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MIDDLE KINGDOM

Poems by
David Farnsworth



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Moscow – Sofia Express 12th February, 1973

With Bulgarian children cavorting about the carriage

I am diverted from the danger.

I am lulled by the Russian beer

and an American voice.

All very deceptive.

The irony of it all

does not escape either Cat Stevens or myself.

The Voice of America on a Russian train

heading for the border

through a dark Russian winter's night.

The border is just one hundred minutes away

and I approach it with all the trepidation

of a swimmer approaching a dangerous current.

What new threat awaits me

at the hands of the Iron Curtain countries?

The date of entry into Rumania is the 13th

and I lie calmly in berth No. 13

with all the worries of the world.

After all

if the American dollar is uncertain

what hope for the rest of us?

(1973)

Farewell Leningrad

The silent chauffeur drove like a maniac
slipped and slid the voluminous Volga
along the ice-covered streets.

Meanwhile, on the bitumen station concourse,
shattered snow fragments settled on fur hats
ice creams and black coats wrapped.

Unwrapped a friendly sweet into my mouth
middle-aged gift of a woman on the bottom bunk.
Yellow fluffy blankets.

Friends farewell and wave through white curtains parted
and the warm silver train slides from the station
through the starlit Russian night
south, for Moskva.

(1974)

Penn Central Station

If you ever have to leave Pittsburgh
choose to go out by rail.
No matter if the station
is a sad reflection of past energies.

Four passenger trains a day
is a terribly inadequate amount of traffic
for this glorious station
with its huge tessellated roof
and tile-covered pillars and floor.

Booths and kiosks are closed up and arrowed
giving the station a gap-toothed appearance.
Modern additions
the hanging ceiling
suspended by hundreds of wires.
The new Amtrak Booking Office:
the self-opening doors
have the appearance of fillings
executed by an amateur dentist.

Modern lockers partly hide
a fall-out shelter sign which hides...?
Directions are forthright/deliberate.
Abruptly arrowed 'Use Other Doors!'
'Passengers with reservations check tickets here!'
Only the 'No Loitering!' sign bears the conviction
borne by new paint.

How many people are sheltering from
the sub-zero temperatures outside?
Two brakemen warm their hands and gloves
by the central heating.

A lady with pursed lips stares through
pale-rimmed spectacles, crossing a
statuesque leg bathed in black nylon,
toes pointing, pose unchanging,
red coat challenging.
A painted lady, gold rings supporting her ears
protected from life by a leather coat
and a white poodle on her lap.

A proverbial natty Colonel Sanders
white clipped moustache and beard
paces the floor.

Finally, the movement of people

indicates that the train is imminent
and we wheel our cases
onto the platform.

Amtrak cheerily invites us
to join their Broadway Limited
and we crunch through the ice
oil flares smoking
the half mile to the waiting carriage.

(1974)

Sea-Gull Port Fairy

An independent thinker
prepared to sit it out
in troubled darkening waters.

After all his mates had left
for more auspicious grounds
long ago.

The sea-gull sat
on one of the few remaining rocks
left by the rising tide.

Half an hour ago
rocks had been plentiful.
The sun shone on the river.

Mates had been many
grouped in fives, pairs
or scattered singly.

They watched the sun depart.

Two rocks now
and even the last of the sea-gulls
has gone to join his mates
upon the beach.

(1975)

Mt Bogong Autumn

Silver and mysterious
under a leaden sky
Mt. Bogong rises.

Hereford cattle
on the valley below
remember sweet grass.

Cool streams
and cooling winds
the mountain was theirs.

Now the snow has claimed it.
Snow gums stand firm
to accept their load of ice.

Footprints in the snow
cry out with the pain of
movement, of living.

A sudden
snow flurry
covers my beard.

Six friends
fall exhausted
into the snow.

1975.

Cross-country Run, Sydney

(i)

Just as I was congratulating myself
that Sydney's parks were derelict-free
there he was, prone behind a sheltering sandstone wall,
a take-away cardboard milkshake container in front of him.

Why was I uncharitable enough to believe it contained sherry?
On my return journey, he was still there
observing the activity in the park
drinking thoughtfully.

(ii)

Galloping along the park-pathway
was a greying runner and his dog
both making a good pace.

Around a corner, one came upon an old man
and six or seven tabby cats
ranging from grey to gold.

Strange how the dog ignored them.
How the cats kept on eating.
Familiarity breeds acceptance.

(iii)

The man of the house giving his
three Australian Terriers exercise
A weedy ineffectual man
supporting his three friends
for their romp in the garden.
Even their bark was un-dog like.

Not much of a life for man
or dog running a boarding house.
Doubtless the lady of the house
barks with more conviction.
A VACANCY sign looking out from a front window
bears witness to her efficiency

1975

Small Life, Mount Bogong

Crows
screaming and falling
across Bogong
feeding on insects
unwise enough
to be up and about
during a spell of
unseasonably warm weather.
Weather which sends the sap shooting.

About exposed rocks
lizards dart.

On sheltered slopes
deep snow
still lies
melting in
an orderly fashion
dripping slowly.

The crows rise!
Disturbed by our approach
they rise like hundreds
of black autumn leaves
seen in back-projection.

Hundreds of feet above us
eagles survey their kingdom
admiring the familiar escarpments
noting with pleasure
the familiarity of the updraughts.

1977

Reflections¹

If you take the budgie, you can't take the dog.

And Lenin looked back surrounded by fuchsias
always looking – mainly posing
acting but little.

I mean, if I'd been lucky enough to
die when he did, perhaps we'd still have a
credit account in the pages of History.
Or was it a mercy? Nadezhda keeping a record
of events and the proletariat still clanking
about in their chains, totally oblivious of their
chafing. (Go to Jail. Do not collect \$200)

Break out the red shirts
un-top the spray-paint can and sail into the
Revolutionary Sea where we can all
pretend that anarchy is still a practical
alternative. Meanwhile, back at the palace,
Lenin has applied for membership of the
Australian Labour Party, as Bob Hawke's deputy.

1978

¹ The line "If you take the budgie, you can't take the dog." Inspired by a caravan park sign which stated, 'Only one pet permitted'.

A Torn Achilles

It is necessary for patients to
notify enquiry desk on arrival.

On arrival, patients are
requested to notify enquiry desk.

Further, you are requested to
notify enquiry desk on arrival.

Failure to do so may result
in your spending the whole day
in the surgery waiting room.

You may be reduced
to reading the *Women's Weekly*
or *The Rotarian*.

Remember. You are requested to
notify the enquiry desk on your arrival.

Lead me to the enquiry desk!

Yes. I'm fully covered by Medibank Private.

No. There's little chance that I will
be unable to pay for any services
or Health that you may be able to give me.

My date of birth I will write down for you.

And yes... I must confess...

My mother did smoke.

No. I have not been X-rayed

or been seen by any
of your colleagues for similar
or related injuries.

You'll need to look pretty closely.

My injuries are not readily visible
or accessible.

In fact, I feel rather sheepish
about the actual insignificance of my injury.

While other people have been limping in here
or being wheeled, I've been

leaping up stairs two at a time.

Same time next week? Beaut!

Do not forget to inform the enquiry desk
of the date of your imminent arrival.

Your departure you may wish to signify or indicate
by making some inappropriate sign or gesture
in the general direction of the enquiry desk.

Girl with a Cigarette Mt Feathertop

The tranquillity of the campsite
the silences, the sudden movement
of smoke and my breath
layer upon layer of cloud
enshrouding a blue sky and a sun
moving at a fast pace
breaking and forming
reforming.

The cigarette advanced upon us, held
in the delicate fingers of a robust
girl but comely, enquiring about
water. 'You could go into that gully
but I wouldn't advise it. I've seen
grown men emerge from that gully
waterless and exhausted. This
doesn't necessarily mean that
grown women might not be more successful.'
We recommended the melting of snow
as a possible alternative.

1980

One Way Out

Penfolds Royal Reserve
 Dry Flor Sherry
 a simple glass
 an appetizer

I mean it's good for you
 Well it'll be pleasant
 the viscous liquid
 Waterford, Irish crystal
 the \$60 the glass is worth?

Be realistic
 Well – maybe not
 but sure as hell

1980

Mantillo
 just a glass
 taken before tea
 a stimulant so to speak

and tea tonight
 not having to cook
 clinging to the glass
 now if I had
 How far to Sydney?

Would \$60 get you to
 maybe not that far
 I'd get the hell out of here

Beachport Hotel

A conversation is neither here nor there
Mainly with conversation it's there.

Wait until we have this commercial.

Somebody died on television!
Oh yes. It's almost as sad as them dying
in real life. And who am I to disagree
with that sort of prognosis?

* * * * *

Not so much a matter of the annual hols,
more a matter of making sure that
the urinals are clean, that the plates
from the counter teas are returned to the centre.

● * * * * *

Well yes. We feel we've earned
a bit of a rest. A relaxation
so to speak.

Yes, you're right
we have had too much to drink
but what else is new? Very little
if you ask my opinion. So here we sit
like birds in the wilderness,
zapped out of our tiny brains.
Mercifully, we're only a stone's throw from home!
(All giggle hysterically at this point)

● * * * * *

Yes well. We would have said
that all things being equal,
the dog with the Sealyham terrier coat
would have been spared being
the feature attraction of supper
at the Beachport Hotel. He was
And here we sit like ducks in the wilderness
wondering where our next Benedictine
will come from. Why should we worry?
Before we could say 'Bob's your uncle'
or the drunken harpy at the next table
could pivot again into her drink
there we were 'Two liquers sir'
Yes well. I'm grateful
and suitably (I hope) impressed. 1980

A Bed of Owls

Recumbent on a bed and the night
moist with mosquitoes and the calls
of owls, calling out across Mount Wilson.

The glare from the white sands of
Little Waterloo Bay trapped behind the
eyelids with the chill and invigoration of water.

Owls measuring their predictability, calling
mathematically, unnervingly, a shattering
of feathers – brown speckled.

A mountain of feathers fulfilling a dream
and with the dawn
the squabbling of wattle birds.

1980

Is Stalin Still in His Crypt?

Red Square was where Stalin used to hang out
in his heyday, beating the drum, calling the tune
and the faithful. Many were called but few were
chosen to avoid a fate worse than death
or an unexpected opportunity to open up
the tundra the frozen wastes of Siberia

Collectivization, electrification everything went
according to one Five Year Plan or another.
Responsibility was delegated, as was blame for failure.
Knock on any door, but don't expect the victims
to be waiting. You'll see few reports in *Pravda*
detailing their demise, even if you're lucky enough
to survive any one of sixteen purges yourself.

You could of course, always move house,
visit a warmer climate.
Does Mexico sound like a promising place?
Well there're ice-picks there so there must be ice
to cool the fevered revolutionary brow.

Ask Trotsky

1981

Take an Apple from the Top of the Tree

The area boasts an Educational Bureaucracy
second to none, carefully culled from those
who have already displayed their conservatism
hardly putting a foot wrong by the simple
expedient of never moving either of them.

Supporting the status quo and their own inevitable
ambitions, they choose to keep a low profile,
to never rise high enough to see any of much
that is going on, attending meetings, shuffling
papers or writing them.

Avoiding contact with anything as unmanageable
as a human being, preferring to let pass
unnoticed anything as awkward as an idea
as unmanageable as a complaint, and playing
dangerous balls as straight as the pin-stripes of their suits.

I love their black polished shoes, the smooth shaven
chins and the forced jollity they forever display.
All's well now they've been nominated for the new positions.
All we really needed for the abolition of apathy
incompetence and brutality were nine new positions.

1983

Farewell Beograd

The snow of Beograd at Sućin Airport
obliterating what few footsteps we may have left
behind in this city or in this locale
sweeping and lashing the airport
meaning little to those not travelling
or to the experienced traveller who has
moved through fire and snow.

The stylized furniture unable to match
the unpredictabilities and updraughts of the winds
and the drops of water, falling from the light globe
at Sućin, bidding a sad farewell to regular
travellers, already diluting their feelings
in Gordon's Gin and Johnny Walker before
facing the final plunge on Qantas flight
QF14 to Athens, Bangkok and Sydney.

1984

There are No Concessions in this Life. You are Forced to Enjoy Yourself.

Have you
cut the lawns
watered the garden
cleaned the car
serviced the boat
exchanged the video-tapes
got the cold stubbies
made the beds
had a shave, shower and perfumed yourself
hung out the towels to dry
prepared breakfast, dinner and tea
taken the time needed to eat these three meals
washed up from breakfast, dinner and tea
put out the rubbish
cleaned the bathroom
replied to your letters
collected the mail?

If you've got time, you might like to
clean the windows
polish the bath
dig the garden bed
chop the wood
de-flea the budgie
and generally make yourself miserable.

Any day now, there should be time to write.

1985

Mt Feathertop

(i)

Midnight or one, and the moon
tops the ridge and meets my tent
interpreted by an intervening snow gum.

The limpid moon, tracing Japanese prints
on the fly of the tent a pallid ochre
diffused by a layer of mesh

into something vague and imprecise
here, in a different light, the branches
look like apricot, gnarled and aged

like a tree in Isabella Street, Geelong West
so many decades ago twisted and tortured
by age. Here the reality is the wind.

Wind and ice and snow distort the branches,
account for the distinctively stubby leaves
reflected here on the tent wall.

Buffeted we've been and we've aged.
Both age and weather have had their effect on me.
Luckily I can't see my own reflection.

1985

Mt Feathertop

(ii)

Cloud descending upon the mountain
bringing with it rain and wind
racing from the north, buffeting the gums.

Gums viewed indistinctly through swirling mists
other ridges viewed not at all, lost they
are but the track moves unerringly upwards

Splashing now through regular rivulets
gaining power and strength before they
forge off on their own, off the path and down the valley.

A hut appears through the mist and
is welcomed and entered and occupied
with appreciation and deference given

to the weather which howls and beats
at the tin walls, the rain sounding like
hail blown in sudden gusts.

Pools develop on the grass outside, billies
collect water from the roof and the
occupants cringe closer to the fire.

1985

Mt Feathertop

(iii)

A crow crying out, beyond the trees
beyond the ridge, intent on duties
involving survival in this harsh environment.

kraak kraak kraak
repeated incessantly, flapping from tree
to tree and now flying off into a gully

low down below the ridges and the
mountain lost in the shadows cast
by snow and gums on the slope.

A blowfly liberated by the early
morning sun buzzes threateningly
towards my head, investigates for an instant

and then hurries to the more tempting
food of the old camp fire the remains
of food discarded by the affluent.

A gentle breeze causes the leaves of
snow gum to quiver, this page to move.
Creation to an awareness of it all.

1985

I'm Going Home

(i)

Moving through the valley and hills
I've come miles miles in time.
I'm on my own here on the track
leading for the summit, past
the white orchids and fallen
wattles over the swollen creeks
to the snake brown looking
dead. It's early morning. He's cold
half his huge bulk concealed
in the grass for safety, like me
enjoying the sun and the pleasure of
last week's meal, bloated here in
the sun. I gaze, ascertain that the
head is pointed away and try to
decide whether he's alive the
slight quivering of a grass blade
indicates that he is. The head folded
neatly against the body for warmth
comfort. Luckily it's still chill
and I don't have to worry too much about
rapid movements.

1985

I'm Going Home

(ii)

A small honeyeater, here at the summit
dead – quite dead, its feet rigid, its
head characterless, like a stuffed bird
in an antique shop – here among the snowdrifts.

Its feeding ground is far below – there's nothing
for such a bird up here – was it the recent
storm? Did it lose its directions and come
over the top? Was it the strong winds which
dragged it this far?

The bird is a lesson of sorts. Age and
exhaustion have claimed it. You're
not too fit yourself – exhausted I would
have said, stumbling in the snow, gasping
like a grampus. Here on your own, alone
on the mountain. A risky business at
any time – but in your condition?

Even old dogs crawl off into the bush to die.
Maybe my time's not quite right but
it's coming. I feel it in the blood
instinctive – a rapid coming to an end.

1985

I'm Going Home

(iii)

I'm here at the junction of two creeks
nestled under the snow gums, writing.
The fire of alpine gum twigs sends off spirals
of aromatic smoke, a pleasure for my
Lenin-like eyes to handle, half shut
luxuriating in the sun and the happy sound
of five crows breaking the constant roar
of the creek as they re-occupy a nearby tree.

The creek, swollen, roaring – cascading rapidly
down, tossing its burden of spray as effortlessly
as the Tattslotto balls on a Saturday night.
But this is Sunday morning and the creek is
no lottery – it's a given – summer or winter
it moves relentlessly down towards Big River.

Last night the moon was caught in a pool
and I admired its radiance. This
morning in the same pool just twelve
hours later I admired, very briefly, the sun's
radiance too bright, painful.
In my mind I'd created an eclipse.
An hour later the pool had shed its
ice, and went on with its task of
breeding mosquitoes.

Camp Creek Mt. Bogong

(1985)

Luigi the Leech Perishes

There he was – climbing up the mesh
of my tent, fully intent on finding
a way in to me or my flesh

whichever was quicker or more convenient
arching his neck like a Loch Ness
sea monster, searching for entry

searching for survival – searching for
a release from a six-month self-imposed
exile from blood. I looked with

amazement during the morning
to notice him still there – still
searching for the rich red liquor

which would make his day or
the next six months whichever was
more convenient and so I packed.

The tent too, made a disappearance
into a tent bag and at the end of
the packing I noticed the blob

the black blob – unidentifiable
nestling under the white watch band
like a flaw – like an evil presence

there in the mist – Luigi awfully
bloated, attached by a prehensile
mouth, was enjoying my A-negative blood.

Such is life or death. Controlling my
shaking, I undid my pack, found
the salt container and doused

him with salt. Twenty seconds is
a long time when a leech is embedded
in your wrist. Finally he fell

to the ground and I attempted to
staunch the flow of blood released
by his anti-coagulants.

I'd have forgotten all about Luigi
but the wound keeps itching
growing – flaring reminding me of that which
I would rather be forgetting (1986)

A TAFE Director Addresses His Troops

Somewhere down the track is where we should be at – there or somewhere better. Preferably you should know where you're going. If you don't that's not our concern.

New courses should be vocationally based. Do not ask if all apprenticeships lead to permanent employment – they lead to a four-year guaranteed job after which

it's anybody's guess what happens. Actually we'd prefer not to know. There are vocations and vocations Vocations governed by apprenticeships

are preferred. I mean – they are obviously work, employment, not permanent but approaching it. Vocations without apprenticeships

we'd have to make up our minds about. This is never easy. We'd prefer not to. We refer you instead to our list of priorities which you can't see and which

change as quickly as we make them up. I'll just pass around this thirteen page document. It's only a draft. Being Humanities' teachers you should have few

problems reading it in five minutes. I regret not getting it to you last night but it wasn't possible. Much of this is just in comment form, but you should get

the general drift. I get the general drift. They'd like us to work more hours, teach larger groups and reduce our holidays to two weeks a year. Preferably we should create our own work-loads which must be vocationally based.

(1986)

Rain. Lake Wendouree, Ballarat

Lake Wendouree in the rain
the drops falling into the lake
disturbing the fish and the
peacefulness of the surface.

They've come from the willow
even though it's stopped raining.
Rain in Ballarat
in October – absurdly drear.

Another willow and more disturbance
of the waters – just like before
just like fish moving, the rain
stirring up the surface of the lake

and the people stirred up by
the unseasonable weather
irritable and bad-tempered
moving on short fuses and

exploding like drops from
the willow here on the lake
stirring the surface of society
with their anger and frustration.

(1986)

Spiders

Covering the walls and ceilings with their webs
clogging the corners and dimming the light
they've multiplied or is it only their webs?

They're there all right. I saw one the other day
scuttling across the floor, very small. I looked
closely. I wanted to make sure it wasn't

a cockroach which would have been awful
unclean, but no. Spiders are okay, particularly
when you spray under their arms.

My friends used to find my friendly attitude
to spiders funny. Now they avoid staying here
and I've no-one to share the spiders with.

Most people manage with spring-cleaning
every spring. Most of our webs have been
in place ten years.

How long does a spider live, I wonder?

(1987)

Harare Zimbabwe

Like a migratory bird I've landed
and been escorted through customs
and out into the clear atmosphere
of 4,500' and am greeted by an
Alec Guinness look-alike and
proceed to a 1960 Anglia
held together with wire and good luck.

It's night. A black night beneath the
Frangipani. And past the sputtering
cars fired by ethanol and some
sort of challenge to get where they're going.

In the morning I'm up and away
heading towards the parks on my
morning ritual – past the youths
in caps and shorts – the girls in their
boaters and skirts, very sedate
two inches above the ankle.

Everybody's black. Everybody walking's
black. Except me. I'm running and
an old white man in an old car is tooted
out of the way by black louts in a
black car, quite new, a present from the
President, or an attribute to their
hard work and ability to save.

The sun shines, frangipani blossoms
fall and an old dog sits and
looks at me from the middle of a paddock
and I push on home.

Here on the patio the morning is occupied
with countless pots of tea brought to the
verandah by the black domestic who
places the tea-pot, strainer, milk jug,
cups and sugar carefully on the table.

The conversation lurches along and one
hears of the European who's now in jail.
Criticized the black government within
hearing of the domestic servants
told on and rewarded with a sentence.

In the afternoon I was rewarded with a

visit to the city proper, admired the shops
and coffee lounges, walked through African
Unity Square, which used to be called
Cecil Square when Harare was Salisbury
and Zimbabwe was Southern Rhodesia
and whites knew where they stood
and blacks kept their place
and the system was just hunky-dory.

I was feeling hunky-dory before repulsing
a snatch and grab on my wallet and passport
and, but for my Alec Guinness look-alike
and his incredible commando leaps,
I would never have caught a plane to Sydney.

Six black youths disappointed and me so
exhausted and shocked and wearing a bruise
above the eye and a chill in the heart
I head for the airport.
Just six hours to go and so little to do with it.

(1988)

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