TOMORROW AND TOMORROW AND TOMORROW

M. BARNARD ELDERSHAW

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY
ANNE CHISHOLM

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The cover shows
Dorrit Black (Australian, 1891–1951)
Mirmande, c. 1928
Oil on canvas, 60.0×73.8cm.
Elder Bequest Fund, 1940
Collection–Art Gallery of South Australia

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Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.

—Macbeth.

I

The first light was welling up in the east. In the west a few stars were dying in the colourless sky. The waking sky was enormous and under it the sleeping earth was enormous too. It was a great platter with one edge tilted up into the light, so that the pattern of hills, dark under a gold dust bloom, was visible. The night had been warm and still, as early autumn nights sometimes are, and with a feeling of transience, of breaking ripeness, of doomed fertility, like a woman who does not show her age but whose beauty will crumble under the first grief or hardship. With the dawn, sheets of thin cold air were slipping over the earth, congealing the warmth into a delicate smoking mist. Knarf was glad to wrap his woollen cloak about him. Standing on the flat roof in the dawn he felt giddily tall and, after a night of intense effort, transparent with fatigue. Weariness was spread evenly through his body. He was supersensitively aware of himself, the tension of his skin nervously tightened by long concentration, the vulnerability of his temples, the frailty of his ribs caging his enlarged heart, the civilisation of his hands. . . . Flesh and imagination were blent and equally receptive. The cold air struck his hot forehead with a shock of excitement, he looked out over the wide sculptury of light, darkness, earth, with new wonder. For a few moments, turning so suddenly from work to idleness, everything had an exaggerated significance. When he drew his fingers along the balustrade, leaving in the thick moisture faint dark marks on its glimmering whiteness, that, too, seemed like a contact, sharply intimate, with the external world where the rising light was beginning to show trees dark and grass grey with that same dew.

Behind Knarf the lamp still burned in the pavilion and the dawn had already diminished and sickened its light. Only one wall, the west, was folded back. It was empty save for the low broad table with its piles of manuscript, a chair in the same pale unornamented wood, the tall lamp, and a couch where Knarf sometimes slept on a summer night with all the walls folded back, like—he told Ren, but his jest had fallen flat—an antique corpse under a canopy. There was no

colour except in the bindings of the books piled on the table and spilled on the floor. The frame of the pavilion stood up dark against the golden sky and within the frame the lamplight, at variance with the new daylight, was clotted and impotent. The vapours of a night of effort and struggle could not escape. The empty room was like a sloughed skin. Knarf had been born from it into this new day of which he was so keenly aware.

In this pause between darkness and light he was between two worlds, a reality between two ghosts, a moment of sharp individual consciousness in the drift of centuries. His imagination had been living so vehemently in the past that the present had become only half real. He was standing at a nexus of time. Four hundred years ago, a thousand years ago, dawn among these gentle hills would have seemed no different, to any living eye that had seen it, than it did to him. In a few minutes, so quickly was the light growing, the world of to-day would be back, incontrovertibly, in its place. But now, for a moment, the old world, the past, might lie under the shadows just as easily as the present. A thousand years ago the country had been covered with bush, a thick mat of it, unending, breaking into natural clearings, closing in again, a shaggy pelt existing for nothing but itself, unknown except to the wandering tribes of the First People, and they, measured against the world they lived in, were newcomers and sojourners. They lived in it according to its terms without changing it or penetrating it. The pattern of their lives wound, like a kabbalistic sign traced in water, through the bush. Their apparently free roaming had followed a set tide. Their food supply, since they did not intervene in nature save in the spearing of game, was bound upon the seasons. Within this cycle of nature was the human cycle, the pattern of contacts, the linking invisible trade routes, the crossing and recrossing of tribe with tribe, the circulation of thought and knowledge as natural and primitive as the circulation of the blood in the body. Within the human cycle was the mystic cycle, the linking of rites and places, of ceremonies that were symbols of symbols forgotten even in the beginning of time but that continued to draw men through old, remembered ways. He thought of the anonymous and indecipherable tracks of the First People which had lain so lightly on these hills. Far away, reduced by distance of time to outline, theirs was only another arrangement of the eternal pattern, of eating, communicating, and reaching out into the unknown. They were gone,

completely and utterly, nothing was left of them but a few rock drawings, a few spearheads in rosy quartz, some patterns incised in wood, the words of some songs, soft, melancholy, their meaning forever sealed. Their dust was in this dust, nothing more. In the north, where they had not perished but had been absorbed, their docile blood had mingled without trace and no overt memory of them remained.

Four hundred years ago this country was stripped bare. The delicately moulded hills were naked to the sun and wind and rain, their hoarded fertility broken into and flowing out of them. Knarf remembered the old barbaric name of the river—Murrumbidgee. It had not slipped quiet and full between canal-like banks, tame and sure, as it did today. It held the rich lands in a great gnarled claw, its red banks sculptured into canyons, carved, pillared, eroded, littered with the flotsam of old floods, an ancient tribal river that ruled like a god in these parts. The countryside had been called the Riverina, a gentle fruitful name, a propitiatory name perhaps, much better than Tenth Commune; Knarf would have liked to see the old name in use again. To divide up the earth into squares with a ruler was too arrogant. This earth was not like any other earth, it had its spirit still, even if old god Murrumbidgee was tamed and made to serve it. All that had happened was written in the dust, it didn't end and it wasn't lost, it was woven in.

The river had been a frontier. At the beginning of the dark ages, there had been a migration along and beyond it,—the people who would not make terms thrust out by the pressure from the coast. They had mustered their flocks, piled such goods as they could salvage on to their trucks, and with their families sought the interior. It was here, probably almost at this very spot, that their final decision had had to be made. The waterways had been secured so that they could no longer push along the comparative safety of the river frontages. From here they had struck west and north for the safety of the bad lands. When the trucks had foundered for want of petrol, which happened sooner or later, (nowadays whenever a farmer turned up a rusted shard of metal in the paddocks by the river, he'd claim it was from one of the abandoned trucks—they must have been pretty thick about here, like the detritus of a routed army) they had taken off the wheels, cut down the famous Murrumbidgee gums, the old-man trees, and made themselves rough drays to which they harnessed their horses

or their bullocks and they had gone on. No one pursued them, but their needs drove them further and further out. As they reached poorer country they needed more and more of it for their sheep. They could not stick together, they had to scatter. It was every man, or every family, for himself. The years of the migration were good, the country was in good heart and so were the men. They were the descendants of a peculiar people called the Pioneers and, only two or three generations earlier, their forbears had gone out into the wilderness, had come down here from the coast and the city, and, driving out the First People and cutting down the bush, had made a life for themselves. It had been hard and many had perished but others had prospered, grown wise, tough, and rich. They hadn't been afraid of the country and its irregular rhythms. The sons thought they could do it again, or rather they wouldn't believe that they couldn't. They were the great-grandsons, the grandsons, and even the sons of Pioneers, so close was the end to the beginning. History melted down the years between and these followers of a forlorn hope became one with their successful forbears, and were also called "The Pioneers." They left their foundered, mortgaged runs, where they had been feeling the long wars like a drought, and set off in a sort of cheerful desperation. If they lost a lot they got rid of a lot too. What had been done once they could do again—but this time it was different. There was not only no way back but there were no resources behind them. For a year or two it was not so bad, while the few things they had brought with them lasted and the seasons were good. Then the situation began to tell on them in earnest. At first they shore their sheep but there was no market for the wool. It decayed and stank and burned in bark sheds. A little of it they made shift to spin into yarn for their own use. Several risked a journey to a southern port with a drayload or two, but it proved too dangerous and unprofitable. They could dispose of the wool readily and secretly but there was little or nothing they could get in exchange. It was useless to keep the flocks save a few small ones to provide meat, yarn, leather, and tallow. They let them go, it was better than confiscation. The sheep wandered over the fenceless pastures. They lambed and wandered on. Their fleeces grew and blinded them, the burden of wool dragged them down till every morning there were some that could not rise and must starve where they lay. Summer and drought pressed hard on them. The waterholes dried up. The sheep died in hundreds and then thousands. Dumb and

helpless death was everywhere. The Pioneers had great difficulty in keeping alive the small flocks that were necessary to their own survival. Beside that the death of a myriad sheep meant nothing to them. Even on the coast where there was water and feed people starved and went in rags. One dry summer was enough for the sheep laden with wool.

The men were much harder to break. Others had come after them, a motley crowd of the dispossesseed, the angry, the frightened, the hungry, but they had had no staying power, they began to die like the sheep as soon as they had crossed the Murrumbidgee. But the Pioneers endured, long and incredibly. Like the First People, they learned to move from scanty resource to scanty resource, they valued nothing but water and food and perhaps the antique fetish, liberty, but that would not be a word they ever troubled to speak. It was something they could not help having and for which they had no use. They were as tough, as thin, and almost as black from the sun, as the First People had been, but, unlike the First People, they had no festivals, no corroborees, no old rites. They were scaled down to something below that. It is said that as a people they stopped breeding.

They could not or would not return and no effort was ever made to bring them back. Such people were useless for the building of a new world. A few may have straggled back, but very few. The great majority was lost. After twenty or even thirty years there would be a few survivors, madmen living in caves with their phantom dogs beside them, men gone native with the last of the tribes, gone crazy.

That wasn't the history you found in history books, it was local legend. Knarf believed it and Ord said it was true. He had known it for a long time but only this morning did it seem completely real. He was smitten, he supposed, with imaginative conviction. It was often like that. Knowledge lay dead in his brain, so much ready-made merchandise on its shelves, and then, often for no obvious reason, it quickened and became part of the small, living, and productive part of his mind. In the shadowy morning light he could trick himself into seeing the Pioneers moving down to the river in neutral coloured cavalcade, flocks of sheep travelling over the brown plain beyond in a haze of dust, tall, brown, laconic men in dusty clothes, their heterogeneous belongings piled on the makeshift vehicles already weathered to drabness, the slow flight into country without

cover. . . . There were people far out west, in the next commune, old or lonely or simple people, who in unguarded moments told stories of the Pioneers. Solitary travellers had seen camp fires in the bush. When they approached, the fire had been burning brightly with a skeleton sitting beside it, bushman fashion, on his heels. Their ghosts are thick round waterholes, and if you spend a night there you cannot sleep for the rattle of hobble chains and the stamping of horses that will have left no trace in the morning. The strange dog seen at twilight is no mortal dog but the mythical folkdog, the Kelpie, "too faithful to die," as they say. When cattle stampede in the night they say "It's the Pioneers." Sometimes, it is said, they pass through on a moonlight night, you hear the rustle of sheep's feet in the dust, the creak and clatter of riders, and even men's voices singing in an archaic dialect, and in the morning there will be broken fences and eaten out paddocks but not a mark in the dust of the road or a single dropping of dung. . . . But no one ever caught up with this legend, it had always happened farther on. It was like the Hosting of the Sidhe, Ord said, thrusting it farther back into the world that was his own province.

There must be a good deal of Pioneer blood about here still, Knarf thought. He'd often noticed, though it wasn't a thing anyone talked about, that the inlanders were taller, looser, leaner than the men on the coast, with less of the orient in their faces. Blood mixed slowly, even after all this time.

With his back to the east Knarf had been straining his eyes into the west. The light had grown imperceptibly. It collected on objects like dew. The river was already a broad silver band. At his feet there was still a well of darkness, a well full of sleep, but farther away the white houses of the square and along the bank of the river were visible. By concentration, sight could rescue the dark lines of trees and even pick out, across the river, the black and grey pattern of the irrigated orchards and gardens. As yet there was no colour, only assembling shapes. The river was quicksilver between dark banks.

In a few minutes now the past would be buried again under the present. The scene he knew so well and loved so deeply would cover and supersede the figment of his imagination which had had for the moment the intense overstrung reality of things that pass. He would see, not the shaggy olive green hills of the beginning, nor the bare hills of the twentieth century with their chromatic swing from the

new green of the rains through silvers and browns to the naked brown purple of the earth, stripped and compressed by drought; not the irregular wasteful pattern of land overdriven and under-used, but the lovely design of safe and steady fruitfulness. It was a bright picture, where there had never been a bright picture before. If a man of the First People had stood here he would have seen only a monotone, or perhaps no more than the mazing pattern of narrow leaves against the sky. To the Pioneer it would have been a variation in pale colours, country under threat, a threnody for the wind. And yet—it must have been lovely. It might even have had something the present lacked. Eyes that had known it would be homesick to-day. Man might turn away from surfeits to pine for hard and meagre fare. To think of the Pioneers as a people who had ravaged the country, left it denuded and helpless and then had gone out, irrationally and obstinately, to die with the country, to become in the last resort place-spirits, the half-evil genii of the soil, was a poet's conception. Life was lived as fully then as now, now as then. This, that looks so sleek, is only an approximation too.

The Australians, of whom the Pioneers were part, had been the second people. They had been so few, never more than eight or nine million in the whole continent. They had been a very strange people, full of contradictions, adaptable and obstinate. With courage and endurance they had pioneered the land, only to ruin it with greed and lack of forethought. They had drawn a hardy independence from the soil and had maintained it with pride and yet they had allowed themselves to be dispossessed by the most fantastic tyranny the world had ever known, money in the hands of the few, an unreal, an imaginary, system driving out reality. They had their hardbitten realism and yet they co-operated in the suicidal fiction of production for profit instead of for use. They thought of Australia as a land of plenty and yet they consented to starve among the plenty. They lost the reality of their land to the fantasy of the Banks. They looked always to Government for redress and assistance but they were always scornful of their governments and with a persistent lawless streak in them. They loved their country and exalted patriotism as if it were a virtue, and yet they gave a greater love to a little island in the North Sea that many of them had never seen. They were hard drinkers and yet had puritanical prejudices and made difficulties against the purchase of their drink. Inherent gamblers, they legislated

against gambling and then broke their own laws systematically and as a matter of course. Lovers of horseflesh, they had no feeling for the animals, sheep and cattle, by which they lived. They praised the country but lived in the cities, or they grumbled eternally of the land but would not leave it. There was no measuring their pride and yet they were unsure. They tried to live alone in the world when their whole civilisation was in the melting pot. They called the North the East and the Near North the Far East and it was to them an unknown place of mystery and menace. They were a fighting people —but not at home. They settled their differences at home by other means. The small people was prodigal of its armies; generation after generation, they swarmed out to fight and die in strange places and for strange causes. Tough, sardonic, humorous, they were romantics the like of which the world had never seen. Crusaders without a crusade, they fought for any cause that offered or for the simulacrum of a cause. They went to South Africa to fight against a people small and liberty loving as themselves. They fought in France and Flanders, Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia, for an imperial design from which they themselves sought to escape. Within a generation they were fighting throughout the world, for what they scarcely knew, for brave words and a coloured rag, for things that were only names being already lost. They fought with tenacity and élan, the bravest of the brave. Or was that the incurable romanticism of history? Knarf didn't think so, there were facts and figures to support it.

All that, and yet they weren't a belligerent people. It was as if there were two people, indistinguishable in peace time, the fighting tribe—the Anzacs, as they came to be called—and the others who didn't fight. At the first drawing of the sword the cleavage showed and apparently they accepted it. The armies were volunteer, both sections of the community joined together to refuse conscription. It was one of their gestures of freedom, the curious truncated liberty to which they held.

Knarf could think of the Australians as living in a perpetual high gale of unreason. Their whole life was stormy and perverse. They were city-dwellers and their cities were great vortices of energy that carried them nowhere. They strove enormously for the thing called profit. In competition men's efforts cancelled out, one against another; they could succeed only, one at the expense of another, but when competition merged into monopoly they were worse off, for as the forces

became more powerful they were more destructive. A terrible logic worked itself out. There were those who saw the end coming and cried their warnings, but helplessly. When a man is caught in a conveyor belt he is not saved by realising his danger.

Life went like a cart on square wheels. Their houses were choked with useless objects and meaningless ornament, their shops with wasteful luxuries. Yet men were hungry. There was always too much and too little, never enough. Nothing was secure, neither bread nor faith, and man's confidence in himself and in his fellows was at last ruined by the cajolery of the advertiser and the propagandist, for advertising and propaganda were spokes in the wheel whose hub and circumference were profit, the iron wheel that ground men into gold which cannot nourish. It was all mad and strange and wanton, it poisoned itself and had issue in violence and violence begot death. "The Australian Fairytale" Lunda had called his book, a story so fantastic and remote that it was difficult to think of these people as fully human. That was the trouble with historians. They dealt in curios. They wanted to surprise their readers and to flatter today. The queer things had happened but they weren't the whole, any more than the stone stripped of its rosy pulp and glowing skin is the fruit. It had been life in a different key, it had been transposed not lost.

The Australians coming after the First People, disinheriting rather than inheriting from them, had laid a different pattern on the earth, a free pattern, asymmetrical, never completed, because their life was so disrupted, complex, and unreasoning. They had brought in the rhythm of flocks and crops, but that had never quite formed because the seasons to which they were bound were irregular then as now; there must always have been a sort of counterpoint. The imported beasts and grains must have striven with the blind instinct of their life to fulfil each its immemorial cycle, only to be thwarted by the irregularity of the climate, the unstable incidence of the rains. The pattern had been pulled aside, crazed, until after centuries of effort an adjustment, not perfect, but adequate, had been reached. The life of the Australians themselves had been based in part on this new fertility pattern which they had brought and were holding to the land rather by their obstinacy than by their reason, and in part on their political and economic conceptions, a flow of opposites, wealth and poverty, freedom and slavery, till you had a design in cross

currents, in negations, in contradictions, that reflected itself, as it must, in the patterns traced by civilization on the earth itself. Knarf could see it from the watchtower of time—the clotting of life into cities, the irregular scattering of habitations over the country, the thousand and one reasons, apart from the main scientific reason—the only legitimate one, people would tell you—that were allowed to influence or even direct development, the haphazard network of the roads, the inequality of the dwellings, the movements of people and goods based on the fantasy of supply and demand. . . . After the simple incised pattern of the First People the Australians had left a sunken maze. Each people had reflected its own way of life in its design. The First People had lived scientifically, following a rational, adjusted, permanent design. The fragments of the handiwork and ornaments that survived were in the likeness of their lives, simple arrangements of lines and dots, naturalistic representations of animals, designs fed not by shallow conceptions of beauty but by deeper fountains of meaning. They were few or repeated. The Australians, having overthrown reason and ignored adjustment in the interests of their fantastic conceptions, begot a multiplicity of hybrid, uncoordinated patterns and left upon the earth itself a half-meaningless scrabble. Their movements had been turbid and without rhythm. There had been a constant flux through the country of men looking for work, the need constant, the opportunity fluctuating with times and seasons. Few, even of those who were "settled," could retain their place for long; economic forces levered them out, sent them circulating rootless through the country or gravitating towards the cities. Then would come a change of wind, a thing called Depression, and many of those who had been drawn into the cities would be driven out again, travelling the roads looking for bread, to die on the roads as the last of the Pioneers died in the deserts but unsentimentalised, unregarded. . . .

The Australians had brought a new sort of death to the continent, —not overt violence but the unregarded, unrecorded death of dumb men and beasts, bound luckless upon the machine. Death as the unplanned by-product, the leakage of the system,—animals caught by drought on overstocked pastures, men caught by depression in overproduced cities, a needless repeating pattern—the softfooted death with the look of accident was not accident, but a part of the relentless logic of a way of life: the loneliness of condoned death.

All this side by side with pride and courage and independence, unvisualised for what it was. Knarf shivered in the dawn. This was one of the moments when, his spirit worn thin, he was oppressed by all the suffering that there had been in the world, especially the pitiful unrecorded suffering of those who died without redress or drama. It was as if he saw it still, like a lava stain upon the hills he loved so much. We may be just as blind, he thought, and because blind, cruel—or because secretly cruel, blind. They weren't inferior to us in mind or heart.

They loved this place, Knarf thought, they were the first to love it for it wasn't possible to think of the First People formulating an emotion so explicit and detached. He caught a glimpse of the landscape he could as yet hardly see, through the eyes of his imagination, as they must have seen it four centuries ago. He was brushed for a moment by that excitement of the spirit which was the secret manna of his gifts. These hills, these wide horizons, these aboriginal contours, unchanging and unchangeable, must have had an added lustre against the background of a more turbid world. We don't know peace, he thought, because we take it for granted. Life is not so fiercely indented as it used to be, more evenly spread, and so even our eyes cannot know the quality that this earth once had. It wasn't only the loveliness of peace, it was peace over against turmoil, it was refuge, it was home. If the sky was empty and the horizon unbroken, that was rest. These were not hills, they were the gentle breasts of the earth. Like a man suddenly realising that his retreat is cut off by the tide, Knarf thought "I belong as much with them as with today, with the Australians as with my own generation of a people who have no name."

It was nearly seven years now since he had gone down with Ord to the Centre on the coast because of the excavations. Ord and all the other registered archaeologists had been invited to view some fragments dug out of the channel of the old underground railway. The official circular had described them with dry enthusiasm as "of unique interest, probably part of a memorial pavilion which, as the result of bombing from the air, was carried through the crust of earth on which it stood into the railway excavations beneath, and then being covered with debris was completely forgotten until rediscovered in the course of tunnelling for sewage works. The exhibits include a stone figure, seated, almost intact, fragments of other

figures possibly similar, portion of bas-relief and other exhibits which, although incomplete, are of the first importance." Because Knarf was in the constipated and dreary state of a writer temporarily deserted by his desire to write, Ord had said "Why don't you come too?" He had gone, more than anything else, in the perverse hope of pinning on Ord the responsibility for the tedium in which he was becalmed. To begin with, he had not been able to resist the pleasure that he always felt in the sea. From the first glimpse of it from the air, a dark blue band on the horizon, his heart had lifted, he had been stirred by the drama of its immensity and his sealed mind had become receptive again. The panorama of the coastline, the great procession of treeless headlands north and south, green, brown, bronze, dust, smoke, in diminishing tone, old and dogged; the scallops of apricot sand, the highlights of white surf, the voluminous blue of the ocean, the jewel-like harbour, the Centre so compact where once a great city had sprawled, invaded his brain like an intoxication of light. To walk upon the ground and perform the common routine had, in the hour after their arrival, been curiously unreal. His mind had been washed clear in that great draught of light.

As soon as they had eaten they went to the enclosure to view the relics. Knarf had first seen the colossus, that they now called the Brooding Anzac, as a dark shape against the sky. It had been raised upon a plinth, a sketched fragmentary reconstruction of the original pavilion. The construction of the figure, the curator of archæology pointed out, indicated that it was meant to be seen from below and it could not be justly estimated unless shown in a setting which at least sketched the original. It was possible to ascend to the platform on which the statue was set, should they wish to make a more detailed examination. Ord, who was in a vile temper, complained at once that headquarters took too much on itself; that the curator was an arrogant, insolent fellow who tried to score off all his colleagues by presenting them with a ready made arrangement on which he had the audacity to lecture them; that he took on his shoulders decisions which should be communal.

The colossus sat, looking straight before him, his stone arms resting on his stone knees, a soldier after battle, accoutred, his battle dress a rough swaddling on his tired limbs, an infantryman in a slouch hat, hard, lean, far-sighted, one who had covered great distances, a man worn down to bedrock, an immortal ghost in stone.

Knarf stood looking up at it, eliminating Ord's grumblings from his attention as something accustomed and meaningless. He was at once irrationally convinced that this stone figure had survived holocaust and time, not by chance, but because of some inherent quality in itself. The stone was charged with life. Just as its substance was harder and more enduring than the flesh of man whose likeness it held, so too the spirit that had been in him, dogged, enduring, obstinate, unfailing, was transmitted unchanged into stone. It endured because it embodied endurance. This was the thing itself, the surviving principle of man, grasped by the sculptor and set down in stone. As the stone preserved the life it copied, so the tension of the artist's imagination preserved the stone. This brooding, unheroic figure was immortal man. Knarf had one of those moments when his mind made what seemed to him a direct contact with reality, dead knowledge came to life in him, a world co-ordinated about this focal point. The thing that was illuminated in his mind was a truism, something that his mind had never doubted and his imagination had never before accepted. The men of the lost world, four centuries sunk in time, were as fully matured in their humanity as any man living, cut from the same living, continuous tree of life—only their circumstances had been different. Trapped in a failing world they had still had the strength and temerity to beget a new world, or there would have been no new world, no now.

There had been a frieze of these stone men, a wide-spaced hollow square. It guarded a shrine, an altar with the figure of a naked boy crucified upon a sword. The curator was working on that. He was making a marvellous job of it, piecing it together almost out of dust, you might say, with only an old fragmentary inscription that no one had been able to trace before to guide him. "He gave himself a good long start," Ord said bitterly. But Knarf could see the stone men up on their rampart, obstinate and brave, outfacing a world they could not save, defending the symbol of death and sacrifice, which was all they had to defend, against death and destruction. It moved him enormously—because, he warned himself with the residuum of his mind, I am a romantic which is the synonym for an untrustworthy person, one who is emotionally avaricious, as Ord would say. He hid everything that was in his mind from Ord.

Presently he followed Ord up the rough steps at the back of the plinth to the platform on which the statue stood, but proximity

blotted out the whole conception. He was aware only of the roughness of the stone and of a certain disproportion introduced to counteract the height. He could not understand how a sculptor could work in the close disillusion of proximity and yet achieve the compelling long-distance effect. The height, though it was not great, disturbed him and he came down to walk on the grass among the scattered blocks of stone, stooping now and again to see if his awakened imagination could force any secret from them, and letting the images that had assailed him seep into his mind.

When Ord came down again he was in a better temper. "That sculptor knew his stuff," he said, "the detail's pretty accurate."

Knarf flared. "Do you know more than a contemporary? That thing was done from life."

Ord gave him one of those quick glances which reminded him of a delicate and prehensile tentacle thrust out for an instant from beneath a horny shell.

"*You* said that, did you?"

"I can't see anything else? It's the work of a great artist."

"Nevertheless artists by their very nature are inaccurate. I'd sooner trust a trained archaeologist of any period."

"Meaning yourself?" said Knarf with childish rudeness.

"Exactly," Ord answered imperturbably.

Knarf came back later alone. The gatekeeper who remembered him made no demur although he was about to close for the night. The enclosure was empty. From the wooden shed where the curator still worked with his long patience, piecing together the dust, a powerful blue-white light sent its diamond rays into the dusk. Knarf stood for a long time among the elegiac debris, staring up at the Brooding Anzac. The figure grew larger against the fading sky, the outline more fluent. The thought of flesh imprisoned beneath stone shook Knarf's heart. Touching him on the shoulder the gatekeeper told him in a subdued tone that he must lock up now.

Knarf returned again and again in the next few days, sometimes with Ord, sometimes alone. Ord was very busy examining and measuring the piece. This seemed almost perversely profitless to Knarf. What was there to do with such a thing but to look at it? It had no secret, no mystery, except the imagination that had informed its making and that could not be captured by any foot rule or by anything else except another imagination of the same quality. Knarf

was developing some of the fetichism of a man in love. Between him and Ord there had developed a competition in vanities which masked the deep feeling to which one, if not both, was a prey. It was, in its very pettiness, a relief.

Ord was certainly at his worst. He had embarked with great gusto on a controversy as to the authorship of the Brooding Anzac with another archæologist, Lunda—a man, as he said privately, who had sold his honest trade of archaeologist to the arts by becoming also a writer. Ord, with a great display of pedantic learning, maintained that it was by a Dutchman named Hoff, who had been official sculptor or laureate and who had died sometime in the nineteen thirties in the narrow gulf between two great wars. "One of the fortunate," Ord said, coming, surprisingly, out of character and as quickly retiring into it. Lunda contended, with a more showy virtuosity, that it was by Raynor, an Englishman, famous for his bas-reliefs, the head of a famous academy. He lived on far into the troubled century, forsook his art for public affairs, became a guerrilla leader in the Blue Mountains, and there came to an unrecorded end. One man, thought Knarf, who became the thing he imagined. He didn't believe that either of them had sound evidence, this was just a game they played, building such patterns as they could conceive out of the fragments of evidence that they had. History is a creative art, a putty nose. You can make what you like of it. Event, immediately it is past, becomes a changing simulacrum at the mercy of all the minds through which it must seep if it is to live, memory passed from hand to hand, coloured with prejudice, embroidered with fantasy, flattened with pedantry, and finally served up in all seriousness as history. Ord made him think these things. It was impossible to be sure whether Ord believed his own thesis or whether he was perpetuating some sort of solemn joke, burlesquing the whole controversy, or whether he did believe it and mocked himself as well as his colleagues as a sort of insurance against being made a fool.

Knarf didn't know or care. He had seen with his own eyes history pegged down at one point. He had trodden in the footsteps of another man's imagination and it did not matter at all that there were four centuries of time between them. The impact had engendered that excitement in his mind which meant further creative effort. His unattached imagination had found its host. Slowly, in the years since, he had beaten that moment into shape and fashioned from it

something that was his own. The book that was just finished was not obviously related to its source and yet it was rooted there and the Brooding Anzac had been its touchstone. What had been begun in that moment was finished in this, as far as processes can finish. This book was like an island of reality in his life. The poetry that he had written as a young man, the dramatic work of his maturity, seemed to him now uninhabitable, like stiff garments upon cold limbs. He believed that his life would not accumulate enough energy for another major work. His writing had caught up with his living and had consumed all that the years had hoarded. The shock of finishing a book is almost as great as the shock of beginning it. He had been safe in it, uneasy but safe, and now he must go out again into objectless living and expose his newly stripped mind to the harsh light of a world he had not made. The book was finished and yet his mind was not discharged. It was as yet unshared. Today he would talk to Ord about it, they often had talked about it but never as a whole. Ord, who knew perhaps all that had been salvaged of the old Australia, had been his quarry. He, at least, had come, long ago, to take the work for granted and that was a help. Knarf must talk to someone, get this book that was still and finished into the world. A book is as implacable as an unborn child, a rising day, inevitable in its demands.

It was as if the light were coming not from the east only, but quickening in the earth itself, like a flush of blood beneath a transparent skin. The river was no longer like steel in the primitive darkness, it was silver-blue. The whole picture was developing under his gaze like a photograph in the acid bath. He could see everything as far as the horizon in an unearthly quiet clarity; first it was shape, the empty mould of form, and now the colour was flowing back into its accustomed channels. Following the horizon north to south as far as the eye could see, was a broad dark blue band, the rain reserve. Through the west there was one of these five-mile belts of trees in every hundred miles so that from the air the country had a wave pattern. From the river almost to the rain reserve stretched the irrigation garden. It was like a great sampler in the dark frame of its wind-break, corduroy of vines, groves of deciduous fruit-trees among which autumn had begun to burn, the bas-relief of vegetable gardens, threaded with blue where the water channels lay. Farther away, to the north, lay the fodder crops, a solid mass of intense

green. It was the focus of the whole scene, and yet it was a relief to look away, to comfort the eyes with the tranquil hills. They appeared empty but for the roads with their double line of trees and the clots of greenery that marked the presence of a house here and there. They were pasture land. The countryside was, of course, much more thickly settled than it had been, since the hundredfold improvement of the pasture, the larger flocks on smaller areas, and scientific culture generally had concentrated the population. The wool, with the better pastures, had deteriorated, it was said, but that was the sort of old man's tale that usually got about.

If we looked back at today instead of living in it, we would say it was the Golden Age, Knarf told himself pedantically. There has never before in the whole history of man been anything like this, peace and plenty. The river was once the last refuge from the desert. In the worst times the desert reached the river itself, running long red fingers into the good lands, its dusty breath carried blight for hundreds of miles. The river itself was half silted up, the excoriating dust ground the faces of the hills. Rabbits, driven by the desert into the cultivated lands, devoured everything before them. Men went out to massacre them because both could not survive in the denuded land. They killed and killed but hunger was stronger than fear in the creatures, and despair than will in men. For over a century the land had lain dead, virtually deserted, but towards the end of the twenty-second century, because it had been left alone, it began very slowly to rejuvenate itself. It had taken more than a hundred years of conscious effort of replanting, of vast engineering schemes that tapped the snows of the Alps and brought water into the dredged and deepened channels of the old rivers, to rehabilitate it completely. Knarf told himself the story, bricking in the hollow spaces of his mind with it. Would the desert ever come again, was the possibility of it still there, giving the brilliant scene its phantasmal quality? Had it the sharp-edged beauty of something threatened? Or was that only a suggestion of the restless imagination? Nothing is lost, nothing ends. I don't know that, I only feel it. Didn't the desert pass like a sponge over the land, wiping out all that had gone before? So that this is a new beginning? This place has never been standardised either because it is too new and cannot catch up to the older places—or because it cannot forget that it was once a frontier. Frontier people are different. A part of life has gone

underground here like the old rivers. We don't quite fit the world pattern, we accept the mould but we don't fit it.

The past isn't dead because it left so few material traces. It excites the imagination the more because there is so little evidence. It has gone back into the earth. The bark huts and the slab houses, the weatherboard and the mud walls have all gone back. The earth accepted them as it would never accept us. Our houses don't really belong. They come from the north, but where the northern houses were flimsy, of wood and paper, these are solid, of concrete and glass, but it's the same pattern essentially, with a hint or two brought back from Egypt by the Crusaders. No, the earth wouldn't receive us back so willingly and we're as much of the earth as of civilisation. We're a frontier people, all this doesn't fit us or we it.

That's heresy, Knarf thought suddenly. Of course we don't fit, nobody does. Men have to be held to good ways. Civilisation isn't natural. It's an art and a science. Left to nature this would be semi-desert, left to ourselves we would be semi-barbarians. To go our own way would be to go back. Engineering must help nature and laws must help man. Anything else is degeneracy.

The Centre, because his house was a part of it, did not come fully within Knarf's survey. It was small, one of the smallest, because there was no industry here, only the irrigation gardens to be tended and the few jobs there always were about a Centre. The workers' dormitories usually such a feature in any Centre, were only miniature. It was looked upon as a health camp because the work was easy and the dry air so good, and it was usual to send here young people who had some defect, or those who had overstudied or had recently suffered an illness. For this reason they were on the whole less high-spirited and played a smaller part in the communal life, than was usual. There was, of course, the school and the Service House, the clinics for man and beast, the library in its grove—how many hours had he spent there in a perfect daze of tranquillity, lifting his eyes from the printed page to stare between the columns and the tree trunks at the broken panorama of the river, to listen to the clock ticking like a pulse, to consider the shafts of sunlight thick as honey pouring through the bookish air from the high windows, till he sickened—the Pavilion where every citizen had the right to exhibit, for a period not longer than one week in any year, anything that he had made or grown, whether it was a flower, a cake, a picture, a

statue, or a toy. In some of the big Centres the Pavilion was a vortex of criticism and emulation, but here it was quiet enough. Few came to exhibit their work and because they were few they were embarrassed. Knarf thought he might take the manuscript of his book and lay it there for a week as a matter of principle. On the communal altar, he thought with a wry smile. No one would have the curiosity to turn its leaves, not even Ren. Least of all Ren. Something failed to ignite. The citizens of the Centre weren't interested in Making and the wisest provisions of the authorities could not force them to it. When he said that to Ord, he'd asked in his dry way "Aren't you the obvious person to breathe life into the Pavilion?" And then, with the way he had of ignoring his own remarks he had gone on to point out that the Pavilions were the last vestiges of the old Country Shows and that they had been hotbeds of competition and were themselves vestiges of much more ancient orgies. "Of corroborees, too?" Knarf had asked, accepting the red herring and responding to the interest old things always had for him. "No," Ord had grunted, "they were collaterals."

The face Knarf turned to the light was the face of an individualist. It had become, in a moment and for a moment only, bitter and brooding. His mind had returned from its wide half-feverish excursion through the ages to its narrowest base, himself. The sight of the Pavilion just now in his exalted state had uncovered an old distress in his mind. He could not bring down fire to his own altar. To his wife, to his son Ren, he was a dead man. He had standing but not here. His life did not mesh with the life of his community. Of all the people here most might be expected of him and he gave least. He was a prisoner in himself. If he cared only—as he sometimes thought he cared—about his work, he could not expect it to be otherwise. That he was so frequently now, in his forty-seventh year, a prey to desolation and doubt, did not matter to anyone. A man who by his work as a writer sought an audience found himself without an audience for his personal drama. It was as if he had given his power to his work and now was bereft. This form of depression descended upon him with peculiar violence whenever he finished a book. This last book had sustained him for a long time; now it was finished, his mind had rocketed into the blue only to fall back into emptiness, an emptiness that was worse for being familiar. In these moods he had tried going into one of the big

Centres but it had not helped him. If he attracted attention it irritated him, hampered his movements, gave him the sense of being a prize animal in a stall; if he avoided it he felt neglected and the velocity of life in the city left him utterly lonely. He would return but only to dullness and emptiness. He would be haunted by a vision of the country, by the belief that there was a ritual assuagement to be drawn from the earth. He would walk out into the hills, walk till he dropped and then lie unresisting in the grass, breathing its warm sappiness, feeling under him the beating of a heart greater than his own, waiting for peace to storm his nerves and possess him. But the moment never came. The ants bit him, the sun went down and he had to rise and make his way back, dog-tired.

The Centre now looked drugged with quiet, no one stirred although this was to be a most unusual day, a meeting of all citizens for a consensus of public opinion. Soon enough there would be plenty of bustle, even if it were only of the domestic order, and by eleven o'clock the first infiltration from the countryside would have begun. Ord would be here and, although he was exasperating sometimes, he was stimulating, his mind dry and sharp like herbs rubbed between the hands. Sardonic and combative, there was something comforting about him. They would talk about the book. Ord was the only person he could talk to about his writing. Ord infuriated him, drove him to defend and justify himself. Many an idea he'd beaten out in the heat of opposition. Ord had no leaks in his mind, none that Knarf had ever discovered. It was as strong, unsentimental, impersonal, as an anvil; as an anvil he would use it. It was flattery enough that he had his place in Ord's uncompromising world, for he wasn't a friendly man or liked, as little a respecter of prejudices as of persons. For that reason people were all the more ready to believe that he excelled in his subject. But for Ord the book would never have been written—without the long walks through the countryside, the unearthing of relics the more stimulating to the imagination because so naive, the circles of crumbling cement which Knarf had thought the last remnants of forts but which Ord said were silos or wheat reservoirs, the depressions in the grass that Ord told him were the traces of dams, a form of water storage so primitive that it suggested thirst rather than plenty, the just discernible trace of some homestead among the grass or close growing trees. It was Ord who had traced the course of the old railway, who had dragged

him fifty miles to the site of some once flourishing town and with immense erudition had located the important buildings, mostly banks and hotels. There was nothing to be found, no treasure, no museum pieces, no relics of cultural interest, only the blind hieroglyphic of a life long lived and effaced, scattered among the undulating hills and on the banks of the river. It was different in the great cities of the coast. There the light had never been extinguished, but here it had been rekindled. There was a hiatus, a snapping of the thread, so that our life had a beginning and theirs an ending. And it was here, in the least remunerative field, that the great scholar, Ord, the archaeologist, was happiest. The purest essence of his science was to revive these vestiges, and so he was content to live on the family holding ten miles out from the Centre and neither to bear any part in the work of the place nor to comply with the requirements of the Bureau of Statistics from which he drew his allowance. This worried them, but not him. He resisted all their persuasions to work on what they called "assignments of universal importance" and continued indefatigably with the compilation of his big book "Riverina in Australia," making of it an excuse for standing aloof from all the local interests, at once a claim and a refusal, a life work and an alibi. Knarf knew that under this pose of stubborn rationality there quickened a strong imagination, that Ord could not have held to his task without this secret nourishment of the spirit, yet that it was so hidden made their friendship easier. There was no competition and yet it was open to each to mask his strongest feelings under an assumption of hostility or even contempt.

Today would mean different things to many people, an excursion, a rare taste of political excitement, a break in routine, but to Knarf it meant that Ord would come and that they would talk about his book and that in the passion of conflict the book would come alive to him again, or so he hoped. He looked forward to it with eager trepidation. He wished he were not so tired. He weighed his reserves of strength and endurance against the day. Sometimes he got more out of himself when he was tired than when he was fresh; a night without sleep keyed him up when a good night relaxed his nerves and left him spiritually foundered in a featherbed of indifference. He had made today his sticking point. After years spent on the book he had suddenly, a couple of months ago, determined that it must be finished by today, that this was the final outpost of

endurance. If he allowed it to run on longer, after the peak of his effort was passed, it would spoil. Last night he had made the final effort to gather the whole into his imagination and synthesize it in a single flame, subjecting it once again to the melting fire of his imagination in a last effort to anneal its weakness. And today was important because he knew Ord would be forced to come into the Centre for this fantastic business of the vote, and, although he would have come at any time, grumbling perhaps, but never for a moment hesitating or delaying, the formal occasion made the whole affair easier and more natural. Secretly these subterfuges were important to Knarf. He made his way through life by a series of little concealed artifices, as a fugitive might cross this undulating country, taking advantage of every fold in the ground, every tree and bush — as doubtless fugitives had in the days of the melting pot. Knarf's mind was brushed with homesickness for a world in which overt or objective danger gave man peace from himself, the world of his book with its driving necessity, its heroic extremity. He had thought so long on it that he belonged there now, more than here where the *tabula rasa* of his life frightened him. Ord had hit on some kind of truth when he said, "You're writing your own autobiography, aren't you?" Now it was over, the book was closed against him and he was a man shut out. "I am shut out of mine own heart," one of their poets had written. Our thoughts, like our blood, root deep in the past. Knarf was none the less alone for that thought. The work of years had left him, he was alone, he was forty-seven years old and life had been too simple. There had not been enough pain and distress, not even enough event. His lot as a man was still unfulfilled. If it were not behind him then it must be before. His foot was on the brink of an unseen trap. Something will fill this vacuum in my heart, some folly or pain. I have done nothing but write. I have never even loved any one except Amila—and Ren. His son's name was a stone blocking the channel of his thought. A shaft of real pain shot through the vapour of his not altogether unpleasing melancholy. Through the boy he was vulnerable as he no longer was in his own person. Ren was involved in today's business, he didn't know how far or how deeply. Knarf reproached himself because he knew so little. He had taken no trouble to find out. Because he had been so wrapped up in his own work he had come to this day, which he suspected of being a crucial one for

Ren, quite unprepared. He must talk to Ren—but perhaps it was already too late. A relationship could not be built up in a conversation. The chances were that he could neither help nor understand at the eleventh hour. He knew very little of what Ren thought or felt, only suspected that he did both abundantly. On one of the few occasions when Lin's grudge against him had become articulate, she had accused him, with a bitterness that suggested that the idea had been working in her mind a long time, of keeping everything, all his thought and energy and emotion, for his books. She even seemed to think it was because of this that they had had no more children. He had grudged the giving of life and blind nature had recognised it. His fatherhood, as a spiritual relationship, had always seemed to him accidental and precarious. Nor was there much that was motherly in Lin, though always now her eyes went past him to Ren and he had seen a dumb greed in them that horrified him. Lin, in a way, had remained immature. Though she was over forty her youth had not left her, it had hardened, so that she was like a fruit turned woody. She was still waiting for heaven knew what improbable spring. She was disappointed, vaguely, envelopingly, and she blamed him for it. Opportunity, both before and after her marriage, had been as much open to her as to any one else, but she had not risked taking it. She had wanted her husband, home, and children to absorb her, and when it hadn't been like that she blamed Knarf for her inability to deal with her own life in her own way. The situation was chronic and insoluble. He had nothing to give. Even with the best will in the world he could never have given her what she wanted. He didn't know if Lin had ever loved him; if she had, she lacked the power to make that love a reality, a cogent force. He knew her so well and yet she had never come into the full focus of his mind. She was not quite as real as the characters his imagination had created.

Lin would not like today because the house would be full of his friends, people she did not understand and with whom she was painfully awkward. Awkwardness at her age was an ugly thing and she knew it. Above all she disliked Ord. But she would do her part by preparing them a good meal and supplying all their wants—only it would be without grace or kindliness. Her hostility never rose beyond a certain point. All through their married life it had been rising to this point just short of danger and falling ineffectually away

again. Today, too, she would resent and comply and both would be valueless. Knarf found that he had no idea what Ren thought of his mother, how much he loved her or how much she irked him. He might have been Amila's child for all he resembled Lin.

The rim of the sun was showing above the horizon like the edge of a golden coin. A few small clouds had collected like flecks of fire on the background of golden light. The day had rounded out, it was bright, fine, and still. Knarf turned slowly, sweeping the wide circle of the horizon with his eyes. Deep in his heart he saluted the day. He was alive. He was a creator and had completed his task. He stood alone and the miracle of light lifted his spirits. The myriad thoughts of the last half-hour had not so much passed through his mind as stood in it; all were of things with which he had long been familiar. They came to him as the scene slowly came out of darkness into light. They had evolved as the unborn child evolves and as, his imagination believed, the country before him had evolved from past to present in the changing light. In half an hour, following a natural process, his life had co-ordinated, with himself as pivot, the world of his imagination and the unresolved pattern of his life. He had laid three worlds one on top of the other, like three plates, and each was his. He had to steady himself with his hands upon the balustrade.

II

Ren came lightly up the stairs to the roof. When he saw his father leaning on the parapet he had an unexplored impulse to turn back. His bare feet had made no sound on the stone. It was simply his unwillingness to have his mood destroyed by contact with an immovable object. All people over forty were immovable objects, even when you were proud of them as he was, sometimes, of his father. Often his father made him feel flimsy, papery, and above all he didn't want to feel that today. He went and stood beside his father. Knarf didn't greet him but shifted into a more companionable attitude and smiled with his eyes at his son.

"It's going to be fine," Ren said. You could tell he felt proprietary towards the day.