

The Gift of Responsibility

5th Draft
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The performers – there are 6, despite there being 4 parts – are dressed casually, chatting amongst themselves as the audience enters. There are no wings or drops or props – a bare space – and one large, light bulb on the floor, mid stage, throwing light and shadows around the room.

All the performers know all of the text and who says what is negotiated in the moment. That is, who will speak as ‘A’ and who will speak as ‘B’ and so on, is not fixed. The order of the text is fixed but not who says what.

D.
I
he said
I am

we are

sitting

by the fire

with
this light
to see

with this light
for warmth.

The pane
of
glass
keeps the wind away.

I'm not
locked in here
with you
you're locked
in here
with me

my sister
my twin.

This did happen
this happens
again
and again.
and again

We are warm
with
this light.

This light
is for us.

5 steps looking at the ground
5 steps looking at the horizon
5 steps looking at the ground
5 steps looking at the horizon
5 steps looking at the ground
5 steps looking at the horizon
5 steps looking at the ground
5 steps looking at the horizon
5 steps looking at the ground
5 steps looking at the horizon

Words.
Words, words, words.

Coffee break's over
back on your heads.

A.
Walking

the sun rises
behind me
warms my back
arms and legs
passes over my right shoulder
warms my face
drawing me
into the wind

toward home.

Today
I caught two snakes
and shot a wallaby.

I like the horses.
There are
many things
I will tell my family.

B.

I'm either too hot
or too cold.

I'm sick of damper and salt pork.
I can't shit.

Every day
I dig for water.

Nothing at 3 feet
nothing at 5 feet
nothing at 7 feet.

This morning
there are clouds on the horizon

they are gone by mid-day.

C.

South Australia
18 March, 1841.
We made 26 miles today
due West.

9 horses
6 sheep
250 pounds of flour
saddles
rope
guns
knives
tarpaulins
blankets
buckets
kegs
books.

D.
Fewer berries and nuts, now.

The food is smaller
faster
harder to catch.

I am thirsty.

With every step
my home
my family get
further and further
away.

It is hot
I am tired

I remember
riding on my mother's
shoulders, sleeping.

C.
28 March.
Here
it is flat
empty
of life
only
several species of tree or scrub
survive
scattered
bent
stunted
in the hard ground.

No clouds
constant wind.

White light
blue sky

red earth.

D.
I hate these flies
and the heat.

Each of us
everyday gets
2 pounds of flour
1 cup of sugar
a handful of tea
and what's left of the sheep.

I won't eat lizard or snake
it's not right for a whiteman.

The horses need better grass.

We bury
4 muskets
12 boxes of shot and powder
the sextant
6 books
a pick-axe
blankets
and 4 saddles.

I remember going hungry.

C.
I shoot a kangaroo
and chase it
for most of the day
finally
clubbing it
as the sun goes down.

I lie
on the dead animal

feel
the heat drain
away.

D.
6 April,
Today we did 21 miles
West, North-West.

___C___ shot a kangaroo.
The blood tastes of iron.

Camping last night
near tolerable grass.

The horses are doing better than I imagined.

For several days
now
in the evening
we've seen
the smoke from other
distant camps.

C.
We begin
the day heading for
what looks like
a large
tree.
We walk all day
toward
that marker
finally
coming upon
it in the evening
not a large tree at all
a shrub
no taller than a horse.

D.
By the fire
under
a blanket of stars
the wind
tells me tales.

Before
the sun is up
I crawl
through the bush
collecting dew
drinking.

The sun makes me sleepy
Two small lizards
fucking

lunch.

C.
From county Kildare
a convict
now a free man.

Wherever I am
Rachel is with me.

Coffee break's over
back on your heads.

D.
___B___ throws a rock
hitting me
in the back.

I chase him
round the horses

hitting him
with a stick
___C___ yelling
tries to catch us.

Tonight
no sugar in our tea.

C.
23rd April.
This morning
coming over a rise
we surprise
several families at camp.

B.
WHO ARE YOU?

PAUSE.

B.
WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

PAUSE.

B.
WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

PAUSE.

B.
WE ARE LOOKING FOR
THE INLAND SEA.

PAUSE.

D.
We stare at them.
They stare at us.

Here.
There.

We.
They.

Us.
Them.

Dark.
Light.

Black.
White.

Good.
Bad.

Up.
Down.

Tall.
Short.

Wet.
Dry.

Now.
Later.

Live.
Dead.

Girl.
Boy.

Young.
Old.

Skinny.
Fat.

Hard.

Soft.

Cock.
Cunt.

North.
South.

East.
West.

Blow.
Suck.

Hot.
Cold.

Heaven.
Hell.

Happy.
Sad.

Empty
Full.

True.
False.

Forward.
Reverse.

Left.
Right.

This.
That.

Front.
Back.

Go.
Stop.

You.
Me.

B.
Imagine this:
Only
4 and half billion years ago
the earth
is without
an atmosphere
a malformed
roiling
mass of goo
in space
bashed about by asteroids.

Several hundred million
years later
things settle down
a bit
an atmosphere
develops and
about a billion
years after that
you
YOU
are born
of that atmosphere:
the chance encounter
of
carbon dioxide
water
and sunlight;
A living thing.
Nothing special
just the tiniest tendril
of algae
a wisp
of waterborne muck
hardly different

from your surrounds
save
for one thing

You are alive!

ALIVE
and nothing
else
is.

You
are more advanced
better
than everything!

Grow little plant, grow!

Not long after
– geologically
speaking –
single cell creatures
develop.

Over time
these
creatures
evolve
from harvesting
sunlight and nutrients in the water
to eating.

They eat
other things...
they eat
each other.

Fearful and distrustful
they group
and cling
together:
cultures are formed.

From these cultures
more and more
complex organisms
bigger stronger
organisms
bigger stronger
cultures are formed.

Cultures
mass together
and
feed upon
weaker
cultures.

And now
from all this
ooze of eating
killing
and conquering
comes the best and greatest
culture of all!

B.
A blackfella
walks into a pub -

A.
- That's gotta hurt -

B.
A blackfella
enters a pub
and asks
the white clerk
for some wine.
The white clerk answers
'there are 3 types of wine
red wine,
white wine
and plain

ordinary blackfella wine.'

The blackfella answers back
'did you know
there are 3 types of turd?
horse-turd,
musturd,
and you
you big shit!
Gimme the plain
ordinary blackfella wine.'

A.
Hornsea, England, 1826.
I am ten years old
the son of a Yorkshire vicar.

The cotton in my clothes
comes by way of sail
from India and Egypt.

My room
has two windows
overlooking our garden.
Through them
I can see ten miles into the distance.
I know
because I pace it out

My family
comes to England with William
the Conqueror.
My father
tells me
his great-great-great-great
grandfather lost a leg
at Agincourt
that I have a duty
to him.
I see God's wisdom
His order

in Everything.

I study French.

After
grammar school
I
he
has
the benefit
of a tutor.

I excel in mathematics
and the natural sciences.
I am taught
how to trap
kill
and
preserve
samples
of the local
flora and fauna.

I am 19.
150 pounds
is put down as
a deposit
for the purchase
of a commission in the army.

After
several months of waiting
my
father decides
I
should
make my fortune
in Australia.

B.
My mother teaches me

Mineng, Bibbulman and Goreng.

I am Nyungar.

I am
licking
the sweet nectar from
a bright yellow
banksia cone.

I sit
on the ground
watch
my mother
fuck for grog.

She is beaten
there is a soft breeze
it rains
washing the dirt from her face
I hold
her
as
she bleeds to death.

The elders throw rocks and spears
at the man
who killed her.

He sits
at the edge
of our camp
for
five days
and then is gone.

I live
near the sea
with dogs and rubbish
looking for food.

I have many
brothers and sisters.

Family is everywhere.

I learn to speak
English Dutch and French.

Several
white men
come with horses
in a wagon
and
take my
sister
away.

I sleep under a church
wear pants, a shirt and hat.
I work for food
I pray.

Before there is hair on my chin
I am a cabin boy
on a French whaler
stranded in Adelaide.

A.
My father tells us we are
royalty
sons and daughters
of Niall of the Nine Hostages.

I do not know
how old I am
when he dies of a fever
after being stepped on by a horse.

I have two
older sisters
a younger brother and younger sister.

My youngest sister

dies that year
along
with my mother
during
the summer hunger.

We live
in a windowless
mud and thatch
hut in
County Kildare, Ireland.

When told
to vacate
the land
Rachel
my oldest
sister and I walk
to Dublin.

We sleep under a bridge.
I learn to graft.

We live in a room above a stable.
Rachel
is a prostitute
I am her pimp.

I steal
matching rings.

We play at
being married.

We go to confession every Sunday.

Rachel is bleeding
he refuses to pay
we fight
I kill him
with his own knife.

I sew her up.

We flee to London.

The city smells of shit
we eat rats.

Rachel goes to the river
with Fiona.

I never see either of them again.

I'm imprisoned for theft.
On a barge
on the river
that took my sister
awaiting transportation
to Australia
I marry
another Rachel.

She is pregnant
we are
6 weeks at sea.

Below decks
is a slurry of vomit,
shit, rats, flies and lice.
Rachel catches a fever
and dies.

Wrapped
in a shroud
they
throw her in the ocean.

C.
12 June,
Rain at last.
God has seen fit
to
preserve us
and our endeavor.

We dig holes
and spread tarpaulin.
Our kegs and buckets
are leaky
we are
cold and wet
and without sleep for days

Tonight
we roast and eat
from a dead horse.

For two days
explosive diarrhea
vomiting.

___A___ has a terrible fever
delirious.

D.
His eyes stare up at the grey sky

Rachel
Rachel he says
then he
stiffens
shudders
goes limp.

I hold his head, close his eyes

Wrap him in a blanket
and make a cairn of him.

B.
I am a child
when I see my first whitefella.

We are Ngunawal.

My father is a singer
he spears
a kangaroo
in the neck.
The spirit enters
my mother
gives me life
this mark on my neck
I am that kangaroo.

I watch
the dancing and singing
and learn.

Baiame made the land
and us from the land
then
he stepped
back
into the sky.

We move
with the seasons
with the food.

I watch from the verge.

The whitefellas chop down trees
build fences and
scratch long lines in the ground.

Everyday I move a little closer.

I'm helping them.
They give me food and a torn shirt.

I learn their words and teach them mine.
An uncle drinks grog
gets sick
and drowns
in the river.

My mother carries a nail
in her dilly-bag
for digging and sewing.

We can no longer
hunt and fish
where
we hunted and fished.

We spear a cow for food.

Whitefellas
ride through our camps
scattering
our fire smashing
our home.

My father dies of a fever after being
stepped on by a horse.

We move further away.

D.
Before you go, may I speak with your father?

PAUSE.

D.
How 'bout your mother?

B.
MUM!

A.
WHAT!?

B.
THERE'S A MAN HERE!

A.
WHAT'S HE WANT?!

B.
HE WANTS TO TALK TO YOU!

A.
WHAT ABOUT?!

B.
What do you want?

D.
I am here, from Hornsea, England
now
charged
by Her Majesties representatives
in Australia
to find
an economical route
to the inland sea
in order
to facilitate
trade
with the other colonies and
I
need help translating
hunting and tracking.

B.
HE WANTS ME TO GO WITH HIM IN SEARCH OF THE
INLAND SEA!

A.
TELL HIM THERE IS NO INLAND SEA.
ALL DRIED UP!

B.
MUM - mum says there is no inland sea.
All dried up.

PAUSE

B.
HE DOESN'T BELIEVE YOU!

A.
GODDAMNIT!
BOY, GET OVER HERE.

GO WITH THEM.
LEARN WHAT YOU CAN
THEN COME HOME.

ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?

B.
YES!

A.
WHAT DID I SAY?

B.
GO WITH THEM.
LEARN WHAT YOU CAN
THEN COME HOME.

A.
GOOD.

B.
CAN I BRING MY COUSIN?

A.
YES.

B.
CUZ!

C.
WHAT?1

B.
DO YOU WANNA GO WITH ME AND THAT
WHITEFELLA OVER THERE
ON A WALK
IN SEARCH OF
THE
INLAND SEA?

C.
THERE IS NO INLAND SEA!

B
DO YOU WANNA GO OR DONTCHA?

PAUSE

B.
Out here
I am cousin
to nothing and nobody.

I am tired
thirsty, hungry
I miss my places
my family.

With our footsteps
to guide me
I walk away from the dead man
away from the whitefella
and blackfella
funny faces
yelling
away from the flour and sugar
and dying horses.

Shaking the dew from bushes
eating lizards and berries
I walk home.

The wind pushes him home.

Days
nights
walking
empty
my stomach cramps
my muscles ache
my face tries to cry but nothing comes out.

He lies down out of the wind

The sun warms my body.

Ants crawl
across my face

he wakes

I feel them on my tongue
and up my nose.

I keep walking
all that day and night
and all the next day and night
in my sleep
he stumbles forward.

Looking up at the
full moon
I feel the night ground
full
against my body
growing colder
too weak to shiver
now a part
of this land.

D.
4th August, 1844
London.

He presents a paper
and some specimens
to the Royal geographical society.

Later
From his specimens
there is
conjecture
that
once
there was
an inland sea
but not anymore
not for many thousands of years.

He applies for

and is awarded
a job in the colonial office.

While waiting for a posting
He stays with his father
at the Vicarage in Hornsea.

He walks along the beach
wondering if ___B___
ever made it home.

He remembers
watching him go

hoping
he would come back.

He puts a rock
with a fossilized shell in it
on
___A___'s cairn.

With the wind in his ears
and dirt in his teeth
dogs barking
kids running
cheering
the band plays God Save the Queen
marching to the edge of Adelaide
saying good bye
to the Governor
sweating in ceremonial dress
drinking kangaroo blood
black ants with sky-blue abdomens
the white light
and red earth
stars at night
the shriek of a cockatoo
maggots on a dying horse
the breasts of an aboriginal girl
dew encrusted spider webs
walking toward his shadow in the morning
and away from it in the afternoon.

___C___ comes and goes
at night with dead lizards and snakes
in the morning with a dew soaked sponge.

A.

One by one the horses die.
I take 5 steps looking at the horizon
and 5 steps looking at the ground
5 steps looking at the horizon
5 steps looking at the ground
5 steps looking at the horizon
5 steps looking at the ground
5 steps looking at the horizon
5 steps looking at the ground
5 steps looking at the horizon
5 steps looking at the ground
5 steps looking at the horizon
5 steps looking at the ground
5 steps looking at the horizon
5 steps looking at the ground
5 steps looking at the horizon
5 steps looking at the ground

Waking
curled under a bush
the sun
overhead

___C___ smiling
holding a big
bright yellow banksia cone.

C.

Home
soon home.

D.

I've never been closer
to death
or more alive

such equilibrium

Neither
nor
both and

it is rapturous.
I don't want to go

here is perfect.

B.
In London,
he meets Sarah
A daughter
of a friend of a friend
of his father's.

She was 8 when I sailed away.

D.
He's handsome.
I am in thrall to his exploits.

A.
His first posting is to New Zealand
as Lieutenant Governor.

I arrive in Wellington on 11 July, 1847
poor
already
having spent half
my yearly salary
on several
new suits with brocade
and silver lace.
A fine warm day

a 13 gun salute
the dressed yards of 2 warships
and the band of the 65th play
God Save the Queen.

D.
In person he is tall

A.
Very thin

B.
With a tip-toeing gait

C.
Narrow-chested

D.
has a bad tailor

C.
His countenance is not agreeable

D.
Phrenologically speaking
a bad head

A.
Small and contracted

B.
Indicating something materially
short of full capacity

C.
Peculiar of speech

D.
The very border of an impediment

C.
Taciturn

B.
Awkward

D.
A sheep herder

A, B, C, D
A nobody.

A.
five months after my arrival

I am sworn in.

B.
10 January, 1851.
I
He
is relieved of duties
as Lieutenant Governor.

Married three years
2 daughters.

Sailing home

pacing the deck

wondering if ___C___
ever made it home.

Watching him go
hoping
he would come back.

A.
I take the girls window shopping
we stroll
through the park
and watch
a man taking photographs.

Shoes
dresses
coats
shawls
hats
mother mother
they shout
only they
will ever call me mother.

B.
My father
walks with a cane.
Sleeps mid day
by the fire
head tilted to one side.

Retired
now
still in Hornsea
he lives on his savings and pension.

It is generous of him to accommodate
us
for so long
and under
such circumstances.

I have written again
to the colonial office
explaining the unfairness
of certain payments withheld
and expenses incurred
without remuneration
and await a reply.

C.
A headstrong
arrogant man dies.
He goes to hell.

A demon
meets him at the entrance
to show him round the place.

The demon shows him
fields of nettles and
thorny thickets
all bloody and festooned
with torn flesh.

He shows him
fiery pits
full of screaming souls
swimming in molten sulphur.

He shows him
vast, thrashing machines
covered in blood, urine and feces
sodomizing a thousand souls a second.

Then the demon asks the man
where would you like to spend eternity?

The man looks around terrified.

He points to a plain wooden door
and asks the demon
what's in there?

Oh, you wouldn't like that, replies the demon.
Let me see
let me see says the man, desperate.
If you insist, says the demon.

The demon opens the door and inside
are a bunch of people
waste deep in shit
standing around drinking coffee.
This doesn't seem so bad, says the man.
If you say so, says the demon.
Sign here, here and here and this will
be your home for eternity.
Done.
The man wanders into the room of shit
says hi to a few friends
and gets himself a cup of coffee.

Just then
a loud whistle
and a demon shouts
alright, coffee break's over
back on your heads!

D.
We bounce
and giggle
in the carriage.

It stops
at an angle
the horses complaining
we must walk
the remaining
100 yards
up to Government House.

It is hot and the overgrowth
stifles any hope
of a breeze.

Mother and I stop and rest
several times
our dresses filthy
and our shoes black with dirt.

The house
is dark
the roof leaks
the walls are damp
windows do not open
the drain stinks of rotting flesh.

The privy is a hole set off from
the larder by means of a curtain.

B.
Escorted through
the heat
and stench
shopping with the girls
I witness
several instances of public drunkenness
2 brawls
solicitous acts

and men
openly
relieving themselves
against
walls and carriage wheels.

Our eldest is just coming into womanhood.

I must remember the smell
of the freshly mown grass
at the cemetery in Hornsea.

On my husband's behalf I write
to the colonial secretary
complaining of the meager wage
and housekeeping stipend
awarded a temporary Governor.

Why is it half what a Governor receives
when the duties
social and professional
are the same?

A.
The council hears news
of bloody feathers
disemboweled goats
and late night gatherings

dark affronts to the established church.

We pray for their souls.

I am notified by post
a letter
from the Colonial Secretary
24 April, 1864
he is
I am
appointed
Governor-in-Chief of Jamaica

with the commensurate increase in salary
effective immediately.

My eyes are failing
I read the letter several times.

D.
It is very hot
humid
and still

I cannot tell you
I cannot tell anybody
how it makes the body smell

I wash and wash
still the damp smells rise
from my skirts.

Standing before this pane
of mirrored glass
I'm looking back
but
it is not me
merely an image
of my face
my head.

This mirror
is useless.

Useless useless useless.

I am ugly

my daughters
are beautiful
but they do not know beauty
and I cannot teach them.

All that I am

all that I know
stranded
inside this head
looking out.

Everybody
is here

all of us stranded
inside looking out.

C.
He grabs me around the waist
yelling
fire murder
fire
murder

I will put them back.
let me go and I will
put them back.

A, B, D.
No Madam, I can not do that.

C.
2 months hard labour
for stealing 2 bundles of cane
valued at one shilling.

A.
Gunshots
it is dark
I smell smoke

my wife and daughters are sleeping

down the hill
the court house is burning.

B.
Beatings from the mullato militia
digging weeds
out of a black earth
for a white man

my skirt
and blouse
are in tatters
exposing me
to jeers and cold.

My mother
before she dies
tells me of the crossing

shackled to 12 other girls
covered in darkness
covered in flies
rats and shit
rocking across the sea.

2 months hard labour
for stealing 2 bundles of cane
valued at one shilling.

The court house is burning
we are dancing
drunk
tired
hungry.

C.
He suspends the constitution

and declares martial law

arms are distributed

black masses
people
fill the square

every white male
and landed mulatto
receives 2 rifles and 100 cartridges.

Fires sweep over the hills
across farms
livestock stampede

a horse harnessed
to a burning livery
runs through town

A child
shot in the eye
stands
round mouthed
silent
one hand cupped
to her face holding her mind in.

Courts are convened

men
armed with clubs
knives
guns
shovels
bloodied
fearful
feared
roam the towns
and countryside

killing looting raping

chasing
chased by
an armed militia
sworn to serve
and protect

People are shot on sight

on suspicion

hung from trees
gibbets
windows
by ropes
vines and
bed sheets

eyes bulging
naked
his body shakes
dying
he gets
an erection

scores settled
businesses
buildings
estates
whole plantations

plundered
burned

pinned to the ground
legs spread
slit
her throat is slit

naked
flayed
set alight clubbed
and shot

screaming
men women children

silenced

their bodies
stacked neatly
in rows.

PAUSE

A. B. C. D.
we are
sitting
by the fire
with
this light to see
with
this light for warmth.

The pane
of
glass
keeps the wind away.

I'm not
locked in here
with you
you're locked
in here
with me

my brother/sister
my twin.

This did happen
this happens
again
and again.
and again.

We are warm

with
this light.

This light
is for us.

5 steps looking at the ground
5 steps looking at the horizon

coffee break's over
back on your heads.