

The Big Gas, 1973

James Walton

It was a two-storey terrace. A small front square of garden, a struggling rosemary, standard rose, and a bay tree in a pot. Victorian tiles on a rectangle of porch. The biggest room upstairs, once a lounge, faced the street, with windows to step through onto a veranda. An older guy lived in that one; he worked as a waiter in a flash restaurant in the city, and could afford the extra rent. The rest of us were students.

A hundred metres south the Old Colonists', all quaint English-style cottages, spread over prime real estate. A special development for artists, actors, and writers in retirement, it sat out of era, a beautiful parody of a village which never existed. A performance space where theatre met the backdrop of inner suburbs carved in working class days.

We had a concrete-floored back courtyard, a lychee tree, a ramshackle gum, a clothesline blown in during a summer northerly. An overgrown herb patch ended at the triangle where the fences met. Walking through the lean-to kitchen the sun seemed to always blaze out there, as if a kite had landed and stuck, bringing down a patch of sky with it.

There were seven fireplaces; none worked. Each of us had an electric heater in our room, but the gas oven was where we mostly gathered. We cooked on the top jets and kept the oven door open, taking turns to place our feet in it. Half of us were purists, our bodies a temple, the others smoked dope, drank cask wine, and sometimes 40 litre bottling tubs, delivered by the train.

Things changed when Lorraine died.

She misjudged a rip down the west coast surfing with Bruce. They shared the first room from the hallway, on the left. Her parents were off the grid somewhere up on the Central Highlands. Lorrie told us how she would be punished with an old blackberry cane, a quick whip over the back. If she didn't work hard enough, or asked questions considered silly. She showed us the scars one day. We filled her bowl up again. Bruce didn't want to go back into that room, and went to another house.

Geoff came about the vacancy. He did amateur ballet, jazz dancing. He was tall, with a thick head of blonde frizzy hair, wore loose-fitting pull-on trousers, had an angular, elegant way of moving. His clothes didn't fit him, but he was like a statue of David, dressed as a clown, in a way that wasn't noticeable until after several viewings. He was a charisma of fairy floss, taken human form.

He chatted with Cherylle and Rose, and they agreed he could move in. We didn't think much of it, we needed the rent money, and he said he could cook. The waiter nodded assent in passing on the stairs, and Arthur and Fay thought he seemed a decent guy. He arrived with a suitcase of books, a raffles settee, two helpful well-spoken parents, a bulging Edwardian wardrobe, and a full-length Irish tweed overcoat. He was doing a doctorate in Literature.

After moving in he didn't wear clothes very often. He was mostly naked, believing his skin needed to breathe to realise its potential as he put it, and dress was a modernist convention of capitalism, part of the huge trick that was the lure of the system. Readjusting the body was a key to overcoming the neo-liberal constrictions.

He gave us a detailed lesson on cutting the whole loaf from the Yin to the Yang, ensuring the energy flow passed from the grains to our bodies. He knew a lot about cures, and would consume his own sperm as a treatment for the common cold. He told each of us individually of his bi/non/a/trans sexuality, and how he had felt something move between us.

His surname was Love, and we called him Doctor Lurve.

I met Melanie in the kitchen at three in the afternoon when I returned from my Law lectures. Geoff was having a cup of tea, suppressing a shake of goose bumps. She had a London accent, flowing hair as rich as a Persian carpet, and finger and toenails painted different colours, every one of them. They met at the tram stop in Queen's Parade, and had been in Geoff's room for the two days since.

Unusually, Melanie was taking a ship back to England later that night. Melbourne's winter was too cold for her, and she had to get back to her girlfriend in Oxford before the summer ended there. While I was getting toast and spreading the butter the incorrect way, Geoff explained that he was trying to remedy Melanie of her lesbianism, which Melanie found hilarious. I couldn't tell if Geoff was joking or not,

given sex and gender were irrelevant to him. There was an unease about him, and he was wearing socks.

I left them to it and went to sit on the bench seat in the street in the late afternoon sun. William joined me there, as he sometimes did, on his walk from the old people's village. He was a war correspondent for the ABC and the BBC, had seen the liberation of the death camps, and later covered Korea, the Berlin Wall, and the early years in Vietnam. We used our proper names; we hated the short versions, especially when there was a 'y' tacked on the end.

'Your new housemate is an interesting soul, I found him shivering here the other day, let him sit on my jacket.' I had the feeling William was still investigating, watching for specimens to examine in a world-weary way, not judging, observing. 'I hope you put it down the right way, not in a way that would conflict with the current between him and nature.' He was on the move, 'I've seen it all before, we're all just electricity, an occasional static interruption.'

I ran to the milk bar around the corner to ring for an ambulance.

Geoff was cold, very cold. I put a blanket on him before they arrived. I didn't know about pulse, CPR, any of those things. I rubbed his arms as hard and as furiously fast as I could. Turned the gas off, relit the oven, tried to place him more comfortably, but he was a big guy and the best I could do was sort of flop him in the front of it. I opened the door to clear the air.

'There isn't a window,' I kept saying to the paramedics as they rolled him down and over. They asked me about drugs, alcohol, anything else that might have affected him. I didn't know, I knew he smoked, but that was all I knew. The very loud contradiction in that was clanging on my forehead. And, 'Melanie went back to England.'

His parents came to collect his things. It was one of those August days when Winter won't let go, the clouds all clotted and bolstered up, a sky conceived by a shammy, wiped in every direction. 'He's doing OK,' his father thanked me as I dawdled patiently speechless. 'He thought you might like his coat; we can't thank you enough.' They were both as tall as basketballers, moved the same way as their son.

I sat in herringbone with William. 'You could get a cap to go with it, although you'd look a bit like a matchstick, the last one left in the box.' The road was slick with passing drizzle, the bus went past leaving the pushpushpush of its opening and closing on the air. You could see the sun mopping the Dandenongs.

I finally asked him.

'I was too young, although I lied. At the start you had to be six feet and two inches to be accepted. By 1916 or so, they dropped the height to five feet and four inches, then took away the limit altogether. War's a great leveller. I was born before Federation, a real colonial. Rode a horse to school. There was a lot of stained glass when I was growing up.'

He worked as a cadet in a big Melbourne newspaper, and left for London in 1919.

'Yeah, I wanted to be a writer, who didn't? I sent back reports from Istanbul on the breakup of the Ottomans by the winners. Saw the first war grave memorials being established, wanted to believe there was a better world around the corner. I wrote it that way too, I was stupid. Made my way across Europe filing stories. It was a good living, very exotic for the all the folks at home, reminiscences for the returnees, a good dozen years' worth. Of course, I was an oddity, a bit of an uncaged marvel, a true wild descendant of the convict transportees. They loved me, they mocked me, I played their game, I was an international at the heart of the Empire.

I fell in love with a woman who had amethyst eyes out of blue ice, that colour on the side of emperor gums which cannot be described. She'd escaped the Armenian Genocide and was working in Paris. She looked straight at me serving me coffee, and that was that.'

The rain got heavier, buses and cars passed, joggers waved at us, pedestrians stalled and got going again. The day seemed to stutter.

In October I opened the door to a woman in a broad scarf, enough to go over her head, around her shoulders, and fall down over a hatbox she carried. She paused long enough to say, in a precise tone 'William wanted you to have this'. She did not come in from the porch, and I did not need to be told. 'Galeries Lafayette 1925' and a faded maker's name ran around the circular lid, and inside were envelopes of varying sizes and ages. The copper plate headings on each changed from pencil to

ink to biro and to thin texta. They were arranged chronologically and laid out a life story in chapters of years and events in a narration of despatches, photographs, and notes. William had told me much of this, but the envelope which drew me bore the word 'Lusine'.

I was spread out over two small rooms at the top of the last staircase. From the window, in the bedroom, the lanes took crazy angles bending around back entrances, tracking between workers' houses. Beyond them the city's skyline wavered in late spring warmth. Jacarandas broke open managneseblueviolet, a full moon hung radiant teasing the falling shades. From the kitchen below, talk of Blue Poles, Patrick White, and the Sydney Opera House opening floated, a translucence of smoke rings of turtles rising...

They have cheese, ham, bread, a small amount of wine. Place des Vosges tilts towards the corner houses. 'On the second floor, there, see the smaller windows, Hugo wrote most of *Les Misérables*, looking out to here, maybe.' She doubts this. 'He would have been working and not noticed.' In their three rooms in the Marais, lives are compressed within each other's belongings. They were immediately comfortable with the little and the lot of this. Her husband had been killed before the French rescue, and while Apostolic, she did not practise. He believed in horses. 'I marvel you had a horse which you did not have to eat.'

They did not speak of children. They knew it to be impractical as they moved through Prague, Vienna, and into Berlin. He cabled reports to news services in Britain and in the States. Sitting in Grober Tiergarten, Lusine turned back from watching a group of uniformed youth dally then run. 'It's time to leave.' William had never been broken. He lacked the shadow sight of those who had experienced flight. At first, he misunderstood but saw the tidal withdrawal of content from her eyes; as events surface to travel in intuition. The BBC took them back to London.

They survived behind blacked out windows, and ration card run downs. She worked at anything required – ambulance, clearing, translating, volunteering tea to neighbourhood wardens. He knew from the beginning that his decade 'advantage' was lost years. After the final all clear, as he wrote of street celebrations and the hope of sugar, Lusine eased beside him, her head and arms across his lap, 'Tell them William of this Grand Illusion.' Bands were playing, a streaky sun called out streets; what was left of the world found time to sigh.

They spent more time separated but not apart. He sent details back from Nuremberg, different to his press pieces, his study of the world within their world. 'Do they really think no one will replace the hanged?' They stayed in London while he covered Korea, and Checkpoint Charlie. Her business was growing, French, German, Russian, even the occasional Hayeren needed transcription. They laughed over his 'treasonous' reports in various outlets about intervention in Vietnam and the 'progress' of the war. Suddenly, he was old. The earth no longer folded out.

'Jesus, where have you been?' Laughter, cooking smells, a late western afternoon light, all over the creases of hard sleep written on my face. I take a glass of cask red. We're celebrating; the voting age is coming down next year, we were already out of the war, conscription had ceased ten months ago, and university fees were being abolished. 'There goes your scholarship, comrade tosser!' We haven't been like this since Lorrie and Geoff, and I'm enjoying this merge of house into entity. I'm noticing the end of spring, the way people come out, like the pollination of being is purposed to scratch out the veneer of winter, get garden dirty with each other before summer. Arthur and Fay have reconciled, again, Cherylle and Rose are still fighting over Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell and revolutionary nuance in the works of...even mystery guy from the big room is here smiling.

'Are you taking up Brightman's offer to go to Normandy with his study group? He's still going on about you pointing out Becket's time as Papal Legate as part of his resistance to Henry you know,' Fay is reaching over, taking my arm to get my attention. I'm out of focus, the wok is steaming, I'm trying to listen to everyone. 'No, I've never travelled, I'm going home for the hay.' She gives my shoulder a shove, 'Fuck you're a hard case, what's the matter with you?'

Early morning, December. The day is warm milk, the air so still it curdles, conversation on the bus spills as it stops and goes. Trams come down the hill clacking along the Parade heading to the city, the train at the ornate Settler's Station picks up no one and heads off, two hours away my father has waited out the dew, ready to cut the first 20 acres. I sit here in my girlfriend's sister's jumper, a fine wool castaway, cerulean, 'blue and green should never be seen without a colour in between'.

Clouds are washed out, each moment in portrait, japped at the edges, proves itself. Later I will drive home, knowing the paddocks bleach to white from cutting, then cold lime with the last rain. Before this, as the ocean calls in beneath big hill, we will hurry to cart the bales for next season, over and over, into the sheds, watching our neighbours do the far mountain top fields, in the certainty the southerly will bring in the change.

A page whispers from my room, the way words surge and dart to a resting place.

'My dearest William, it is not that we do not have enough time, it is just that we do not have enough lives, Lusine.'

James Walton is published in many anthologies, journals, and newspapers. He is the author of four widely acclaimed collections of poetry. The Leviathan's Apprentice, Walking Through Fences, Unstill Mosaics, and Abandoned Soliloquies. His fifth collection will be released shortly. He was nominated for 'The Best of the Net' 2019, and is a Pushcart Prize 2021 nominee.