

Man in the Alcove

St Kilda Word Prize 2010

Man in the alcove

1.

There's an old man I sometimes notice, who stands at night in the alcoves of buildings, playing the harmonica. I'd like to say he wears a suit and an old man's hat, but the truth is he wears a dusty plastic sports jacket, which doesn't suit him at all, and carries dandruff on his shoulders. He is small, kind of squashed looking and his face is almost perfectly round. He has the smile of knowing a secret that cannot really change anything. He stands in the shadows and plays, but he asks for nothing, not even money. At this time of night the street is full of drunks, even in winter. Once I went to drive away, but as I started the engine, one of them climbed up on the roof of the car and clung on, like a sea anemone. I have heard these drunks arguing with the man and laughing. I have seen him shout after them, a torrent of abuse, which was carried away on the wind before it could ever reach them. It was carried away and out to the dark sea where it meant nothing, where seagulls were still turning in the cold air, because they couldn't sleep. On nights like this, he plays on and on, as if he's fighting against something other than the drunks.

2.

There's an old man I see, dressed in a suit, who places his harmonica into a small suitcase at the end of the night. He's tiny, almost a midget and when he walks, he keeps his back very straight, as if he is trying to seem taller than he is. His nose and fingers are puffy and his grey hair is parted on one side, and beginning to stick up in unruly spikes where the slickness has worn off in the wind. He walks through the fun-fair on the edge of the sea, as if he is holding something fragile together. He doesn't put a foot wrong. He goes just to hear the screaming and the happiness. He would have liked to have had children once, but it's far too late now. In a week he will be 64 or 65. He smells the water and the

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sugar and the cold. The machines are driven by attendants in purple uniforms, who've been waiting for hours to go home. There are young couples, hugging one another, as if they might not be doing it right. No one seems to notice the man. He does not stop in front of the mirror that makes you taller. The mirror would not notice him either, and perhaps if he stopped there and looked for himself, he would disappear forever.

3.

There's an old man who stands at night in the alcoves of buildings. He is small and grey and red faced, thick featured with the way of a retired boxing trainer. He plays the harmonica. He accepts no reward. He is not a beggar. He is not even a busker. He plays Irish songs, union songs, jigs. Girls dance for a bit, drunken and sparkly on their way home and about two million invisible rainbow lorikeets screech in the palm tree above him, even at midnight. When he's finished, he places his instrument in a small suitcase and walks carefully to the tram, without swinging his arms very much. On board, he will stand, even if there are plenty of seats. He smooths his hair. I imagine him climbing the rotting stairs to his small apartment. He puts his suitcase down and finds the key. No one is around and he breathes out. Whoever is causing trouble tonight is doing it somewhere else. He enters his one room. The moon and the dust on things, the stuffy smell. The bad carpet, with the mark of an iron, like a cliché. A bare tree at the window in the gold streetlight. I imagine he sometimes imagines, going to the bathtub, turning on both taps then returning to the centre of the room to stand and wait with his arms by his sides. He would wait like that, for however long it took, perhaps many years, for the water to creep up over his chin, over his eyes and head and bury him.

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4.

There's an old man in St Kilda, who plays his harmonica in the empty doorways of buildings at night, when no one is watching. He does not let you throw your coins to him, and in fact, he once yelled at me and made me take my money back. "Do I look like a fucking wishing well to you?" I know that he is doing something very important, which I cannot see. Imagine for a minute, a great Swedish hot air balloon hanging precariously above the Arctic Ocean, sometime in 1896. Inside the basket is a square jawed adventurer whose idea this was, his nephew – an amateur astrologist, and a third man – a meteorologist unrelated by blood to either of the first two. They are losing altitude and it's dark. Below them a few stray ice ledges are floating in the black water, but nothing to land on, nothing that would bear their weight even if they could direct themselves to it. You could imagine the cold, but you'd be wrong. It's much colder. No one has ever attempted before them to cross the arctic by balloon. It is an enormously expensive operation, and one that will cause much suffering, not least to the families of these men, if it fails and they die. Remember for a minute the tiny old man in the nearly empty gloom of Acland St., whose job it is to play his harmonica and by playing to keep this balloon from plunging into the frozen sea.

5.

The old man watches the seagulls in the park fighting over a few scraps of cheap, white bread. It's dusk and cold and maybe he doesn't want to play his harmonica tonight. Maybe he just wants to sit here, while the world moves around him. The lorikeets, or whatever they are, rattle across the sky, catching the light, but it's the seagulls which really interest him today. He watches one particularly ugly bird grab a large square piece of bread and fly away, with a gang of others screaming in close pursuit. And since this bird cannot eat while it is flying any more than it can land and swallow in peace, it flies out low to the sea, with the anchor of bread in its mouth, until, condemned by its own

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nature, it collapses from exhaustion and drowns, so far out to sea that its body will never wash ashore.

6.

There's an old man I look for, who stands at night in the alcoves of buildings, out of the wind. He is not waiting for anyone. He plays his harmonica, like Dylan in the early days I like to think, kind of crude, with two feet on the ground, pulling something up. He asks for no money and he plays for no one just as happily as for a great crowd. I have never seen a great crowd massing, mind you, in the dark, to hear him, but nevertheless, I imagine the various members of this crowd sometimes, getting ready to leave their apartments and houses, checking their watches, picking up their children from the three inches of cooling, white water in the bathtub where it would be difficult to drown. Hurriedly they would dry their children's wet hair, thinking again, how small and fragile a child's head is, how absurd. The children clench their faces in the blur of the towel and allow their parents to dress them in train-coloured pyjamas and carry them, wrapped up through the cold streets, to where this man has already assembled an immense audience. There's light in everyone's eyes, a gleam (and you'll remember this in years to come, if you are one of these children). The world is enormous and solitary and dark, and everyone is watching and not talking, while this old man plays. He is boxy and small, his grey hair getting loose of its wax. In front of him rests a thin suitcase, which is closed. It means he does not need them. It means the crowds come for themselves, because they enjoy the beauty of a man who does not need anything and who sings about this every night, even in the misery of winter.