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TEXT prose

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Pauline

If I were to tell you that I spend my afternoons staking out the cathedral, during those hours when its shadow relentlessly casts a greater and a deeper darkness over the heart of the city I love, being Melbourne, you'd probably get the wrong idea.

Which only goes to show – *tant pis* –
how much you can miss if you don't
stop, now and again, blink once, and
look twice.

Look at me, for example. Only the other
day, sitting in my usual spot where the
sacred land of the cathedral meets the
footpath sacred only to those
bewildered women who have stories like
my one to tell, I saw a light that made
me look twice.

Or would have done, at least, if I
hadn't already looked once.

The light I'm talking about wasn't a real light, unless metaphor is deemed real.

Be done with all that! This metaphorical light I said I saw is only my way of putting into words the most blazing light of all: what I've heard men call, creation out of nothingness. The light of the real, the unreal, and of all that lies in between. The light, so to speak, that makes you look at all light in a new light.

The light, though, of what earthly time? When was it: "only the other day?" Perhaps it was a Tuesday. It could well have been a Wednesday. I am

certain that the Monday-to-Friday 5.15 pm service had been about to commence, which narrows it down somewhat. Even so, it may have been a Thursday, a Friday, a Monday.

Anything but an ordinary Saturday or Sunday.

Let all that pass... these days, I'm not as good with dates as I am with people. If only by sight, all the members of the weekday congregation – those who trickle into St Paul's Monday to Friday without fail, at a quarter after five, as afternoon shadows lengthen – are known to me. And of all these anonymous worshippers, so familiar to yours

truly, every last one of them was taken
in: made to look twice.

Deceived, as metaphor deceives: made
foolish before God.

Think twice on those words, and tell me
that deception doesn't always travel in
twos: the language of deception
wrapping around the deception of the
thing – and always, it goes without
saying, in God's sight. Something any
St Paul's parishioner worthy of the
name would do well to believe; for
isn't this the very thing discoursed on
in cathedrals? I ask, only because
(hear what I may through the walls)
I've never been inside one; all I know

is, the shadows the thing casts.
Anything more, infidel that I am, is
irremediable foreign-ness – which
leaves open the alternative, if
religion is to be believed, that
deception is not so very deceiving
after all; even, to risk practising the
sophistry I so much despise, that to be
taken in is necessary to knowing the
whole truth of things, be they begotten
or made. Perhaps any lie doubled is a
truth made complete? (“The animals went
in two by two, hurrah! hurrah!”) Think
what you will, it endures, that no
member of the St Paul’s congregation,
arriving at the cathedral from places
that would not know me if I lay down in
their streets at night, had enjoyed my
advantage of seeing, from the very

beginning, a light that made everyone who saw it look twice.

The sole exception: God himself – God and I. For surely it was in His company, that I – alone of all my sex or of any sex; with eyes as serene and unblinking as the Lord's – had watched this light which drew a second glance from all that saw it. Surely too, my eyes alone (like the twin "o's" staring eternally out of "looked"), had gaped, gawked, gazed – an unholy Holy Trinity of looks – as a man beat a dog, beat a dog into shape, beat into shape what no-one could have known, before the sculptor himself, was a dog in the making – a dog coming to life, beneath

cathedral shadows. A dog with a sandy-coloured coat flowing, as if caressed by zephyrs, over its flanks.

Skin-deep metaphors, however, be damned! What was, was a dog of sand to its very heart.

A dog with creation itself being thrashed into it.

Thereby transfixing even me: the woman (daughter, refugee, lover) who has seen so many miracles in the penumbras of evening shadows; the one who has gazed upon such a quantity of wonders in the half-light of hazy mornings. Before

such a slapping into life of raw animal, all such things (all former marvels and mysteries), into insignificance, *paled*; in the face of such a concoction. Like to God as the Artist Chef; the Book of Genesis, his heavenly gastronomy! Take one teaspoonful of ocean. Add a pinch of desert. Combine, and voilà: one cooked-up work of art. For as the dog before me seemed proof: sand without water is nothing but drift and despair, while water without sand is the possibility of all things... which is to say, eternally nothing.

So to say, what I was seeing – the product of hands hardly God-like –

couldn't be gainsaid: a torso
unmistakably canine; jaws,
approximately those of a wolf;
hindquarters, such as any puppy might
dream of. And for the use of those
human hands, a dog's drinking bowl
(delicately lettered, *Fido*) filled with
water solely as a kindness to art. Even
so, there are some tasks too delicate
for water so ordinary: once, twice,
three times, I heard the soft, kissing
sound of a man's spitting into shaping,
creating palms – the very water of the
body partaking. And I imagined, to go
with my listening, tiny oceans within
dactylograms, deserts themselves chafed
from skin.

All the same, all in the service of
what? To what end, this endless
craftsmanship: spirit of the artist
binding water and sand; dumb animal
born out of brutal matter; the thought,
untouchable, fitted to all that which
touches but doesn't think? How can I
put it to you so that you will
understand? How give it a name? Such
art perfectly faithful; such life mock
and bogus. Deception sublime.
Persuasion most abject. Metaphor left
to bleed out on the steps of the
cathedral! Or rather, metaphor buried
up to its neck in sand. For this I'm
telling you: under way, before my very
eyes: the pure Platonism of dog; Pluto,
ideal; conjectural, abstract; yet no
less of a reality than water and sand.

A dog of mind transcending; in the
selfsame instant: a dog all a dog is.

Is, in the end, or rather *was*, down to
the final twist in the tale: a single,
unambiguous turd (a twist from the
tail!) shaped into being out of a
fistful of leftover sand. One unique,
unmistakable, life-like shit. The
tailings and ending of *Fido* the dog.

All the same, before such a concluding
flourish – deposited at the very tip of
the creature's termination – there had
been a beginning, whether you do or
don't believe that endings exist in
beginnings from the very beginning. And

at that time, prior to the origin of all things that concern me (be they begotten or made) I'd only been watching casually, indifferently, with my typical, downcast, couldn't-care-less cast of face.

Reason being, the young man with the bulging, blue tarpaulin slung over his left shoulder hadn't looked to me, at first, like any species of artist I was familiar with. (I'd not noticed, initially, the escaping grains of sand trailing behind him, fugitive sediment – Golem grit – never more to be called into the service of creation...) If anything at all, he'd seemed a dressed-down, out-of-season Santa Claus.

Dressed all in blue, however, rather than jovial red – exactly the same shade as the blue of his tarpaulin – and so bundled up in his clothes that there seemed perhaps much in common between his body and whatever it was that he had wrapped up, just as snugly, within his swag – resembling, as it did, a little bit of the bluest sky, torn away. A patchwork-blue wight then, shrouded in so many vestments for which I know not the name; even I, shrouded as I am – shrouded in darkness, in shadows, in veils. A man no doubt, but an artist well camouflaged – whose eyes too were blue, and whose prematurely bald, blue-veined scalp, glimpsed by me each time he raised his cap in the greeting of some benefactor, poured

with sweat. For it's hard work, as you might imagine, making an animal too real to be true, yet not so untrue that it wouldn't be mistaken, by just about everyone who saw it, for what it really was not: alive.

Call me a dog, would you? A piece of shit? Surprised, are you, at my gift for English?

May the Peace of the Lord be with you...
And now that I'm tearing my heart open like this, I remember that it was also a wind-less day – a wind-less, business day. But of course, what artist would risk creating a masterpiece on days when the air might carry so much of his

creation away as to make any creature something less than a creation? As to make creation, creation-less? There it crouched then, finally – calm, complete: a creature perfectly ordinary yet utterly unreal, taking everybody in, staring with its own blind eyes at the portal of the cathedral – hearing, in its infinite deafness, no trace of the hymns filtering through the walls of ancient sandstone.

Until, with evening approaching, all came to an end, and I was left staring at nothing in particular, as the artist (not once having seemed to acknowledge insignificant me) swept his creation back into his tarpaulin, and walked

away, just as he'd arrived, with the makings of future animals slung jauntily over his shoulder.

Consequently, as he walked, feet thumping like a dinosaur's upon the solid surfaces of the city I love so much, mysterious shapes created and uncreated themselves through the blue skin of his hump – alive (if you can call it that) only so long as he (their bearer) was quick, quickly striding away, speeding down light-lined, raddled, worn-out Flinders Street.

Thus burdened, however, still every pocket of this blue-swaddled hunchback jangled, by way of compensation, with the coins that his dog had earned him –

his cathedral collection, as it were.
Reward for all this deceiver's
deception, and all in the name of
falseness, of art. Gain, however, is
also, inevitably, loss: a few grains of
sand were making their escape with
every step: enough perhaps, over the
course of his journey out of sight, to
make a mouse tail or two, a dog's ear,
an eyelash of an elephant.

The ragged remains of life.

Hours expired. The last of the
worshippers drifted away.

11.15 pm. Time for bed.

Falling asleep where I always do, on
absolute waterfront – my morning
reveille the sludgy sounds of the Yarra
– I wondered when I might see my blue
man again.

In the end, it was a year, even to the
day, before he turned up once more.

And once more, just as before, I was
staking out St Paul's. 5.15. Wind-less.

Did he wink at me just now, remembering
days gone by? Even now, as I tell this
tale, I – almost always coin-less of
pocket, still with riches in my head

that few could imagine – can't be sure.
I resolve though – for the rest of this
story, no matter how long it might last
– to call my artist Paul, and myself
Pauline. To connect us. For after all,
my real name, in your language, cannot
even be written down. And after all,
weren't we both in the shadow of St
Paul's? Both within the same darkness?

Today, a year on, there are more
pigeons around than I remember from
last time, with enough plumage loosely
dancing upon the slate-like paving
stones to be able to stitch together a
whole loft of them. It's colder too,
which perhaps explains why, under my
watchful eye, Paul has been kneading

his bundle of sand for several long minutes, like a baker reviving the yeast in set-aside dough, using the palms of his calloused and reddened hands to warm up the life within. From *Fido's* drinking bowl, now he adds a little more water to the tiny desert island lying before him, swimming in its ocean of tarpaulin blue. He's in blue again himself, as well: Paul, my Michelangelo of animals. What creature is he going to make today? I wonder. But before I can even begin to imagine, I have another thought: perhaps all this business of kneading the sand, of running his fingers through it, is not Paul's way of bringing anything to life, but just the opposite. Perhaps all his preparations are only his way

of exorcising, of driving out, all the other lives – the lives of all those other beings carved out of sand – which he has formed, in the past, out of the misshapen matter before which he is presently kneeling. Perhaps, natch, something remains of life even when life seems completely destroyed: some skerrick of existence; some breath that fans a heart aflame.

Perhaps everything old has to be put to the sword before anything new can begin.

As if thinking this over, Paul's fingers suddenly still, and the world, too, seems to lose all motion. Just for

a second. Until, without warning, all the pigeons take off at once, as if all of one mind, and it seems that something of time has finally come to an end.

It is then, finally, that he turns to me, and only then that I realize my unavoidable fate. How could I have been so stupid? His movement my way, long minutes ago, (his conspiratorial wink), was undoubtedly that of an artist's. I would smile at him this instant, were it not that I am now like a statue, frozen on the outside, if churning, churning stone within. A smile could shatter me. But relax, Paul seems to be saying with his eyes, and so I settle

back, within myself: to await the
making of me.

Whole generations seem to pass by as I
watch myself grow before my eyes.
Oblivious to everything, tourists toss
coins into Paul's collection bowl. I
wonder though, do I really look like
that? A woman with every appearance of
life but no reality within?

Finally I am done. Still I daren't
move, for fear, again, of collapsing
into a million grains of sand.

My coin-less pockets gnaw at my sides.
I have nothing to give the artist for

this my portrait. No matter. I am
Pauline to his Paul, eternally.

And we are both, he in blue and I in
black, eternally in the shadow of the
cathedral.

Eternally, still not really. For in the
end – as midnight's shadows bear down –
I am the only one left crouching there,
for God's dogged winds to endlessly
scatter.

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