

DIASPORIC LITERATURE

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Rain jest

Dec 18, 2009 10:09PM



Level with us
wicked sky,
reveal the courtship
you have bestowed
upon a drop of rain.

A morning left
and we will pass,
a sunset morn
not far to leave,
a breath in vain...

Some finite hope,
in raging fret
is a hallucination
to a bashful heart in pain.

The blatant truth
of furious dries,
despite the fuss
there's no retort
and hardly any gain.

But when above,
amidst the clouds
a little thought
of jovial play,
a glimpse of nature
smooth and shiny
forming so swiftly
a drop of rain.

We need it now
immortal heaven
of makeshift dreams
and gleeful violence.

A single drop,
as smooth and shiny,
always exciting...
yes we thrive
on rampant rain.

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Homage To Frederick

Jan 20, 2010 01:38AM

For fifty years every April 11th, my birthday, I have taken from my bookshelf a small, blue, relief stamped volume, entitled "Life of Frank Buckland," printed by Nelson. Not a great book, but fascinating, a grand opening to a new world for a young man obsessed with learning.

When I open this book it is with remembrance more than nostalgia, in fact reverence, that I view the inscription "From F. Thomas to Michael on his 12th birthday, April 11th 1952."

I have always been blessed in my life when all seems to be a struggle, when creative drive goes, when the daily news of world events begins to overwhelm, my guardian angel gives to me the gift of a situation, or person, to transform and regenerate my life. Frederick was such a gift. A mentor and someone who has always inspired me.

I was absolutely hopeless with mathematics - numbers, figures, adding up, multiplying, subtracting, dividing. I might as well be dealing with Aramaic, Hebrew or Chinese.

To baffle my teachers I used to work on the principle, if I put hundreds of numbers on a sheet, by natural selection somehow a right answer might occur at the bottom of the page when I put in the equals sign or the minus sign or the division sign. This dyslectic approach to all things tied up with numerals was compensated by a passion, a thirst for all information on zoology, biology, histology, morphology, geology, palaeontology, microscopy, anatomy, botany and drawing.

My adopted parents despaired. They could not understand. They got me a mathematics tutor, and so I met Frederick. I still remember Frederick on that Saturday morning for the first session of instruction. Frederick, about seventy years of age, quietly spoken, white haired, very thin, moustache, and oh! those vivid clear mischievous blue eyes.

We both sat in a room completely lined with bookshelves at a round Blackwood table, papers everywhere, pictures, folders stacked on the floor, and fruit trees blossomed outside the study.

Frederick told me quietly "we will do long tots today". This was his term for adding up columns of numbers.

With "Waterman's" fountain pen he made each sheet of lined paper become a calligraphic masterpiece. Black ink numerals, some cursive writing, a conversation, than a cup of tea and the first two hour session was over.

Several sessions went by ... and Frederick informed my adopted parents that he felt that not much could be done to increase my skills at this stage, but he would still try.

Every Saturday I dutifully went to his home for "tuition" and lunch. My life had changed. Frederick was an ex zoologist, a watercolour artist (not a prissy dabbler but a full bore master of the large mop brush. He was a literary critic for an international newspaper, a gardening columnist, and also had a beautiful ancient brass microscope.

My mathematics time (unknown to some people!) was spent for many, many months learning about literature, the techniques of laying down a wash on rag paper, on preparing a graft on a fruit tree, and how to draw an image viewed under the microscope.

Frederick talked and told me about an old fashioned thing called "beauty," about the tyranny of fashion, but mostly about being authentic and always to push and extend whatever you became involved with.

I am absolutely sure that most people can look back and remember one or two humans with special affection, or some one they had a crush on, but Frederick, that man with a multiplicity of talents, and such scholarship, had a lasting influence on my life. He inspired me with his moderation, a model of a person who could be trusted and relied on, and I relied on his aesthetic judgement as though it came from Moses.

My first mentor, my greatest friend, my sage, my first idol, "Your writing in that book is still a talisman for what goes on in my visual art. Frederick, I used to think it futile you would live forever - but you do."



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A Birthday To Remember

Jan 21, 2010 02:00AM

The food was prepared, the table set. It looked like a subject for a Renoir or Bonnard. Just luscious to look at. Time for a relax, guests due to come at 7 p.m. Divine aromas of luscious food cooking permeated the atmosphere. Bliss!!

The guests arrived on time. The first drink was poured and then we heard the fire siren, and then another. The hills around reverberated with the sound.

Oh no!... I was a member of the voluntary Country Fire Authority.

Hearing those sirens, I made up my mind; "Sorry folks I have to go, enjoy, I won't be long."

Driving carefully to the tin shed Fire Station took one and a half minutes. Park, throw keys on floor, grab yellow coveralls, hat, goggles, large handkerchief, pull on boots.

Two trucks with engines revving to build up brake pressure are being scrambled upon by seven or eight people. Two female fire fighters are stuffing their hair under helmets. One sits in the front with the driver to assist on the radio, another joins us on the back of the truck. Some of us sit outside on the narrow covered bench behind the cabin, the rest stand hanging on to the handrail or anything around the tank overflowing with the water and retardant.

A yell from the driver, "Looks like a big one in the State Forest." Sirens yelping, flashing lights, we're on the move.

Off down the steep road curving every whichway - most of us are adjusting or still putting on our gear properly. You can hear the vehicle creak as it shoulders the corners, the weight of all that water makes you aware of what we carry. Someone checks the pull cord on the pump. We eye the hoses rolled on the floor, look up to the sky to see where the smoke is - not much is said.

Some one on the other side of the tank says, "Oh shit - I think I want to crap!" Some ribald response to that mixed metaphor.

We seem to roar through the township. People all stop and stare as other trucks from other areas follow us. Some people wave. Down some other hills and for the first time we see the smoke. Atom fallout shaped clouds, tinged red, are covering a wide angled view, police cars have blocked a major road and they have directed us up a hill. A helicopter sits in the middle of a traffic island.

My heart beats faster, adrenalin is now being pumped through my system ready for fight or flight. We enter the State Forest, ancient trees, mainly Eucalypts, or Gum trees as we know them, tower over 50 metres tall, and here we see them as giant fireworks all aglow. Explosion of treetops shower sparklers down around us and on us. Each side of the truck has fire on the ground on our sides and above. The pump has been primed and started, we direct broad volumes of water at the lower level flames. We do not get out of the truck.

We move slowly, almost leaf by leaf up the hill, the radio crackles and splutters, the speaker in the back must have a loose connection. We have to guess a lot. The cabin crew know more than we do. Other trucks follow us and aim their water high on

the now red glowing tree trunks.

It is as hot as Dante's proverbial hell. We are the lead unit. Our other truck has been sent off to another track parallel to us. New smoke clouds start to come in through the flames, another area had been ignited.

Instructions just received, "Do not worry about the area you are fighting, others will cover it. Go on to near the ridge and turn right to the open area and knock back that area."

In its lowest gear the truck goes up the hill, steeper, steeper and rockier, on and on.

How could it remain stable? Such an incline, the rocks under the wheels, you could hear them being crushed and dislodged. Steep one minute, the truck on an angle the next. We kept on to a more open area and saw the flames flaring and roaring, green on our left. Some safety? Out of the truck we get, hose unrolled, water on. We are going to knock this off!

Native possums and some feral cats run by on fire. A large snake writhes on the ground. Half an hour later this site was cleared.

"Go around the green area, the other edge is beginning to burn." The wind is changing. The air around us is so full of debris soot now covers our faces. My goggles are steamed up and I clean them.

Into the green area means going down. I do not know what feels better, hanging on so you don't fall backwards or hanging on so you don't fall forwards!

A sudden thump, and we stop, we are caught on a hidden rock, we are literally now like a seesaw. Our driver curses. Everyone on the truck looks sideways to see new flames hitting the sky. A long minute of manipulated revving of the engine and we move again. A bulldozer is creating a track, we keep going left, put out little spot fires and we come to a V shaped valley. We have to go around it. Time for a drink from the water container.

Eddies of air current are carrying embers and leaves like a circle of tea leaves in a cup. A bit more talk amongst the crew now.

A wind gust came. Burning branches fly in the air and land in the unburnt area. There was this enormous "woof" a huge fireball of flames setting the whole area alight.

We were trapped, flames surrounding us and above us. Those on the back bench seat dropped the thin aluminium blind to shield themselves against radiant and direct heat.

We had the pump on, the hoses trained on us with fine mist that evaporated instantly, but our clothing was wet. You could just breathe, a succession of mini gasps gave enough oxygen to take the next breath. The heat was so intense. You could smell on top of the wood smoke, pungent odours of burning rubber. The radio operator was desperately sending messages for assistance, to no avail, being in the hollow or whatever, no messages were being transmitted.

Touching the sides of the red painted truck the paint sloughed off like skin. For a second I thought this is how we will be soon. Burns that no surgeon could repair. Death.

The two women held each other, one pulled out a crucifix from under her gear.

The sound of a plane made us look up. We couldn't see it. Within a minute we were all coloured in bright orange, and drenched with water. Steam and acrid smoke coming from all around us. We had been bombed by fire retardant. We breathed again. There was silence and then a shout. "Yahoo!"

We sat for a while longer and four other trucks came to us. One filled us up with water, one guided us out and we continued putting out burning areas as we wandered down and around the hill. Radio communication was back and we were ordered to a base down on the highway for refuelling and cold drinks. It was now three hours later but not finished, the next part of the operation was mopping up where we had been before. More fires had been flaring and we had to be on call. On and on raking the burnt earth until not one bit of white ash was left, all had to be black.

Tiredness was setting in, not so much gusto for the task now. Half an hour past the bewitching hour and the water emptied, we could go home. Down the hill again, up the curvy road to the fire station.

Off the truck, clean up, refill water, sign off the white board, which told everyone our location, a chat and a debriefing. "Might be more work tomorrow guys," said the captain. "Hotter temperature and north winds."

I go home exhausted. My wife is asleep, the house and dinner table clean. On the dinner table are several packages and cards. Seeing these I was brought up with a start. I had completely forgotten about my birthday.

P.S. It was found the next morning that the fire truck had a hole in its sump, and the fires had been deliberately lit by a deviant ex firefighter.



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Breaking the rules of writing

Feb 15, 2010 06:15AM

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As it takes me one to three years to write a book, I want to consider many issues before deciding what to write. The worst scenario I can imagine is to rush into a story and abandon ship after six or twelve months.

I don't want to even think of 'whodunit' stories and I'm not a romance writer. My heroes fall in love and I chronicle the occasional lovemaking scene but I don't want to fill a book with bed hopping heroes enjoying the delights of the flesh.

My book should be a hero's journey for without heroes nothing changes and the world we live in becomes a depressing place. Reading the lives of the saints fascinated me, I rejoiced every time Ulysses escaped from yet another near death experience and I cried the day Martin Luther King was assassinated but I'm not into biographies of well-known heroes. I want to write about the unsung heroes you and I would chronicle.

Coming to structural matters, I no longer believe the schoolteachers of the world who stipulate that every story has a beginning, middle and an end. The modern readers don't have the time to read three to four chapters before the author introduces them to the main conflict of the story. I introduce the readers to the conflict the hero faces as soon as possible. Then I chronicle the actions she takes to resolve the conflict - the dénouement.

While many argue the beginning of a novel is important, I hold the last chapter of the book is as important. When the reader reaches the end of my book, I would like them to feel happy my hero accepted the challenges of the conflict. It was a good fight. Here I'm not thinking of the outcomes of boxing or wrestling matches or the end of a war because my hero carpet bombed the Dresden of the story. I am interested in the conflicts between generations or the clashes arising from prejudice, fanaticism or jingoism.

My second requirement is emotional connection not so much because emotions sell but because if I don't feel an emotional connection with a story my writing is not authentic.

In what follows I'll only explore stories with which I have an emotional connection. I cannot imagine writing a story that doesn't have a universal theme. And a laundry list of good intentions will not do. This issue is important but what is a universal theme? Given the constraints imposed by this short contribution I'll explore only two important universal themes here.

Many writers declared that we don't live authentic lives - a true universal theme. 'Man is born free,' Rousseau noted, 'and everywhere he is in chains. Politeness requires this thing; decorum that; ceremony has its forms and fashion its laws, and these we must always follow, never the promptings of our nature.'

In the play Uncle Vanya, Chekhov exposes us to many encores of the same theme. The young beautiful woman of the play, for instance, is in love with the country doctor but she doesn't leave her boring husband because he has a professorship.

T. S. Elliot's *Wasteland* is a land where everybody is living an inauthentic life. Doing as other do, doing what someone tells us to do. And no one has the courage to strike out and be the captain of his life.

The world started with an act of disobedience, Fromm wrote, and will end with an act of obedience.

With so much theory under our belts, you will now understand the mess I'm in. Maureen and I were hopelessly in love. 'No one else would love you more,' she declared with conviction while we gazed at the first sunrise of this century. And what did I do? Did I propose to her? Did I marry her? No I didn't. I dumped her and married a well-to do woman with whom I have nothing in

common! Am I happy? Of course I'm not and I suffer everyday of the week and twice on Sundays when she drags me to church. My ordeal has a beginning but no end because I cringe every time she touches me. I cough whenever I smell the smoke in her hair and I think of Maureen when we make love. Years ago I used to think that suicide was the coward's way out but now I'm convinced it's an honourable escape from my living hell.

Love knows no societal boundaries, is another important universal theme. Did Romeo seduce the lovely Juliet by reciting the poems of Ariosto? No, a hundred times no. We remember the lovers because there was nothing but hatred between their families. It was an amour fou story that blossomed where hatred reigned.

This memorable love story fades into insignificance when we consider amour fou stories in modern settings. Hatred resulting from a feud between two Italian families does not compare with the hatred based on the extermination of thousands of innocent civilians. Here I'm thinking what the Moslem Bosnians suffered in the hands of the Christian Serbs. When I was young I believed that each prayer repeated has a certain value in cleansing away sin. Now we know what Ethnic Cleansing is.

Away from the Balkans let us consider the amour fou between Almaz, a young Palestinian girl and Simon, an Israeli soldier. Almaz's brother was a suicide bomber and Simon killed many Palestinians every time his company raided the Gaza Strip. Love however ignored all this hatred and blossomed.

How did the young lovers fare? If you like sad endings her people stoned Almaz to death because she fraternized with the enemy. And Simon flips when he sees her body covered in bruises and blood. She died, he hears, clutching the medallion he gave her - the Star of David.

If you like happy endings Simon deserted the Army and walked to Jordan with a forged passport. In Amman he meets Almaz who abandoned her family to be with her beloved. Imagine what the Army or his family thought of Simon. Consider the shame Almaz brought to her family. Fleeing from so much hatred they survived under the protection of the UN for a year before they boarded a plane to Adelaide where they spend the rest of their lives building bridges between the Arabs and the Israelis.

In summary, amour fou stories unite all of us because the heroes ignore the petit bourgeois reasons that divide one family from another, one race from another and the members of one religion from another.

But wait a minute, you'll interrupt. What do we know about Arabs and Israelis? Are we not supposed to write about what we know? You are right but I don't think many readers would want to read about the life and times of my auntie Mabel. She married three times and ended a binge alcoholic but she was no hero.

If we don't know much about the Arabs and the Israelis we can research the topic, talk to Australian-Arabs/-Israelis. This is what writers do!

Jules Verne was a lawyer but he consulted with scientists and artillery engineers, before writing his book *From Here to the Moon*. Michael Ondaatje wrote *The English Patient* after he studied the living history of the era between the two world wars. Michael Frayn is a journalist who sought many free

tutorials from nuclear physicists before writing Copenhagen. An outstanding play that explored the consequences of a conversation Heisenberg (a German) and Bohr (a Dane) had during the war.

That is what writing is. You forget your auntie Mabel and break the rules because you have a memorable and original story to tell! Literature is in good hands so long as creative writers lean toward disobedience.



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The Clocks That Have Not Been Taken Down

Apr 13, 2010 10:44PM

Yesterday I watched an interview about Cyprus on TV,
This made me think about the Green Line
It made me remember that our houses have been deserted;
That someone threw our personal belongings
In the rubbish bin twenty-two years ago;
That other people live in our house now.
As I lay in bed with my eyes shut
I thought of our old clock which we rescued from the village;
It hangs on a wall of a coffee shop in Gastouni*
It has been hanging there since 1975
I'd like to go there and buy it
It is the only thing left which reminds me of our house.

I remember the sound of its ticks
And how it chimed every hour
It now ticks in that coffee shop
But nobody loves that clock, or thinks of it as I do;
Nobody longs for the sound of its ticks or for the sight of it;
I imagined its sound tick - tack tick - tack
First in our house- next to the pictures of the last supper,
the wealthy man with the poor man -
And then in the coffee shop in Gastouni.

These are the things I think about when everybody else goes
To their family home for Easter ,
To their childhood memories
To the clocks that have not been taken down
And still tick in the same houses.
All towns are alien to me
And I always feel that a part of me is missing
It's somewhere else

It's in a place I have no access to
It's constantly missing
I'm constantly insufficient
Like an incomplete musical metre
which never ends.....

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