

## Souvenir

There are some times of the year which seem like anniversaries. As though something is being recalled or relived. There are a whole lot of things I can't face. Then they shake you sometimes without you knowing what they are. Some disturbing event or some change or some loss. A sadness or sensitivity, something picked up, suddenly on the same frequency. I hardly know whether to speak abstractly or specifically. Certain specific things can present themselves but they are not as specific as this general abstract feeling is now, and it can seem to flood in, a series of images connected to each other.

A country and western song is drifting in from somewhere. It is soft enough that I can tell it is a familiar country and western song but not what it is. Just the long drawn out notes, a familiar instrumental run. So I put on a country and western song myself. I want to know it.

The feeling is of being torn or hurt, effected by something. Of feeling passive. The torn feeling is not unpleasant. The music, so often with country and western, is not extreme enough. It's effective but not satisfying except inasmuch as it's satisfying to feel something. Then so often I don't want to feel affected by other people so much. I allow them in, receive them too warmly, don't provide a sufficient barrier. The texture of the words changes from the soft 'sh' of sometimes, some thoughts, to harsher sounds, they intrude. There is no story, only a feeling and the feeling is static. It can come back again and again, always the same. The whole story exists for the feeling, the thought, the thing which can bind it together. I arbitrarily choose a story which I remember as clear and static. When I write it, it opens out into specific instances, it becomes chaotic and unclear. It can only work if it is clear now and true for this memory as it appears now. To remember all the things that actually happened isn't the point. But like the country and western song, the record I put on now and listen to, is comfortable and real. The one I heard at a distance is more poignant, more foreign.

I remember a holiday which always had a strong feeling attached to it. The first time I felt I was alone or could go away and leave my family or do anything I wanted. The most significant part of the memory used to be a night on the holiday when I'd taken some morphine and went to see a man I'd met. He'd tried to tell me something but I couldn't seem to understand what he was saying. So the memory consisted of a feeling that if only I'd been able to reach him that night, we wouldn't have separated, he wouldn't have thrown me out and sent me back to Sydney. The memory came back again and again. If only I hadn't been so powerless, if only I'd been able to stay, we could've travelled to Austria and mixed with his sophisticated friends. As I try to remember all the details of the story of this holiday, the intense feeling leaves. The most striking thing I remember about it now is the road which ran across a hill, a dirt road crumbling and eroding from the snow which covered it in winter. Standing on the road at the top of some steps running all the way down the hill to a large building containing shops, you could look straight ahead at the slope of the opposite mountain.

But when I think of that story I only think of the physical memory now. The feelings don't seem to effect me anymore. I remember it as though I was there alone, as though I didn't realize how alone I was. The man I met contacted me, months later back in the city and seemed a terrible person. But still for years after that, a poignant memory persisted.

I am lying on the side of the pool now. I look across the extremely neat laid out paths, lawns and flower boxes between the stark white units. Beside me a blonde woman wearing a pale blue bikini of the same type as mine is talking to a foreign man. He is telling her about his plans to

become a musician. She is speaking to him in a very correct way. Yes, that is all very well, but, you see, musicians must be people with a great deal of talent, and they must work hard. It is not only a way of enjoying yourself. Yes, he says, but I think you are not understanding what I say. I do not mean that.

They are sitting very close together.

Beyond the walls of the garden is the bay. I can't see very much of the water. The opposite shore is industrial and there is noise from machinery and traffic, quite loud. Beyond that, the harbour bridge and other buildings, more misty. The noise of traffic is loudest but I can only see traffic which is higher than cars – buses and trucks, moving past a small section where there are no buildings.

The memory of lying here several years ago becomes like a substitute for the memory of the snow country in summer. It is much closer, and only a few hundred yards from where I live now. But the strongest memory is of talking at length with friends, not the affairs. Hour after hour at the swimming pool looking over the garden to the view enclosed by the block of flats. Gradually getting hotter and hotter until the only thing to do is jump into the pool.

The memory of the snow country melts away and melted away as I remember it. For the first time with understanding. There is a story which is no longer touching for me but which has such striking elements of alienation – you are a foreigner, the woman who runs Katie's got on so well with Alexi. Is she Jewish, I ask Alexi. No, they have a rapport because they're European, Katie isn't Jewish. A fish out of water, how appropriate to be in snow country for the summer, having an affair with an Austrian ski instructor who's working as a brickie's labourer. And for the first time I thought I may never have to go back to the family again. Here is a man who travels the world who could take me with him.

The personal nostalgia and pain disappears when I see – that's what it is to be foreign. Of course it was easy to think of turning my back on a career I could never really have on the terms I imagined as a teenager entering university. Once back in the city, the Austrian ski instructor looks so much more like a man who abuses women. What an excellent vehicle for all these hated oppressions the fiction could be.