feel to it; the brides and grooms were seekers after paradise somewhere in or above the seething murky darkness of the rat-infested, cockroach-breeding streets. The response of the photographer is to take a photograph. My response is to write. To try to understand what it was I saw by writing down what I saw. This, this writing, is, believe it or not, my passion; it is my burning desire.

The longing to examine and expose my ideas in words is something emotional and physical. Ask me where I get my ideas from and I can tell you I don't really know; but ask me how I feel when I have an idea for a story, and I can tell you that I have a fabulous burning sensation behind the eyes. The cartoonist who drew the idea as a light bulb lighting up in the head got it right, as far as I'm concerned. For me it's as if something hot is melting in and around my eyeballs, and my hands can't wait to get to the keyboard, to set in motion the statement, the dramatisation of the thoughts that have ignited somehow in my imagination. I seek to perform a kind of balancing act between impulse and reason, to establish a picture and a statement of the

awe and reverence I feel for life and for words and for the ability that words have to describe, in part, the way the world is, or seems to be. I have described my own writing as something that occurs in heartfelt brainwaves, and the process I am now describing is that of transposing those heartfelt brainwaves into my prose, on paper. I write fiction, and the simple reason I give for doing that is that I believe writing fiction is the thing I do best. From writing fiction I derive a deep sense of personal fulfilment, and hope for a connection with people who read what I write.

I spoke of the longing to examine and expose my ideas in words, and this is a longing that I have known since I was a young child. I had then a sense that the world was full of inspiration of many different kinds, and that events, images, ideas that inspired me were in some way gifts to me for my own use. It sounds too simple and too grand, really, to say that I have had a lifetime interest in the matters of sex and death and good and evil, but since there is no point in lying about it, that is the truth. And being conscious of my own interest in these things, I was also aware that I was taking up a position of a potter with clay—the events, the ideas, the images, the stories—these were my clay. The only thing I could do with life, I reckoned, was write it up. It has taken me a lifetime to begin to work out how to do this; it seems to me that the only way to find out how is to *do* it. And for a very, very long time I have understood that the thing that can rob me of my enterprise is my own death. What if I died before I found out how to use the materials of my craft? So I am always writing against death. I write about death; I write against death.

My earliest memory of death is that of the sudden death of my grandmother on Christmas eve, when I was three years old. My mother was particularly close to my grandmother, and I now understand and believe that the depth of my mother's grief was conveyed and transferred to me, the youngest child. I lived as a child in a place which was, on the face of it, a bleak, dreary and meaningless backwater of Australian society. But to a child, anywhere is the anteroom of the imagination, and I had more than enough inspiration, a glut of grist to my mill. That was in life, with the suicides and murders and attempted murders of the neighbours; and the fatal car accidents (one night the local pharmacist and his wife were wiped out on the highway); and the births and adoptions and diseases (a girl three doors down died of polio); and the feuds—great feuds. And romance. I used to go hysterical at weddings. Yes, that was in life. But there were also stories told and read; there was the radio—the war didn't end until I was five, and I drew many, many portraits of Japs and Germans, portraits invested with all the hatred I could feel. And

there were the movies. Nobody cared what children saw at the movies, and I was very young indeed when I saw *The Spiral Staircase* in which the villain stalks and murders crippled girls. My memory of *The Spiral Staircase* is still very vivid. And I was particularly devoted to the sex scenes (such as they were) in the movies.

For a very long time I worked at the clay of this, discovering how to make use of the gifts of the material. I wrote and thought about writing and read. I wrote novels and burnt them. I had a few stories published. It took a shock to get me really going. A very close friend died of cancer at the age of thirty-three, and the effect this had on me was to send me to my typewriter where I wrote a novel at white heat in one month. That I see as the turning point and the breakthrough in my work. I gained thereby a freedom which I had been lacking, a freedom which allowed me to write in my own way about my own subjects for my own purposes. The novel was only the beginning; it wasn't much good as a novel; but that is not the point. It was the liberating factor; it marked the moment when I really began to work. It is now about twelve years since that happened, and I am still discovering how to do the thing I so desire to do, to give in to the heat behind the eyes and to get down the heart-felt brainwaves and write it all up. Of course I still sometimes falter in my resolve, still sometimes feel constrained by what I imagine to be the climates of—say—publishing and reviewing. But when I keep my eye (my hot eye) on the beauty of the complexity and contradictions of the enterprise, I can't contain my enthusiasm for the work in hand.

I am at the moment writing a novel with great pleasure, even glee. And one of the reasons for my emotions is the fact that I have given in to one of my oldest and weirdest desires. When I was a child I had a deep and serious wish to be an angel; I carried this wish with me, and I recall revealing it, as one does, to a boy when I was seventeen. The boy was very scathing. Besides this, I liked to wear red shoes. And to another boy I said my red shoes were magic. This boy said: 'Oh yeah? In what way, magic?' (The angel boy became a poet, and the red shoe boy became an historian—these are probably meaningless facts, and I daresay the poet and the historian don't recall the incidents about angels and shoes.) However I bring the incidents up here as illustrations of the slender moments which can become material for a writer. To return to my weird desire and to the novel I am writing—the narrator of the novel is an angel. And the title of the novel is *Red Shoes*. It is possible that I would not be writing exactly this book if those boys had not been so dismissive, so very long ago.

Fiction has given me the licence to become an angel, and to write about

red shoes or anything I like. In fiction you can have or do anything you want anything you wish, anything you desire, anything you dare. I believe I have to be brave to be a writer, and if I am not brave, the writing will almost certainly be timid, and full of useless lies and imitations. But I have to remember that it has taken me a very long time to discover how to fulfil my angelic desire; it has been a process of living and writing, writing and living.

A process of discovering what I can do, how I can do it. Another of the great pleasures in the writing of *Red Shoes* is that I am developing it in two forms, as printed text and as hypertext. Writing is also a process of discovering what I want to do, of discovering, actually, who I am. The stories that interest you, as a reader, tell you something about yourself; and the stories you write tell you even more—much, much more. That is, if you are writing your own truth.

By writing your own truth, I mean developing a way of examining your own thoughts and feelings and experience so that you can express in language, image, argument and in the music of language and the structure of narrative, the meaning of those thoughts, feelings and experience. In my own case, the medium for this is fiction or reflective essay. It is difficult to know what is the true and original genesis of creative work, but at the moment of apparent inspiration, there is a jolt, a spark, and the writer then has the opportunity, even the responsibility, to carry it forward into a finished work. We love to tell stories and to hear stories; we do it all the time in our daily lives—listening and telling stories. I believe that when we do this we are working on trying to make sense of our lives—and by ‘story’ I mean the personal accounts of the day at the office; the news stories we see and hear and read; the gossip of the neighbourhood; jokes and anecdotes; and all the stories you can find in a library—fact, fiction, fantasy. All stories, I think, in some way, are attempts to push back chaos and darkness, to clarify something about ourselves and our meaning.

It is my desire to work in this way, my burning wish to take up the challenge of inspiration and run with it, to get the stories and write them up. Inspiration, the breath of life of the imagination, is curious, strange. The promise of passion that I ran into with the two brides at midnight in the city was a very potent source of inspiration for me, something I will not forget, something that will inform a piece of fiction that I plan to write. The sights I saw, the sights I have described here, may never appear again in my work, but some element of what I felt and sensed will surface somehow in a story. And letting the material which inhabits the imagination roll out in words and stories is, as far as I’m concerned, a joyful and a very hot thing to do.