
THE TOWN

When townspeople look up it's the blue of the mountains
they see — when they turn back again to the flat land, back
to the treeline along the river and to the farm paddocks,
they're aware always of something above them in the distance.

Along the river, weatherboard houses gather
like broody hens in gravel streets and in lanes
by trees and hedgerows, dams and straggly gardens.
There are three churches, but these people are not so much
fixed on religion or even the law itself if it comes to that.
They're mindful of neighbours and commonly partial
to stories, gossip and a bit of sniping.
On Sundays, Presbyterians congregate near the river,
Catholics on the road out of town,
and Anglicans in the gravel street that is main street.
The police station is next to the Royal.

This could be any town but it isn't.
At St James, there's a bell that kids ring and pine trees
full of sparrows and cones. From a side window, blue
light fills the nave, and falls on pews, a white marble font
and a gold cross. In the corner post office, the telephonist
plugs in lines and makes connections. She filters the news
and weeps silently for people's sorrows, and her own.
Kids gather in a playground lined with peppercorn trees
where they hang from swings, throw balls, score runs,
and clamber through twisted branches.
Empire House provides provisions and conversation,
company and a small lending library.
Once there was a butcher's that smelled of meat and sawdust
and a blacksmith's with a glowing forge where ghostly horses
still stamp and snort in the cold by a dam where muscular geese
float amongst the reeds. At the bakery, the smell
of new-baked bread and Easter buns
floats out upon the sleeping town.

When townspeople look up they see blue mountains
beyond the detail of flatland by a river.

Here is old Tom Turvy was a traveling man once, come
out of his cottage. He's off for his morning walk and the paper.

And there's Mrs Borella who runs the corner shop —
"Mornin' missus," he calls as he walks by on the gravel road.

"Good Morning, Mr Turvy."

She sells fruit, sweets, drinks and bicycle parts
and sweeps her footpath with a straw broom.

Di Brown's done the week's washing — clothes pegged
on her line already in early sunlight; and Jimmie Mitchell's
at his oven, the smell of newly-baked bread
wafting over the town, tantalizing the noses of stay-a-beds
reluctant, yet, to let the night's dream image go.

"Come on over some time," she says,
the lady in black
lonely in the darkness,
the one with a wan smile
and the fragrance of roses.

Here's Joe Jenkins, retired man, grows vegetables and children .
He's digging in the gutter — "Mighty fine worms,
them" — to head off to the river. Images of trout and redfin
lurk in the snags of his memory where they pull deep
and flop about in the leaves and grass on a riverbank.

Birdsong and sunlight,
a steam train in the cutting,
clatter of wheels on the bridge,
and a line of smoke in blue sky above the redgums.
The gangers are out along the line, stabbing at blue metal,
replacing worn sleepers on the track to Wal Wal,
Lubeck, Murtoa. "Bloody hot," says Siddy, wiping his brow,
damp patches showing on his shirt
and hours yet to knock-off time.

"Only tiddlers," old Joe curses, "tiddlers in a jamjar."

Holding the line in his fingers, he drowns, waiting
for his luck to change. Memories of family matters
as ancient as stories and Cornwall lead him away -

there's Nellie was
"a young girl once, very pretty"
chasing seagulls on a stretch of sand,
and Captain Cat too, come growling
down to the sea —

“Set us up another,” he says,
leaning back in his captain’s chair,
surf in his ears and the hiss of wind on water.
Miss Pritchard, school teacher, cleans the board,
and writes up the day’s lessons. She is thinking about young Alf,
farmer, the one with twinkling eyes and reckless hands —
“Naughty boy. Very enjoyable!”

Listen. You can hear the chaff cutter and chuckle of poultry,
cart wheels in the street, the telephonist’s sigh, men talking
on the verandah and whisperings in the boatshed. Listen.

When townsfolk look up they see blue mountains
beyond the detail of flatland by a river.

IN LOVE WITH THE CITY

Manhattan (Woody Allen, 1979)

How the camera loves Manhattan. Woody Allen loves Manhattan. And there he is again, ambling along in sneakers, the famous glass towers and the pavement crowds threatening to overwhelm everything, glances like gunshots in the street. The opening is brilliant – a view west across Central Park at dawn with that grand sweep and the detail of buildings and leaves as Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” fills the sound track with its haunting tribute to a magical city. I listened to the music again in Radio City Music Hall in 1982 as the skyscraper sets were bathed in blue light and the very idea of “America” filled that vast auditorium and flowed out through the streets and across the hills and plains and valleys of an irresistible dream and love affair. Comedy and romance, Woody Allen with his trademark mix of self-conscious wit and fumbling affirmation, uncertainties always there at the edge of definition, and Mariel Hemingway just eighteen and very tall. When Diane Keaton asks her “What do you do, Tracy?” and she replies artlessly, “I go to high school,” we see a small shiver of recognition and doubt in the shuffling forty-two year old little man at her side. He has told her already to go to London on a scholarship: “You’ll think of me as a fond memory.” But when the doubts come, as they must, we are reminded of his former wife who left him to live with another woman and who writes a bestseller