Under The Footbridge

Towards evening, she started to waken. For the first time she heard the insistent rattling of windows in their frames and felt the cold wind rummaging about her room. She opened her eyes slowly, but the light, even in its leaden dullness, hurt them. A terrible memory, an unbidden guest, also caused her pain and she closed her eyes still tighter, pressing her head more firmly into the pillow, and would have slept on to eternity, if only to forget. She had then a sensation of rising and falling; she dreamt — if dream was the word in her fuzzied state — of the sea and then of a merry-go-round on which with the spinning of the platform the horses slid up and down on brassy plaited poles. She was a child again, laughing freely while behind the barrier her father, a blur against a whirling, swirling haze, glad to have made her laugh, laughed back at her. Then he was gone and a rustling of curtains carried her thoughts to the gardens, to the park opposite her home where, green and scented, the treetops nurtured a host of secrets and no man could be alone.

With a movement that made her whole body ache, she reached out an arm. Her fingers touched a bottle and, as if burned or stung, she withdrew her hand. She wondered vaguely whether she had swallowed everything it had contained. And she remembered again the merry-go-round, and felt herself spinning, then saw herself gliding, hovering above the treetops and beneath the clouds. And both the treetops and

the clouds moved before the wind that rattled the windows in their frames and seemed to fill the room.

She lay on her bed for another hour, then befuddled and unsteady, holding on to whatever was at hand to lend support, she rose and dressed. She combed her hair, pulling at its knotted strands without looking in the mirror and pinched her cheeks to give them tone. The weight of unwonted weariness dragged upon her eyelids and her jaw. Friends used to say she had such an expressive face, she remembered then — a goddess, a clown, even Sarah Bernhardt had none better. The footlights had been at her feet. A long white rustling gown of satin had flowed down towards them, flowing indeed, streaming, as Ophelia, lovesick, jilted, crazed, glided to her death. A student production, to be sure, but the audience applauded keenly nonetheless as the curtains came down and everyone had spoken about her, had spoken about her, months before, when there had been time for theatre, for diversion and for make-believe, and when study, seclusion and scurrying after time lost were still remote.

At the thought of study, old, familiar and unwanted oppressions returned to her again. The room, in its subdued light and with its smell of aniseed, suffocated her. Feeling the need to find release, to flee, to breathe, she fumbled for her jacket and went outside.

It had rained and the smell of compost and pine-trees hung about her. The cold, crisp, briny odour of the sea, too, reached her and she moved towards it. She raised her collar and walked slowly, her eyes upon the ground, trying, trying in vain, not to think.

She had been working hard, by day under the pale-green bilious light of the Public Library, by night in the shimmering glow of a desk-lamp whose sharp white glare fell starkly upon her books but cast shadows all about. Above all, she blamed the shadows. After three weeks within their thrall, she felt the shadows expanding, extending beyond her until they surrounded, encompassed and dominated her and she could see nothing outside herself but a vast black consuming void. She

came to despise her subjects, regarded history as a chronicle of unrelieved stupidity and wholesale blunder, philosophy as a rife and fanciful rigmarole of illusions. Even literature which she had loved devoutly became something hateful; she could not understand why people bothered to invent fiction or write verse; more than anything did it come to assume the character of an indulgence serving nought but the vanity of the writer and the gullibilities of the reader. She would have abandoned it all and gone to work — it didn't matter where — in an office, a factory, an apple orchard or a store. But she remembered her parents in Mildura awaiting good news and so she pushed on, resumed, struggled with her work; until succumbing to the shadows without and the increasingly yawning void within, she had acted in despair.

Along Acland Street, an occasional passer-by made her raise her head. In these most brief of moments, she saw neon flashing, the street-lights glowing, the stars flickering between the large, shapeless, brooding clouds. She felt sister to the clouds. She became aware, too, of activity about her. Couples approached, passed, and disappeared into the coffee-lounges. Solitary men leaned against sign-posts and giggled or retched; someone called "Double or nothin'"; and somewhere a dog began to bark. She walked on. The smell of cakes drifted out from the Hungarian and Austrian *conditereis* and from the hamburger bar emerged the sicklier fumes of grills. Above her, someone was practising on a violin; there were women laughing, and outside Luna Park, a fellow riding a bicycle rang his bell as he came closer and whistled in her ear. Past the *Palais Theatre* and the *Palais de Danse*, a band was playing loudly and couples in evening dress were going in.

She made her way towards the beach. Always, in her solitude, she had found a measure of solace there. A narrow path near the clock-tower led down to the Lower Esplanade; on both sides were small stunted bushes and quivering tufts of grass, and below, across the road, the solid and sturdy parapet on the edge of the sand. In front of her with the darkness falling more heavily and densely about her, the waves unfolding in low-

pitched shuffles sent a delicate spray over the low stone barrier. She felt it in her face and, even in its saltiness, it tasted of something fresh, of something pleasant, of something she had once loved but had since forgotten. In the distance, across the bay, she saw the port that was gateway to the world beyond, its lights glinting doubly, both on land and as reflections in the water at the further edge of darkness, and she would have given much in that moment to be as untroubled as that darkness out there and the stretch of sea that linked the far and scattered shores.

From the farther end of the parapet, she heard the strains of music. Under a footbridge, protected from wind, sat a group of young people, fellows, girls, students, too, no doubt, or clerks or shop-assistants. One of them, a lean fellow with a straggly beard, was playing a guitar. The glow of a kerosene lantern lit up his face. His eyes were closed. The others swayed to the rhythm and hummed. They were singing a current Seeger favourite.

> "Where have all the young men gone
> Long time passing,
> Where have all the young men gone
> Long time ago?"

The group seemed to her to be moved to melancholy, but no sooner did that song come to an end than another, a more spirited and vivacious one, was begun. A sense of pity took hold and welled within her. Not for herself now but for the parents of the young men in the earlier song who would never return, for her own parents waiting for good news, and for her own homecoming over summer, and for the cluster gathered there singing under the footbridge by the beach.

Someone called out to her. "Join our little party, Sis! Come, sing with us!"

She came closer and sat on the periphery, watching each in turn by the light of the lantern and listening to them sing as she felt a knot rising to her throat. She might have felt inclined to

join them, however mutedly, but with the best will in the world she found she couldn't. Then someone told a joke, an old story, and someone else a riddle. The others laughed and then they sang again. The wind had become sharper and she heard it wheezing in the bushes. The waves sprang higher and their spray fell on her lips. Apart from the light shed by the lantern, all else beyond under the footbridge was now enshrouded in total nocturnal darkness.

Now they laughed, she thought; now they laughed and sang and told tall stories and were healthy, buoyant, jovial. But life was short, it was so short that all the laughter and all the song and all the stories in the world could not extend it. One day, they, too, like the young men in the song, they, too, the fellows and the girls, and she along with them, would be gone. They would grow old, become sick and die, and hear no more laughter, sing no more songs, tell no more stories. Life, in its very motion, was sad; it was abominable; it served no purpose beyond its own perpetuation. In the face of this, how could they sing or even begin to tell stories, let alone laugh?

One girl, wearing a tawny parka, placed an arm about her shoulders. She had short black hair and smiled broadly, openly, showing her teeth. She was also singing but stumbled over words she didn't know. "Come on, kid," she said between a verse and its refrain, "no mournful faces. Sing now, kid, 'cause tomorra' ya' won' have no tongue."

The touch of the girl's arm, the nearby splashing of the waves and the taste of salt brought her comfort of a sort. She wanted to hum, but still no sound yet rose above the constriction in her throat. She remembered again the merry-go-round, the gardens and her father's laughter. Everything was transitory, everything marked for extinction — even the girl beside her clearly understood it — everything passed, every song, every pleasure, every smile, as even those couples going dancing at the *Palais De Danse*, and the solitary men in Acland Street giggling to themselves or retching, as even the boy on the bicycle who had whistled in her ear as he passed. She thought

again of her childhood, so far behind now, it seemed, and irretrievable.

Then, if she had been suffocating from what was nothing if not grief, she now felt her throat constricted by the onslaught of a new emotion. It came to her suddenly and set her head turning. Whatever pills she had taken must have dissipated in their effect and left her mind clearer, sharper, more at ease. If all things must pass, it struck her, so must all things we despise. And if this is so, then their passing is only to make way for something new, for something finer, perhaps for something more meaningful. And therefore, every age, every generation, indeed every moment and action is linked inseparably with the one before it and the one following. Above the sadness of the moment, something greater and still mysterious, for which there might yet be no name, would come to be, but towards which each in his own way had to work, work, work, and, in his own way, in her own way, bring about.

She listened to the singing but heard the haunting, higher, heaven-ascending music of eternity. And, as if of their own accord, her shoulders heaved once, twice, three times and, freely, openly, fervidly, she wept at its sheer beauty.