

A broth of gems; the sky without mother

Some thoughts about the way Hal Porter makes the reader complicit in what happens inside the writer's mind.

In an earlier essay I quoted the unforgettable passage in *The Watcher* where Porter's mother shows her son the night sky:

When I am three and four and five and six Mother points out the constellations to me: Orion, The Whale, The Hare, The Scorpion, The Cup, The Southern Cross. I look up and up, so earnestly and for so long, at her finger stirring the broth of gems, that I become dazzled and giddy enough to conceive myself staring downwards into bottomless beauty. I know by name the stars and planets she knows by name, and have since learned no more than what she teaches me when I am a child.

I say 'her son'; I should have said 'her eldest'.

Not once do I catch her at the same exquisite exercise with the others: perhaps an eldest son exhausts a mother's fire, burns out the last of her virginal flames with the more outrageous flames of the newer, untried masculinity that supplements and at the same time destroys the father's older, tried-out and chewed-over masculinity.

A line or two later the same eldest is observing his sister's practice at the piano – 'its keys no longer sacred under a strip of camphor-scented flannelette' – and then the trickling away

of time: his tenth year is slipping, moment by moment, into the past.

Porter's skill when dealing with the past is something already treated in these essays; this time, I want to look at the ways and means he employs to move a narrative forward. To keep the discussion manageable I shall restrict myself to four stories, and in the first of them, 'Mr Jefferson's Tune', we are again scouring the past, but in a way that only Porter could manage, I think. He realises that he is humming a certain tune, now and then, and he remembers where he got it from, and whom, and when, over half a century before. It was from Mr Jefferson, a storekeeper, on a morning when his mother – Mother – sends him to the shop with a list. Porter's writing is full of lists; this is one of the simplest.

- 1 Tin Treacle
- 2 Lbs Brown Sugar
- 1 Cake Sand Soap
- 1 Bottle Malt Vinegar
- 2 Ozs Turmeric
- 1 Bar Glycerine Soap

It's quite a walk to Mr Jefferson's shop, so there are houses to pass, and think about, as he walks. But before he sets off, he observes – or rather, the sixty year old who's writing the story observes – that everyone in the story but the six year old – now sixty – is dead. Nothing survives of that trip to the shop except the

tune that Porter, alone of those who were alive on that day, heard Mr Jefferson humming.

Humming it, more than half a century after, remembering it all, everything, I ... well, I smile although everything's gone, all of it's gone. From this the heart must not shy back.

All gone: elms, elegant weeds, footpath dandelions of 1917, windfall Gravensteins, meerschaum with tiny perplexed Tibetan face, white dahlia and crimson, Lizzie Vidler fuchsia, that season's tarry-carmine and lime-yellow roses assassinated by Mother.

All dead: blackbirds that mined the windfalls; voluptuous and enigmatic blue-eyed cat; lovelorn ginger dog ...

Hal's list goes on, doing what his whole story does, that is, restoring to life, momentarily, things that were alive when he went for his walk in 1917, at the age of six. Two things only have survived: Hal Porter, and a certain tune. I leap forward now, to the end of the story.

I do not remember the going home, but do remember that the basket is heavier, oh much, and so much that I must trudge like an elderly man, with the turmeric, and the treacle, the scented soap and the harsh, the musky grapes and the acrid vinegar ... and Mr Jefferson's tune.

Leave me there wondering, now at sixty, what I do not wonder then, at six.

Where had Mr Jefferson's mind flown to on the vibrations of his humming that day over half a century ago? Had it flown seventy years farther back? Eighty? Was he remembering a tune he'd learnt as a boy? A tune picked up from a

drunkard's fiddle at a public hanging? A barrel-organ in a whaler's tavern? A harpsichord in a pioneer parlour roofed with thatch? A whistling in the dark by his grandfather?

How old is the nameless tune old men take in as little boys, and haphazardly hand on to little boys who will become old men, and ...?

Hal's discovery is as complete as it's ever going to be, so his statement ends. If we now pick our way back through the story, through his walk from home to shop, we can watch him spreading prodigally all the detail his memory revives of Miss Grant-Smythe, of the town spread around him, of Mrs Carter and the area known as The Common, of Mrs McKay and her daughter Miss McKay who cuts two bunches of grapes for the boy to take home after he's been to the shop ... all these things and people have resurrected, briefly, in the writer's mind because he is recalling a tune, a tune, a tune ...

... which you and I, dear reader, will never hear, except through the reverberations it produces in Porter's mind. Suddenly the man's method in his writing comes a little clearer. His narratives are usually very simple, but heavily, almost infinitely decorated. The decoration is sometimes the elaboration of his thoughts, but more commonly is performed, for Hal is always an actor, via a list of things produced by, or surrounding, his subject. For an explanation of this, let us turn to another story, 'The Sale' (it's in the same collection, *Fredo Fuss Love Life*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1974). It deals with the auction of a deceased estate, so, inevitably, there's any amount of stuff laid out for inspection,

leading the narrator to say, 'I'm very interested in what people buy, surround themselves with, cherish, hang on to, in what they leave behind: Virgin Marys and Mary Gregorys, ploughshares and ju-jus, their blood-rusted dirks, their scent-phials and thumb-screws, gramophones and water-colours. What outlasts people, that's what people are.'

Let me repeat that. 'What outlasts people, that's what people are.' Can this be true?

Yes, no, depending on how you look at it ...

If there's truth in it, at least a little bit, how does it work? What do those objects tell us that the living person's presence couldn't provide?

Did Mr Jefferson leave anything behind more eloquent than his tune?

There are people who think that a smell, a scent, a fragrance, can evoke a person or a period, an event long forgotten, better than any other clue. I am not one of these, having a poor sense of smell and a much better ear. Hence the evocative power of music is, for me, far greater than the associative power of smells and scents and fragrances. You may be otherwise. It's noticeable that Hal's story makes no attempt to characterise, let alone notate musically, the tune that gives the story its life. No, the tune is rather like the auction in 'The Sale'; it takes its life from what it brings to mind. Thus, the ladies whose houses are passed by the young boy on his way to the store, shopping list in hand, and the things in those houses, and the customs, the assurances and deceptions which maintain the various appearances of those houses, they too are

dependent, for their resurrection in a story published decades later, on something bringing them back to life, something that will provoke a sixty year old man to remember what a six year old boy had forgotten, namely a tune. But the tune changes immediately it's remembered because, not only can it bring things back to life, it has had a life of its own. May there not be other Mr Jeffersons, in other parts of the world, evoking other times and places when they, many decades earlier, first had the tune put in their minds?

So the things in the list – all the things in the world – have an illusion of solidity, but they will last only as long as there is a human mind capable of interpreting them, remembering and needing them, and when that mental connection is lost, the things – all the things – are finally dead.

I move now to a story from many years earlier: 'At Aunt Sophia's', written in the Strzelecki Ranges in 1938, shown to the world in the privately published *Short Stories* of 1942, included in *Coast to Coast* in 1943, published in *The Bulletin* in 1961. All this we learn at the end of the story; indeed each story in the collection has something of its history attached at the end. The collection is called *A Bachelor's Children* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962), an unusually frank title; one can hardly imagine a contemporary publisher allowing it. Things are managed less personally these days. The book has an Author's Note making it clear that the purposes of writers and publishers overlap, or agree, only infrequently.

... it is as pointless to fatigue an unsuitable editor with a story as an editor with an unsuitable story. Who wants an attic of rejection slips? Unseasonable manuscripts were

therefore hoarded until the climate changed: even editors are transplanted, die like common mortals, see the Light, or mature to condoning a literary manner one has years ago relievedly abandoned or reluctantly lost. One can then profitably pillage one's garnered youth as, later, one will the cache of middle age. To a writer this sort of patience is as useful as plot, punctuation, publisher and public.

'At Aunt Sophia's' might be said to pillage Porter's youth, but that would be to do it less than justice. Porter is forming himself as a writer in this story, even as he shows the pain of realising – at last, and after a day loaded with suggestions, and hints – that his childhood is behind him, out of reach, out of sight, though not of memory, and another life, far more complex and demanding, is upon him.

It's all very simple. He's in Melbourne, he makes a train journey to Gippsland, and Aunt Sophia meets him at the station, as she's done since he was seven. He's now fourteen and there, dear reader, is the change that's to be revealed to us, as Porter reveals it to himself. Aunt Sophia meets him at the station.

... Gregory sways on the carriage step, unable to move until Aunt Sophia sees him, until her cheek twitches – pricked by an invisible insect. She sees him. It twitches. He moves.

For the seventh time it's his duty to kiss his aunt.

He blushes. Cruelly it cannot be hidden that this is the first of all the years he must bend *down* to Aunt Sophia, the first of all the years she does not take one of his portmanteaux, first of all the years he is fourteen. A scalding mercury rises in the almost interminable cylinder of his throat to congeal at

his celluloid collar; his body becomes grotesque and unoled; the day turns its face aside.

They get in her buggy, and drive out of town.

Upright, her black-gloved hands much too small to control the masculine mare she easily controls, she asks the same questions she has always asked, the same questions in the same voice. He gives, as always, visit after visit, the same answers. They are certainly the same but seem not to be. His extra knowledge gives unintended intonations; obscenities miscolour respectable words.

Change is in the narrator, but he hasn't realised. He senses, however, that the world has changed and this tells him that his position in relation to familiar things has been altered in a way he's yet to discover. The story only spans a few hours.

Aunt Sophia appears above him at his upstairs bedroom window. She is going to call out, "Greggy, come back this minute and change your good clothes. Put on your galatea suit. Greggy!" while she gesticulates like a beetle and he, light and cheeky, laughing, runs away to the hay-loft ...

But she doesn't.

He watches her lips separate, and is horrified at the quiet of her voice: "Are you going to change, Gregory?" In a moment he will cry; a contortion, smile of an impure orchid, mutilates his face ...

He crosses the road to the cemetery. He talks, as in earlier years, to the grave-digger. 'You're a big younker now. A flash

townie, eh? Fifteen? Sixteen? You know what it's all about, yuss! Tell ya something.'

The grave-digger tells him about a man whose wife died, and turned to his daughters, both of whom bore him a child. 'When the babies came, he fed them to the pigs.' Aunt Sophia had become aware of what was going on, and had gone to the man, one 'Fairweather', to remonstrate. She'd been ordered off the property, she'd gone to the police ...

Gregory calculates: this was four years ago, one, two, three, four visits ago. The present might be quaking but even the past is not what it seemed – but he was innocent then, and now is something uncertain, undefined, unsure. Greg returns to Aunt Sophia's and meets up with 'Young' Alec; how young or old Alec is we're never told, but he's old or young enough to have postcards in his pocket. "'See here, Greg". He produces his hand from within his breast and, grinning, holds something out into the twilight: 'What d'ya think of those?'" The postcards are French (!) and show a buck nigger and three women. Gregory wants to say, 'You're a dirty pig and I'll tell Aunt Sophia', but instead he says, 'Any - any more?'

After tea, Aunt Sophia offers him, for his amusement, the stereoscopic views of France, of stone monsters and cathedral saints, galleries with parquet floors and looking glass walls which he has asked to see, often enough, in the past, and which, now that he has them in his hands, he no longer wants to see. Porter is controlling his narrative with an edgy skill. Edgy because he wants to offer every nuance of fleeting, and perhaps unexpected, apprehension and comprehension by the reader, and by himself.

He is not so much narrating a story as leading the reader on a journey of discovery, and the reader is following, not only the writer, but also his character, Greg, aged fourteen, who doesn't know where this venture will end.

Gregory tells Aunt Sophia that he's tired and wants to go to bed. He goes to bed, he lies thinking: what has gone wrong, not only with the day, but with people he always trusted, and most of all, what has gone wrong with himself? There is a knock at the door.

"May I come in, Gregory?" It is Aunt Sophia. This has never happened before; for him no one has ever before knocked on a door.

It is Aunt Sophia, the same but not the same. He recalls what his mother has said about his aunt. Beautiful as a girl, now a hopeless old maid. 'She stands, tiny and dried, in her grey wrapper. She does not advance to kiss him. He knows that she will not, but cannot think why.'

Oh, kiss me, Aunt Sophia, kiss me and say, as you always have ...

It's the same message tonight, but differently delivered. There's an 'evening bowl' in the cupboard. And he's not to forget his prayers ... then she's gone.

Suddenly, like the meeting and marrying of many drops of rain, many tears, sliding sideways along a wire, all things of the day gather together in one full and blinding drop, one overwhelming drop, conclusion to the problem. He violently puffs away the minaret of candle-flame.

The realisation he's been resisting all day is with him at last. He is no longer a little boy.

That is sold, used up, over. The tears that burn from his eyes are for a child who wails for a blue world, and the taste of the tears is different, and the beating of his heart is different, and the agony that poisons his tears and inspires his heart is unique, will never be suffered again, never.

In 1938, in the Strzelecki Ranges, he sought inside himself to find this pain, its causes and the effects of its definition on him. In 1961, Bulletin editor Ronald McCuaig accepted the story. Is it a story? Hardly. It's an inner search, shared with a reader who has to work almost as hard as the writer. The reader is consubstantial with the writer, the two of them joined in something not easy for either, perhaps very painful for both. Hal was right, in the passage I quoted earlier, about editors and magazines. Few editors and few magazines would want 'At Aunt Sophia's'. It's demanding. It asks the reader to be as meticulous in his/her examination of its words as the writer was in putting them down. If, as I keep saying, Porter is an actor in his prose, he demands that his every gesture be noticed and understood. I confess that as a young man I found him hard to understand; that is, I could see that there was a right way to read his stories, but what this way was I had no idea. Nothing in my temperament, my approach, had prepared me for these demands. Nothing in my education had prepared me for anything so acutely personal. I think, if I search my then-self a little more closely, that I felt it indecent to make such demands. Success, even in writing, could surely be achieved by talking in the way of those around one. Why did, why should, a writer need

to forge, to craft, to manufacture, something like this style, the likes of which had never been seen before?

Books and stories had been written well enough before Hal Porter's books and stories!

Slowly I came to accept that Porter's stories had to be read as an acceptance of the man. Not of a political point of view, for he hardly had one, but of a man made finally, made very near to unchangeable, many years before I met him, and read him. You couldn't, as I said in an earlier essay, pick and choose from his virtues and/or shortcomings. There was no avoiding acceptance of the man in his totality. He really was an all or nothing writer.

Let's now go to 'Uncle Foss and Big Bogga', written in Bairnsdale in 1958, prizewinner, Sydney Journalists' Club Literary Competition 1958, published in The Bulletin 1958. Two stories, really, about two men linked only by the fact that each of them cried for a woman lost to him, using almost the same words to accompany their tears. Two stories, two men, linked by the two ears and the one receptive, thoughtful, responsively analytical mind of a unique writer.

'Uncle Foss and Big Bogga': here's how the story opens, with the two men of the title put side by side.

As I grow older I am increasingly fascinated by the interlocking circles which link past with present, a remoter past to a less remote. One has constantly to revalue the quality of appearances, to give a testimony at seven thirty-two one considered grotesque at half-past seven.

Uncle Foss (Foster was his full Christian name) and Big Bogga (his correct name escapes me) – who could ever have

foretold that in the opera of loneliness of which the music is, world over, the same but the libretti infinitely varying, these two so unlike should sing the same words to an aria?

Porter indicates which man he'll deal with first.

Uncle Foss was the perfect country boy's uncle.

The description that follows starts with a photograph. It already outlasts the man it captures. And after that:

When I first remember him he was a widower, childless, his nose bashed in some hot brawl or brawls, his moustache ravaged; his body which might well have sprawled on a Michael Angelo ceiling bore the scorpion stitchings of many a bushman's gash from bowie knife, gun, barbed wire, axe, fish-hook and bicycle spill. He shambled, tall and powerful, across my childhood and those childhoods of my brothers and boy cousins.

We notice once again Hal's love of lists, of embroidery, of detail so minutely considered that he refuses to omit; here's Uncle Foss again.

... he greeted us with gorilla blarings, towering in the heat, for it always seemed hot eleven-in-the-morning then ... We were scallawags, snorters, young Turks, sonny Jims, laddies; we were you B young Bs. We worshipped him.

Men of this sort are acutely aware of the gap between men and women.

I still laugh with middle-aged cousins at the grilling afternoon on the Ninety Mile Beach near The Honeysuckles where naked Uncle Foss and eight frog-naked boys, salmon-fishing,

were surprised by women in floppy hats tramping over the dunes. Baying blasphemously, hands in the posture of classic modesty, Uncle Foss, with lolloping buttocks, cantered into the ocean, we boys, imitating modesty, with him. From the tumultuous soapsuds we glared, Triton and retinue, until the chirruping women scurried off like Touaregs through the kikuyu.

The key word in that passage is 'soapsuds'. The mighty ocean's made ridiculous! It's hard to imagine anything withstanding the wit, both raucous and scalpel-sharp, of Porter's prose. A much-admired man and the boys who follow him around – Triton and retinue! And the women? They chirrup and they scurry but they're made absurd by the comparison with the Touaregs. Why is this absurd? I think it's the extremity of the comparison, drawn from half a world away, the very something least expected. It's a simile that's working in two directions. Few Australians have much idea of what Touaregs are like! Few Touaregs ... et cetera. Those being compared and those they're compared with would not recognise each other in themselves, therefore the simile Porter uses is a laugh against both. Only the reader's unscathed while the writer dips his pen in the ink for what's to follow.

Hal wrote longhand, with a fountain pen, and, in his own words, 'The words arrive at just the speed with which I can write them down.' I find myself wondering how many years it took him to achieve this happy congruence of thought and method, or, to put it another way, did he have to train himself, or did what he seek simply arrive once his brain, like an obedient dog, had learned the needs of its petulant master? Most writers, I think,

have their preferred methods, habits, times of day and favourite chairs, the rituals that precede the moment when they know they must produce. These aspects of a writer's habits are often amusing; more significant is the way their sentences form, the thoughts arranging themselves in paragraphs and sequences of paragraphs, page after page. Writing, or perhaps I should say the practices of writing, produce habits, and a writer needs these habits because being able to rely on them releases the writer's mind to go in search of further thoughts.

Hal, by the time he wrote 'Uncle Foss and Big Bogga', had his practices developed. He describes himself being invited to the home of a fellow teacher 'at a fashionable school in Adelaide'. There are two Boggas on the staff; the large one is called Tiny and the small one Big. Schoolboy wit, the narrator tells us. 'Big' Bogga takes the narrator home to sample his home brewed beer.

Admitted to the large house, I was immediately sure that he had altered nothing since his mother's death years ago. I sensed a behind-the-scenes bachelor messiness: egg-sulphuretted spoons, cups encrusted with dried sugar, frying pans of stale grease in which burnt sausage meat paraphrased the Bay of Islands. Apparently a fortnightly cow-lick was all a slummocky char could manage; the drawing room where we drank was scarcely Miss Haversham's but had the same transfixed air of having stopped when the Vulliamy clock had, years ago.

Porter's choice of words carries his attitude to what he sees: observe 'paraphrased', 'fortnightly cow-lick', and 'slummocky

char'. The occasional broom-wielder is not a cleaner, but a char. The sound of the word suggests dirt.

The evening unravelled, a ball of grubby wool, as we sampled various brews. They, at least, were fresh.

'The evening unravelled, a ball of grubby wool ...' How much is he telling us about the evening, Big Bogga, and himself! He's there, inside his own narrative, his discomfort made apparent in the words he chooses and the placement of them so that their intonation's expressed in a way we can't avoid. The sentences are not so much a controlled release of words as a writhing performance of them, commanding us to react. What else to do? We can't have any more sympathy for Big Bogga than the narrator has, and that's strictly limited.

It was late. I had no watch. The Vulliamy had stopped at twenty-five past three ... day? night? ... long before the war. Nevertheless I felt midnight, the page of day about to falter over.

"Music," he said. "Do you like music?"

Good God, I thought, at this hour, no, but "Yes," I said.

"Truly?" He got smaller and anxious.

"Oh, yes," I said, almost gushingly.

I have already referred to a writer's training of himself; I think we can see it in the lines above, where the writer forces the person containing him to lie because the writer senses that some revelation's to come. It does. Big (because he isn't) Bogga gets his violin, or rather his mother's violin.

"The mater's," he said. "Glorious instrument, flawless tone.

The mater played exquisitely. She taught me. I'll play her favourite piece."

Bogga plays. The narrator thinks it's awful. He prepares to give a false impression of his reaction, but Bogga's playing to a photo - in a mother-of-pearl frame - on the chimney-piece.

A woman - the mater? - postured soulfully under much artistically bundled-up hair. As though it were the Christ Child, she nursed a violin. Same violin?

Bogga, 'with one tear like a tiny snail-print on his cheek', says "Poor bloody old mater! Poor bloody old mater!" A couple of pages earlier we have been told about the house where Uncle Foss lives. Aunt Mary, his wife, has died, and his house, though 'scoured weekly by a char-cum-washerwoman' - not quite the same as Bogga's char - remains as Aunt Mary left it. The narrator remembers a night when

... the gasolier popping, boys lined up on the colonial sofa reading Chums or Chatterbox, Uncle Foss at his third bottle of beer, suddenly, full stop to some secret sentence of thought, announcing in the cricket-soothed and page-turning peace, "Poor bloody old Mary! Poor bloody old Mary!"

Foss and Bogga: the two men are different, the lists of what surrounds them not coinciding, yet in one respect, their expression of an outburst of grief, they are the same. I'm sure there would be any number of readers who would think this similarity, or coincidence, of no import at all, yet for Porter the similarity, the coincidence, is revealing. 'Two men', he says in summary, 'who would never meet stood side by side on the

circle of time - lonely Goliath Uncle Foss and lonely mnikin Big Bogga.' An 'interlocking circle' has linked past and present. It's more than an event being repeated, it's a sense of a thing brought about by something more than its obvious causes. It's as if, for a moment, Big Bogga *is* Uncle Foss, though neither is aware of each other's existence. It's only Porter's mind that knows about the two moments, so the perception, the realisation, is an event in Porter's mind. If there's a story, that is where it takes place. This is, I think, a common feature in Porter's narratives.

And so, to go back to where I began, with Porter the entranced eldest child staring into the stars his mother is pointing at, it's no accident that he's never learned the names of other stars. His original experience was of such intensity and importance that only another moment of equal luminosity could cause him to add to Mother's list. I think this means that what is today known as 'information' is something else in Porter's mind, but beyond that I cannot go.