

Kissing the Baby

*Mr Menzies wears his suit still buttoned as he leans over me.
His white temples and iconic arched eyebrows
below the wry smile are supported by a double chin.*

He has composed his face into its avuncular best for coo-
cooing. Though he wonders what he is doing here,
at 48 Surf Street Elwood, leaning over little
Felix Hayes in his wooden cot, in this modest weatherboard
near the notorious canal that floods annually mid storm and is surely
not so grand, nor fragrant. He smiles. Something should be
done about it
– *by a state's man, of course; not by a statesman* (he blinks at his joke).
Too trivial for a Queen's man, and so is kissing babies after all.
Still, it is a politician's lot, and necessary, after all, from time to time.
Mr Menzies takes a considerably handsome watch from one side
pocket
and dandles it upon a chain. The wide-eyed bub below him blows
out a spittle chain, blinks, and mirrors back his smile!
– as most babies, but not all voters do (he slyly notes)
and lowers the watch, carefully, into the cot,
and it swings there, the pendulum still swings.

Beautiful Strange Moment

We moved to Box Hill South in 1951.
In the street, trenches were full
of water and orange mud.
My best friend, Ronald Candy
from next door, showed me his new
gumboots. We ran together, in wet
grass beside my house
and our shoes shone.
One day, when I looked at some
weeds down by the fence,
all things were just the same,
and I saw this and gasped –
they were just like me –
because they *were*!
Every thing was here and new!
I was amazed, just to be!
I knew this with new gumboots on.
It was winter, and smoke drifted
from chimneys all down the street.



Old Wood Yard

Scent of timber in the sun, where summer skinks
bask or run under a tray of tailings, their squiggle
lives a living writing, leap from leaning uprights.
One, two . . . Weeds poke up through sawdust,
a floor of shavings, gold dust, pure timber pollen.
Three, four . . . your runners sink into your footprints.
Trackers follow! *Five, six . . .* past shelves sagging
with motley off-cuts. Feel the inch-long teeth
of a circular saw blade, still sharp at the tips.
It once spat chips, now rusted on to silence,
stuck fast, forever, in its gears and bench.

Seven eight . . .!

The kids down the road hide and seek me.
See them now, softly stealing –
just a blink of light from cicada years,
long humming up from sun-baked ground!
And you hide somewhere, timber motes
still drifting up from the freshness,
and you inhale the very grain of it,
crawling over racks of disarray, where buttery
stacks of pine and hardwood are
warping in their shaky racks. Climb way up,
to tottering pavilions full of bits of wood,
lopped ends, high tumbled rumpus,
with a single sneaky peep-hole in the galvo
roof. Watch one cloud, floating up upon itself
in silence. Don't move, don't make a sound,
don't breathe . . . *Nine, ten . . .* and you're caught!



Bully

Brian was the school bully, and he began to pick on me, but I don't know why. Every night on the way home from school, he pushed me over then hit me when I tried to get up. He said if I told he would hit more, much harder. What for I don't know. He just liked to hit kids. He always waited after school and caught me – it went on and on, I was bashed up for ages. Then had a plan. I would let him hit me easily, like a weakie. I had a stick behind my back and really quick said, "*Look! Here comes the teacher!*" and pointed behind. He looked, and as he turned back again I poked him in the face really hard with the sharp stick-end and it got him in the eye. He nearly went blind and wore a white patch tied around his face, but it got better. He said he fell. No one ever knew.



Push This Wall Back

Push this wall as far back as you can.
Now as the bricks fall down, trace
in their dusty trance what you have told yourself,
stories you remember, some of which actually happened.

The story you invent from memory says where you
come from, have been, are finally going.
It says why you! And why not. And how we all fit
into bigger memories, called history and culture.

Is civilisation too big a word for little worlds like us
to fill? Is the tiny 'I' excluded? How many voices
must chorus its successive waves before you find
your voice in that receding wave of voices? You hear
you everywhere, and see your face in the profile of an age.

No wonder there are gaps! If we could recall any
hour truthfully, it would take an hour to recall!
A day a day, a year of years to tell all
that detail, shining dust of tears, from the miles
of files, just like the real thing. God's memory perhaps
is like atoms buzzing on, a cosmos beaming
it all back again, out of the big black hole in which time
just disappears! How could we endure it?



A Kind of Mystery

*Unborn, not even embryo, are we somehow fated?
Round and round she goes, where she stops . . .*

Voices rise in Albury, 1944: Time for Bob's party!
"Up the forgotten people, backbones and bread-winners,
lifters and earners, decent and sober chaps,
competition and more petrol, no more rationing, dirty
Commies under every bed and leave those banks alone!"
Solid stuff and enough to win back power!

*At last, after all that nothing! Here I am in Elwood,
watching yellow ducks walk across a wall,
sucking hard at life. I must be born. We start again.*

Bob is back in '49, surfing waves of fear. Under the bed.
There's one! Huge flags over China ruffle time.
Mao's journey of a thousand leagues
leaves his massive footprint in cold blossoms. The East is red.
(The Soviets rising, huge in song, on *their* first Atom Bomb.)

But here I am again, making noises in a bassinette.

Menzies declines to sing along: 1950, he sends the Air Force to Malaya;
a drawl over jungle skies, vapour trails, then bivouac.
Australians wounded in Korea: 1200.
Killed in 'the forgotten war': 339.

*In my playpen in the yard, I am making friends with cats.
No such thing as history. No words, no time.
All just colour, movement, sun!*



Wealth rocks like froth; we want it all: a clockwork dream house, where work is automatic, the cocktail hour, ice from our new fridge and miracles of plastic – every flower is everlasting.

*I watch dust motes, afloat in sunlight,
run wet grass in my new gumboots
where flying saucers clang like saucepan lids.*

Vietnam splits along the faultlines. New puppets for Iran. Warsaw Pact and tit for tat. There's no détente, *Nyet!* when tanks clunk into Hungary. When Stalin dies, a collective sigh, heard round the world, still premature.

*More years of 'first times' as a dream leads
my pony by a flower, I learn I'm going to die then break my
nose under a toppling tricycle, and oh the pretty lights do spin.*

Did Menzies build department stores, or the whole world soar on the same upswing, post-war? History flows down time's stumbling grains, millions of unexceptional little lives, and those lives much richer, did not care. We surfed the wave. Our leaders toed the nose, with cash to splash and credit (squeezed much later!) *she-bob-she-bop life could be a dream!*

*Murray Simpson pooped his pants.
I look for the Easter Bunny.*

El Quijote de la Farola sits on a lamppost
in Havana, watching Caribbean carnival below:



Fidel! Fidel! A red mouse off Miami, soon to roar!

*There are insects in a jar
and my leather schoolbag bounces
on my back as I run and run downriver.
If you hold time up to light,
rainbows burst from every shell.*

New car, TV and radio, JFK rising on the dawn.
We shouted JO'K, the brightest sputnik stars *The Meteors*.

Fritz barks flat-out because his legs are small!

We saw the wars spread on TV,
electrons shot at homes. Still, everyone comfortable thank you
except Menzies on TV, who feared this new medium
would cheapen grave debate, replace oratory with spectacle.
Surely not! TV was our new world's body politic.

– Switch off.
– *Click!*



Put lippy on get a move on!
 it was just a skit, a take-off on that picture
 with thingumabob in it

A tizz a tizz a tizzy, she's always in a great big tizz
 do widdles, dear
Don't slam the fly-wire door!

roast chook and some spuds for tea . . .
 chuck them in the pot, dear
 had cocky rellies from the bush . . .
 I just bought some bread and savs
 take a sickie, no! I said, '*You'll come a gutser!*'

She said, '*He's a real no-hoper!*'
 Yep, stark in the nuddy!
Reffos and Balts next poor buggers
Dear Old Mr Bear!

don't skite . . . or whinge
 he mucks about with shovels in the shed
he's doggo in the sleepout
 . . . more gravy on your spuds?
Another cuppa dear? I love you."

Six O'clock Swill

Mr Menzies takes me by the hand, glancing at the clocks of Flinders Street Station. It's ten to six. He eyes the display of hats at the corner, picturing himself in dove-grey Akubra, but shakes his head. We cross, and stand outside the doors of *Young & Jacksons*, unseen by the working men who reel from every door to leave their pile of steaming sick retched into the gutter, spit and stagger, then barge a way back in, through blasts of beer fumes and drinkers pressing forward, elbow-tight, back to the bar. "Ahem, young man, this is not a pretty sight, yet salutary. Do you know that word?" (I nod.) Menzies melts straight through two big plate-glass doors, and I follow; his hand is cool in mine. Though we are invisible to it, the crowd falls back from us. "Just as well, or they might make a fuss, seeing their PM in this unseemly den." The reek of men in singlets and boots erupts. Summer air, sweet with nausea and foam. "The sweat of many backs built pyramids," he notes. Adrenalin awash with slops, at five minutes to the hour. Everything floats and erupts at once. The hubbub is immense, rising like the hands that ferry 'shouts' above a stale gloom, liquid gold drips down backs, from the jump back to knots of men with tongues like unrolling carpets, a sip or gulp to hit the back throat. And one more. And again. Big hands grab and spill with clunk and clutter at the glasses, shake in racks and dash them under handles filled in rows and rows, two minutes left and gulping down. Mr Menzies frowns. "This," he says, "is the very picture of insobriety. What is the answer? Encourage savings,

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or church leaders might exhort them, good influence of wives, a thin line between them and complete ruin – six o'clock! That is when the pubs shut." (I nod again.) "My boy, stay away from this. A whisky by your fireside, or lager on a hot day at the picnic races. But do not blight your life with intemperance." The crowd rocks. Suddenly, it's six o'clock. Then I tell him my idea. "Why not keep the pubs open, so they don't swill?" "Ah, sweet innocence of youth!" His indulgent smile. "If we did that, these chaps would drink all night. Drink, until they could not stand, or walk, or work. They would be paralytic." I tell Mr Menzies I don't know that word. "Ah, *stonkered!*"

