

DEAD MAN BLUES

for Vincent O'Sullivan

Good news, you are here: the bad news
everyone else is over
there, in the northern hemisphere
where important things happen
and there's Hell to subdivide. Now
the land of the strong white crowd
lies before you. God is waiting
for the meek to inherit
then on-sell their quarter acre.
Salvation's in the small things,
a delicate wind chime scaling
the walls of a dark outhouse.
Opening the Chevrolet's boot,
Butcher stacks the empties so
they're easy to pick up but hold
their position, just like us.
*My first car meant go so I went
like the clappers, bel canto
out of this world: it was heaven.
I loved what I was and was
doing, yes. You construct your self
within a space – it's something
you've got to watch. If there are gods
then the gods are whitebaiters.
Their traps are set to suit the tide
the moon and your cloudy mood.
The human trickles in, confused
but full of itself when self
counts for sweet fuck all. The human
tickles these gods, who fill five
kerosene tins tight with white trash
for fertiliser – that's it,
easy peasy and by Jesus
you're home and hosed, blood and bone
at the base of an apple tree
leaning away from the breeze.*
Farther down the road to nowhere
(‘Norway with a dash of Greece’
as Patrick White has it) the car
hits a rabbit and its guts
spatter the bumper. *As God is
my witness.* Butcher fumbles
for a Benson & Hedges, then
accepts there's nothing, *fuck it!*
Summer's stalled like the Chevy, half-
way there. *God's godawful earth
turns its backside on half of us
half the time. Matter, we don't*
he mutters. Cranking the old case
he stares out to sea, knowing
every fishing boat's name. He gets
the drift of master and mate.
They'll drink to that Purau beauty
who moves and moans as the cock
crows and crows and every time means
her late husband is coming
home. It wasn't so long ago

she was sold on Butcher's boy –
then the sunburn of young shoulders
took her cheeks. She became grass
as she moved through grass to the broad
back that rippled more than grass.

I recognise you. Let's go home.

The tart should have known better
because 'home' is a deep harbour
protected by rusted guns;
it is cellars that smell of tar
after their cargo is shipped
Heaven knows where. Empty cisterns
echo. The sailor's sweat says
lonely. Every broken timber
represents an hour wasted

praying for safe passage. *Jesus,*
we don't know about growing
until it's done. Do what you think
you should, drop to a whisper
before the one you love but, love,
it comes to nothing. Time's up!
Seven prime days to place your self,
neither fish nor fowl nor good
red herring. Just the bloody dust
taking the nap out of you,
taking the gleam from your good eye.
'Night and day, you are the one...'

The Gnostics were on to it: two
gods for a divided world.

Why place faith in someone else's
faith? 'Another of these poor
buggers who gets discovered when
they're dead' (R.H. Morrieson)

Jesus ups sticks and vanishes
into words. Analogy,
that's the thing and more than the thing.
I learnt it at Cassino.

How, renouncing our affections,
we just confirm their objects.
There is always something unsaid.
Demobbed, I came home to weeds
so I turfed them, turned things upside
down until the ground was good
for tomatoes, peas, runner beans.

In the middle a clawfoot
upon bricks from Neighbours, Westport –
near dusk I'd shake my work togs
off, pour myself into the tin
and drink gin until the stars
shot the hell out of everything.

I remember the old man:
'Well, in my day...' It's not your day
is it? We're really spinning
out, farther than forever is...

Sure, up and down up and down
like a fiddler's elbow, but hard
after the Lord's creation –
full of fun and bloody nonsense.

By Christ, they're not long coming,
the authorities, with advice
a child could see through, and food
that wouldn't ground a sparrow, no.
Back down to the six-by-four –

*you should get old like growing up,
slow like. But the bugger runs
through you, tugging the muscle off
the bone. You're near done before
you're trawling for the emptiness
a well must have in a drought.
You shake like grass in a sharp gust
but the grass has more grace. Taste
that gum from your fingers after
stacking firewood. Only smoke,
no flare let alone heat to stretch
your hands out for... Black Bottom
Stomp fades into Smokehouse Blues, soon
it'll be Dead Man Blues. God
but you'll burn good and proper then.*