

M.P. French

LIVING IN THE VOID

—There haven't been enough rainy days lately B.

—That's bullshit, he says to me.

My friend B has known me all my life and although we agree on everything, he ain't never said anything that didn't contradict me. He does it out of habit. Out of some desire to confuse me.

—How can you say that when it hasn't rained at all lately, I say.

—That's coz it's summer and you know it. So it's bullshit.

—I just wanted to say it so I could say I like walkin in the rain and there hasn't been any rain lately so I'm depressed—and sunburnt. I hate that.

B and me are in B's dad's Saab burnin round the roads in the Domain, lookin for a parkin spot. B's got me a ticket to the M.S.O. I've got a tape recorder and I'm tapin our talk so I can win an argument for a change. And even if I don't, it'll be a good convo to tape coz we always get D&M without getting personal, which is the way we like it. Or the way it is.

—LOOKOUT! I jump and scream. B slams on the brakes and stalls the car.

—Fuck. What?

—Nothin. I was just jokin. Haaa, suck'd in!

B punches me. I got him bad. He's smilin but he says, We're runnin late. The concert starts at 8.30 (looks at the clock on the dash) and it's 8.26 now, and if we're not there in time they don't let us in till the interval and we'll miss the soloist.

—There, I say and point to a space. We're doin sixty so we stop about ten cars past the spot. B slots it into reverse and flattens it and we're goin backwards at about sixty (I dunno how he does it). We get alongside the spot and he hardly slows down. He just jerks the wheel and slams on the brakes and we skid in beside the curb perfect.

B's parked real close to the car behind and as we get out he says, Ja think I left him enough room?

—Who cares? We're late.

As I shut the door, B turns on the alarm and the car goes BEEP and the lights flash and I shit meself and jump.

—Jesus. Goddamn yuppies. You are all the same.

B's smilin at me. He reckons us peasants should come outa the dark ages. I reckon this is the dark ages and as we walk past a fountain I say, I need a piss.

—Stiff shit, we're late man.

—Well, we wouldn be if you hadn been late back from the cricket. It's not like I wasn firin three hours ago.

We're goin past the big steel wave sculpture and I start tellin B about an interview I saw with the sculptor on the ABC and how she said she liked it that people would touch and feel and be a part of her work.

Right now, there's two guys ridin skateboards on it and I start tellin B that at the instant one of 'em does a cut-back and just hangs in the air—one hand holdin the middle of the board behind his bum, his back arched, and the other hand flung out like a cowboy ridin a wild bull; at that instant, he truly becomes part of a livin sculpture and if I could snap freeze that and savour it, it'd make me cry.

—That's bullshit, he says. God you speak some shit sometimes.

—It would. It's the truth. Don't you love that stuff as much as me? Don't you think ...

—Shut up. We're s'posed to meet Dan somewhere out here. Screw it, he's probly already gone in.

Dan is another friend. He's just gone through a messy break-up with his girl but we don't care. We only invited him coz B had three tickets and nobody else we know woulda liked to see the show.

B leads me down some stairs and into a foyer and straight towards these doors like he lives there. I'm followin like a good little heeler. He hands this old dude

in a tux the tickets and we step into the Concert Hall, glowin like a sunset and smellin like washed hair.

There's all these old ladies in fake (or real) fur, with fake (or real) pearl necklaces and earrings. They have fat husbands who obviously drive cars like B's dad; and there's Dan. He needs a haircut and I tell him so. He smiles. Man, I'm gettin nervous. I can feel the tension in the air. In the chatter.

B's arguin with Dan. B thinks Brett Whiteley's a faggot. Dan reckons Beethoven's a crock. Apparently we're gonna see Beethoven.

B's sayin, That's bullshit ...

Dan's sayin, That's crap ...

I'm just sittin there smilin with my mouth open coz it's just so cool and excitin. You know, like when the horses are in the mountin yard before the Melbourne Cup. Nothin's happening but I feel like I'm startin the fifth round against Tyson.

Wooo. And the musicians in the orchestra are all doin their thing; pluckin strings, linin up drumsticks, checkin the reeds of their mouthpieces. The orchestra stands and this curly headed conductor ponces out on stage followed by a humungous Russian pianist.

I'd been crackin gags with B about meeting the "pianis" after the show. I turn to say something about the extraordinary size of the "pianis."

B looks at me at exactly the same moment. I can tell he knows what I'm gonna say so I just smile and he laughs.

We sit down. The orchestra sits down. The conductor beckons—he hasn't got a baton, but he has got a handrail so he can sway about. He tilts his head, half a nod. The players cock their instruments—raise their eyebrows. I peel back my eyes and ears and everythin; and softly, softly it begins.

This is grrreat. I can't help it. I'm grinnin like a fool. The music trickles down my back like a cold finger as the bows rise and fall in a slow dance. If I look at the double bass, I can hear it above the rest. If I look at the lead violin, I can hear it.

And the pianis—ha, he's too big. It's like the keys are hot and his fingers are burnin. The funny thing is: as he sways around, if I listen carefully, I can hear his chair creakin.

And the music's saying:

*the hunt the hunt the hunt the hunt
the hunt the hunt the hunt the hunt
look out behind, look out below
what's on your mind, doesn't it show
the hunt the hunt the hunt the hunt*

The conductor's hands dance. The Russian sways and jerks. The heads agree—this is what the sound looks like:

*the hunt the hunt the hunt the hunt
look out on high, look out BA-BOOM!*

The hands, the drums, the brass, the light. The final cymbal symbol: "TRASH" it says. We know it lies. The claps rain down, they stand and bow. We clap louder, they bow louder. How much adulation can these blokes take?

Five encores later—B tells me the most he's ever seen before was three—we finally get to sit down again and catch our breath. My face is achin from grinnin too hard.

The bloke in front of us has been yelling "Bravo" as loud as he could. He turns to me and says, What did you think?

—That was fuckin shit hot! I tell him. His wife goes red but he smiles and nods his head. B's smilin, he thinks he's won his argument with Dan who's sayin that Beethoven isn't so bad after all.

—Yo B. Let's blow this pop-stand before I piss me pants.

Outside. Man, it's like I'm high. I can't shut up.

—Did ya see those guys at the back payin out on their drums at the end. Man, it was like they can't do anythin for the first three quarters of the show so they make up for it at the end by beatin the shit out of 'em. Wooo. I wanna be a drummer.

It's an amazin night. It's like I've just been born and the world looks new again. There're seagulls flyin around the tower on the arts centre. The spotlights shine on their white undersides and they're just glidin around like a huge school of stingrays.

The fountains have all been turned off and I can see hundreds of coins in their bottoms. The full moon is reflected off the water about six feet away and I say to B that I'm gonna stand on the moon and pick up money. He looks up at the moon, then down at me. I'm walkin towards the fountain and he grabs me.

—Don't be stupid. If you get wet I'm not givin you a ride home.

—But ... How 'bout if I just turn the fountain back on?

—No.

—How 'bout if ...

—No. We're goin.

—You always talk to me like I'm a little kid. Like you're all hot shit and responsibility. Just when I feel like a bit of fun, you piss on my fire. What a sook.

We're walkin past the Gallery. B's tellin Dan what a great buildin it is, even though it's just a big square grey block. Dan, who's actually an artist, starts crappin on about the art they've got inside. They look at me for my ten cents' worth.

—I dunno. I've never been in there. I just wanna live in a houseboat in the moat—they only draw two foot. And I could give kids and tourists moat rides for two bucks apiece. B's sniggerin. This is what he loves about me the best. Innocence or stupidity, even though it's only pretend.

—And the atmosphere'd be great. I'd be a tourist attraction. I could watch the music, listen to the paintings, taste the sculpture and smell all the time too many words—thinking hunt hunt hunt hunt, boom crash hmmm splash. Ah man. Sweet sweet sound.

B an' Dan are lookin at each other like: how does this guy keep it up? We say tarrah to Dan at the tram stop, jaywalk and run into the park.

B's after me coz I said Beethoven and Ablett and everybody else he holds holy are poofs. He nails me after a few seconds and sits on my chest and starts slappin my face.

—Give up, I scream at him. Or so help me to Christ, you're a dead man!

B cracks up and rolls off onto the ground beside me. I bounce up and kick him in the ribs. He's nearly as skinny as me and begs for mercy. I leave him there to sob out his defeat and have that piss behind a tree.

—C'mon man let's go, I say.

We get to the car, hop in and go. The funny thing about Saabs is they're built by an aeroplane maker and it shows. The keyhole is in the middle, next to the gearstick. I've never noticed this before and tell B it's stupid, but at least it's original.

—What's wrong with the dash? I say.

—'S got me knackered. Ja wanna go for McDonalds?

He whips around this corner through a red light that's just turned red, jams on the brakes and we shudder to a stop in front of Macca's.

B never takes the car outa gear when he brakes and he just stalls it in a no-park and we get out.

—How can we go for McDonalds?

—What?

—How can we go for McDonald's? I mean, you don't say let's go for Pizza Hut, do you?

—That's bullshit, he says.

—No it's not. You go to Macca's or you go for a Big Mac.

—I'm not goin for a Big Mac.

—Yes you are.

—Nup. Cheeseburger.

All this is crapped out as we go inside. B's pullin change from his pocket to see how much he can buy. I'm swankin along behind thinkin I'll show him. B gets what he wants and the fifteen-year-old asks me what I'll have.

—I'd like a McDonalds thanks, I say. She smiles a little nervously. B spins around at me like I'd hit him with a stick.

—I'd like a McDonalds thanks.

B slaps me in the face and turns to the girl and says, Sorry, he's sick. He'll have a thickshake. Strawberry. Ta. Then he shoves me towards a table. I laugh.

There's not much to say. I'm suckin my guts out on the thickshake and B's got a face full of burger so I give him something to read which goes like this:

HAPPY
like a lonely
 dead
 shark
spiralling slowly
 towards
the bottom
 of the sea
with
 my guts
dragging
 behind
I continue
 to grow
 in this
 life.

—That's bullshit, he says.

—I know, but ain't it the truth, I say and fly on sayin it, coz we're actually livin our guts out right now like sharks or, or fireflies or mayflies ...

—Or maypoles.

I laugh and go Aha. And what we're actually doin is all dancin round the same stick skippin. And you and me are in shortpants and the girls are in frilly dresses and they've got ribbons in their hair.

—Sluts.

—How can you say that when you haven't even met any of 'em? You can't even touch 'em or ya stuff up the pole. An besides that, this is my life I'm dreamin and there ain't none. I aint never even met any sluts.

—You can't say that, he says.

—Say what?

—Say that this is your dreamin life only. That's bullshit. I was the one that said maypoles, not you. So if I wanna be dancin around with sluts I will.

By now we've left and are in the car somewhere in East Melbourne.

—WATCH OUT! I scream. Jesus Christ, why doncha watch where you're goin?

—Why should I? If I do that I'll end up like you; always worryin about shit and plannin ahead. Do some livin for a change.

—Oh yeah, I say. And what am I doin now? I'll show you.

I start to rewind the tape. B's doin his third lap around a roundabout for his usual no-particular-reason.

—This is gonna be great, I say. It'll be just like *Visions of Cody*.

—What's that?

—A book by Jack Kerouac.

I'm always ravin about Jack to B. He doesn't appreciate it but I tell him Cody is the hero and Jack is the narrator.

The tape is back at the start; full of "That's bullshits" and "Shut ups."

We laugh and rewind bits and listen to 'em again and argue what we meant. We talk about dialogue, he talks about livin. I sound like Cody saying: "Thar yup. That's exactly exactly right!"

But I don't want to sound like Cody. I wanna be Jack. But it's such a big second in time that it's eternal and, as B says:

—What difference'll it make in the long run?