

JOHN SINGER

THOUGHTS FROM NORTH QUEENSLAND

27th June 1983

Driving to the tip in my HQ wagon; the back is full of old bathroom bits and I can't see well in the rear vision mirror. Very difficult to see the road behind. No point in going too fast — besides, the tailgate is down and I don't want to leave junk all over the road. An NQTV van comes up behind, impatient. I'm only doing 60, the legal limit. Everyone here does more. Although it's tricky to do so, the van overtakes. I slow a little and move to the left to let it pass. Half a mile up the road, a short line of traffic is banked up. The NQTV van is there ahead, in the line. They're giving way to another line of cars coming out on to the main road from the *left*. Absolutely crazy — no one in Townsville ever gave way to the *left*. Turns out it's a funeral moving off a side street on to the main drag — taking a right from our left. This pisses me off immensely. I honk the horn. The line of cars is moving very slowly past. So slowly that one guy winds down his window: "No respect for the dead?" I reply: "They don't have to get to the tip before it closes". But a little while later I think: in a way they do.

28th June 1983

At the International Terminal, Townsville Airport, waiting to meet someone from a flight. Looking around this sterile, forsaken shed, it occurs to me how apt the word "terminal" can be. The focus of attention is a tiny doorway scored in the plastic wall. What is incredible is the way friends, relatives, lovers crowd around this place, this plastic hole, waiting for their lovers, relatives, friends to emerge from customs. Strange customs. They literally pack the doorway. They are like wolves waiting for their prey — at least, they're like Zoo wolves — waiting for their serving of emotions. People come through the door singly or in pairs, very, very slowly, with three or four minutes between each opening. The door is like a shutter on a slow-speed camera. The people it shows are not quite real and not quite pictures of people. I imagine what they must see: these slavering faces, packing them in, not letting them through. They practically have to run the gauntlet of faces disappointed that this is not their personal loved one — back from the dead? back from another planet? Some welcome! They are lost, startled, all like little children. In other cities, where international flights are more frequent and have a history to them, the crowds are cooler, laid back. No one wants to show any public emotion. Meeting someone from a flight is a

job to be done. Could there be a way between, different from, these two terrible futures: *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (so close now).

3rd July 1983

Where we live, everything grows in abundance. Often it's hard to tell just where something is growing — a tree or a plant, in relation to boundaries and borders. The natural world sometimes seems to have forsaken all notions of "property" so important to the recent white inhabitants of the area. Today, my neighbours (not in the Biblical sense) sent their grandchildren up on to the garage roof to clear leaves and pods from a large tree growing in our yard — mostly — and certainly overhanging theirs. The grandchildren, for whatever reason, decided that a temporary solution to the problem was not enough and proceeded to roughly saw boughs and limbs from the tree in order to prevent the job ever having to be done again. Naturally, I wasn't too pleased about this. Unless trees are properly treated they die. Assuming it to be the work of the children, I approached the grandparents. Not only was there no apology, it turned out that the children had been working under instruction: "After all it's on our side of the fence, we can do what we like with it". This may or may not be legally true. The point is simply this: Europeans have no idea how to adjust their ideas of the individual, his rights, his property and his personal wealth to this land. They actually seem to be getting worse at it after 200 years of trying. What the law says is beside the point. The nature of the place is such that European laws are not capable of coping. It is easy to see how the white people here have become brutal, barbarian. Nothing could be less appropriate to this land than property laws, Gold Lotto, garden furniture, German Shepherd dogs, V8 motor cars The list could go on. What's a "pioneer"? Someone who is going to make these things damned-well fit whether they do or not.

5th July 1983

A student from the University pops in for a chat about her courses. She's an Aborigine from a reserve to the north of here. She tells me of her difficulties finding courses that will be of use to her when she returns to her people. Her difficulty with the town is that she feels cut off from them. I try to get her to say what this can mean for her. If I say "cut off from my people" I mean I'm not physically with some others that I used to be with — family perhaps — and that's true for me too. But this is not what she means. For her, an individual literally has no existence apart from a community. When you are "away from your

people”; they are one, and something is missing from that one. *It is depleted in some way.* My friend says she is cut off in more ways than this. Being in Townsville, she too is coming to see herself as an individual. European culture, she says, has “has got to her”. Slowly she is “growing apart” from her community — she no longer sees the community as it sees itself, as one. She can see how Europeans see “them”. I have an immense sense of something irreparable being done — some terrible harm, some annihilation. If the period of genocide is over — *if it is over* — still our very presence here is coming to absorb the distinct and separate universes, the very realities of Aboriginal people. My friend tells me about a woman who was “caught” “stealing” mangoes from the gardens of a church-run hospital on her reserve. The Minister made her feel “guilty”, made her “confess”. All these terms in quotes, at one time, could have had nothing to do with that — or any — Aboriginal woman. The tree was just *there*, it provided fruit, for everyone, anyone who wanted to take it. Nobody owned it. But *now*: she is guilty, she is a thief. Even more awfully: she is an individual who bears those titles. Above all else, Christianity in this part of the world has to answer for introducing the concept of a separate “self” into a world where all people, all nature, all of the universe were once singular. I too am “cut off from my people” — from a European universe that still incessantly plugs away at its cultural imperialism — even if in new forms. I would rather be in such a position. But obviously, I can never be ideally free of it. This is another case of guilt and stolen fruit.

6th July 1983

Show Day in Townsville — how gruesome. Poor children (in both senses) being parted from their money and their sense by clever morons. The organiser of this “show” appeared on TV last night *complaining* of people not spending enough — “They all have death adders in their pockets”, he said. I am physically revolted at this. The stench of candy apples (and the rest), the giddiness induced by bizarre “rides” and cheap trinkets that cost so dear — what do these stand for? What do they tell us about our culture? How come they can, in several senses, make us sick? To avoid all this, I’ve come to do some reading in my office. Nearby there are two sounds: someone practising for a music examination, running up and down major and minor scales on the piano, then playing a hymn tune (on this most secular of holidays) — and the superb sound of magpies, with their new offspring, warbling beneath the gums. I hardly have to say which is sweeter. And I hardly have to tell you whether or not this weird cultural duet is preferable to the “show”. What are we “showing”. Just this: that we can’t cope with this land.

Undated, 1983

Everyone is away and there's a sound in the yard — someone coming up the drive. I go carefully down the front steps but can't see anyone right away. Then I see him: a black man, big as hell, naked to the waist, and carrying an axe! "Okay", I think to myself, "this is where political theory meets practice". I'm turning to run back in and bolt the door when the softest, most scared voice I've ever heard, bar none, says "Mister, you gotta phone?" The story is that he, K , and his family group who live in a camp near the Cemetery are being pestered to death by a group of white teenage boys in hoon cars. One of them is threatening to take off one of the young girls. All the other men have gone to Isa to look for jobs. K's on his own and he's scared witless. I call the cops. Surprisingly, they say they'll send a car right away. He comes in but won't sit on my furniture. He puts his axe in the corner of the kitchen against a potted palm. I still have some cigarettes and give him one. As I put the phone down, we hear the explosions of V8 exhausts coming up the street from the Cemetery. It's them all right. I grab some paper and pens and we run down to the garden and hide behind the gateposts. I take my pen and give one to K. so we can both write down the car numbers. "Sorry Mister", he says, even though he knows my name now, "can't write".

23rd May 1984

While reading, I pick up my blue pencil without thinking. With "half a mind" on it, it feels round in section. I take it to be round. Perhaps "knowing" the red pencil to be different from the blue one, I pick it up in the other hand. Rolling it gently round in my fingers I find exactly that difference. It feels several-sided. I roll them simultaneously, one in each hand and feel the roundness of the blue and the angularity of the red. Nothing could be more reassuring, nothing more certain — were I to go so far as to reflect on the fact. Looking up from my book, I notice that the red one is in fact round! My first thought is: "The blue one must be round too — what a mistake — both are round, I just imagined the difference". You can imagine my surprise when, upon looking, the blue one turns out to be several-sided! Not only was I mistaken at different points about the pencils individually, I was also mistaken, at another point, about their difference. (It's very hard to write about this. The confusion is unbelievable and the feeling of it is still with me as I write. I've had to cross many things out and start again to get it right. It's difficult to recall the exact form of our confusion. We only make ourselves more confused and yet, the more confused we get, the more we seem to want to battle it out and get back to some firm ground.

I shall probably return to my reading now and find the pencils to have reversed their shapes!)

8th May 1985

I have been dreaming of marriages. One part of the dream goes like this. The couple are licking a giant sucker — the kind you find on the end of kids' toy arrows. This sucker is a really big one, though. It's about a metre in diameter. When it's good and wet, they stick it on a wall. They look at it, and look proudly at themselves. This is some big deal, getting that sucker up there. They look some more at it and at each other, with big cow eyes. This goes on for quite some time. Eventually there's a feeling that it's getting boring. The couple now take out some shooting sticks and use the seat-ends to prop up the sucker, not that it's in any danger of coming unstuck — perhaps they just hope it will so they can prop it up. After a while, this gets boring too and (shall we say?) the guy starts to use his shooting stick to prod away the flaps of the sucker to see how firmly stuck it is. He has to prod really hard in order to get any change at all. Then, after a while, it falls off.

The woman (again: shall we say?) then turns to another guy next to her. He's been waiting there with another sucker and a pair of shooting sticks for quite some time. They go to it and stick the new sucker on the wall. Same thing happens. Only this time, it's the woman who prods the sucker off the wall and the other guy turns to someone new.

At this point the woman may well turn to her original guy and see if they can get their original sucker back on the wall. What happens then is hard to say. Maybe he accepts. Maybe he's already in action with someone else. Maybe he says: "No more suckers for me". What he says isn't important — what he does is.

5th December 1985

Naturally, the whole place abounds with insects. Not a moment of day or nighttime can go past without some insect being visible, audible or making its mark on the skin. Insects buzz in the lights around the house. They pester you to death with their flitting to and fro, around your head and feet. At night, the whine of the mosquito keeps you awake to the point of insomnia — not simply the noise but the fear of being bitten, of contracting some disease or other or, at the very least, waking up with swollen blotches.

At this time of the year, odd beetles of all sizes fly into the house and appear to be drugged by the strong lights. They fly — very unsteadily — up to the light source and then drop to the floor like stones. The "garden" cockroaches, much smaller and less beastly than the domestic

variety, also fly in and shoot around in straight lines from lighted surface to lighted surface until they are exhausted. Sometimes, you come home to find a carpet of tiny beetles and flies across the kitchen floor where a streetlight has left a miniature landing-strip of bright light.

And the others: they are more exotic — the dragon flies of a thousand colours and sizes, the moths delicately patterned and often decked in bright colours or pastels, the shining bugs. All this is such a mixture of discomfort, occasional terror and rich beauty. And so much of it goes on beneath the gaze of our everyday life. It's just insects. Hardly anyone sees them.

Last night, I came home quite late to find a butterfly cartwheeling around outside my door in the porch light. The insect-eating geckos looked on with their dotted, hungry black eyes and albino bodies. I stopped to watch. Occasionally this little thing would alight somewhere — on a carpet, a door or a painted pipe. And I could see its bright brown, red and black markings for an instant. The only way I could see it better was to catch it. I went after it, like a child. It would settle and settle again. As my hands approached, it would perform the most extraordinary backflips at the last moment and go off spiralling. Yet it never flew off into the night. It always stayed close, but never close enough to be caught. It afforded glimpses for instants, but never the prolonged gaze. This creature, for me, represented not the essence of insects themselves, but the essence of our relations with them. The frustration, the irritation, the beauty, the failure to capture, and so on. But what, indeed, would you do with a captured example of such beauty? Kill? Preserve? Whatever you did, its beauty would be gone. Its unattainability seems part of its very being. We must always and forever learn to let proximity suffice. Anything more, even if it appears to be a desperate drive for life, will always bring us only death and the end of beauty.

10th December 1985

Only a few days after chasing that butterfly and thinking how hard it would be to capture and wondering what the point of capturing it would be, I was in the garden, in true nursery rhyme style, hanging out the clothes when Sometimes — as was the case today — the sunshine here is so startlingly bright and the humidity so stupefying that you're almost drugged by it. I stood there, between T-shirts, thinking of nothing very much. In fact hardly aware at all, when *two* butterflies, identical with the first I had seen at night, came bobbing and weaving in and out of each other.

That was the answer! (The exclamation mark never captures quite well enough the joy that arises when the *heart* finds a solution — but at least it looks right, like a little drop of blood.) The answer was that only another butterfly can keep it in sight, weave and turn with it. Could I be such a thing? I chose to look at it positively. It's not that she is a special creature and I am a dumb, slow, witless monster — after all. We — read this slowly — are both the same.

Whether you choose to read butterflies or not, it's true also that she did arrive at my door this evening, just as it was going dark. I was ironing and packing up a stereo amplifier to take to a friend's house. We spoke briefly and she flew away.

17th December 1985

Of all the insects that make their home around my home, the most ingenious I ever found was a fairly large grey pupa. This slow and torpid thing had chewed through the edge of a glossy poster on the wall so that a small section could be folded back to provide a nest. The pupa had curled up the poster exactly as it would have with a leaf.

My reaction, on finding this thing (it simply dropped to the floor as I investigated) was a very blind and stupid one. I was revolted by its looks, felt invaded — as I never do by the wasps that build behind the doors their little mud nests — though this was over my bed. I picked it up and flung it through the window into the garden. Only later did it occur to me that it would do no harm and, with any luck, the place would have been full of butterflies in no time at all.

Looking back, it's odd. I wander round wondering how to catch a butterfly — and yet reject a pupa. How many times must I have been unknowingly, gut-reactingly offhand when a friendship was in the offing? It's sometimes hard and miserable work — like being a pupa for a while — to incubate friendships.

29th March 1986

Late on a Saturday morning, straight back from the Laundrette. Uncharacteristically, the wind is wild, for a March morning, nearly April. And someone down there, below my kitchen, is burning off his garden grass and leaves. The smell is not tropical, not the lush dope and mildew smell. The smell is Lancashire in autumn, a big old house, us up high in it. A man in the garden is burning English autumn leaves and the smell is drifting up. I have to run to the calendar, to the book of maps, to all the local things. Just to assure myself that I'm here and now; that there and then and you are gone.

John Singer, a Scot by birth, travelled extensively. He was trained as an anthropologist and worked, for much of his life, with overseas aid projects in SE Asia. He retired in 1978, and came to live in Townsville. He died in 1986. The extracts published here are from an occasional journal which he kept, recording his ideas, thoughts and feelings about North Queensland.

Alec McHoul, now of Murdoch University, edited the extracts for LiNQ.

DAVID REITER

SLEEPING SHARKS*

*One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more . . .*

— John Donne
Holy Sonnet 10

Whose dream is this? Soft light
of dusky sea has a palette
that warms the palest skin.
Your green eyes have plunged here
before. In waters deep as winter
sleep, your flippers ply a path
for me below the coral. Without
sunlight, all colours become a lie.

The cave comes true: two *galanos*
loll in the shadow's shadow, too thin
to match my apparitions. You tease
the leathery lip above the ridge of teeth.
Prompted close, my fingers wilt like petals
on a tomb. Is this the love to outlast decay?

* In underwater caves between Isla Mujeres and Cozumel, Mexico, divers may come across "sleeping sharks", supposedly feeling the effects of excess oxygen in the water.