

## GREETINGS, AUSTRALIA! TO YOU HAVE I COME!

Serge Liberman.

I am the first to catch sight of land!

Prancing about the uppermost deck in pursuit of a quoit grown black, ragged and greasy from exposure and overuse, I come to a necessary halt at the rails beneath which the tattered ring rolls, trembles and spins into the frothy swirl below to disappear into the waters that fan out greenly turbulent behind the ship.

Behind me then I hear footsteps ringing on metal. Quick, firm, angry, resolute steps. Surely the captain loping forward to admonish me for the loss.

Do I stay rooted in one place? Wait for fury, shame, retribution?

I run towards the bow of the ship where innocence might be the easier to feign.

The steps pass - a purse-lipped sailor on some private errand - but it is there, in that corner, while whistling in the wind, that I see it - a shape, something swelling, something broad, amorphous, grey, creeping legend-like out of the eastern horizon.

"Father! Mother!"

Electricity charges my feet. All clatter and clangour, I clamber down the stairs. I pound along the gangway, torment the passage with echo and find the deck where Father and Mother sit, two bodies side by side sunken into canvas chairs, each huddled, curled against the wind.

"Australia!" I shout. "Look! There!"

Excitement? Tumult? Surprise?

None of it to greet my discovery. Only a few passengers passing by pausing to look, one man, blind in one eye, saying "So it is," and another rummaging through my hair declaring, "Now, isn't *he* a clever boy?"

"Father! Mother! Look!", I shout on, leaping in turn to the rail and back to my parents.

Father sighs, shuts the Yiddish book he has been reading. Mother, marble-cheeked, rolls her knitting into her bag. Together, a mechanised pair, they rise. At the rail, they stand stiffly, and squint as with their gaze they try to slice through the harbour's gathering mist. The wind, devious and persistent, probes under Mother's head-kerchief, from there to prise out a coil of black hair, a coil which falls like a question mark upon her brow. Her exposed cheeks freeze to violet and she pinches them to restore colour and warmth, herself the while shivering within her heavy grey worsted coat, her legacy of an abandoned Paris. She presses Father's arm. He, adrift, it seems, on altogether another vessel, does not appear to respond to her touch.

"We have done the right thing, haven't we?" Mother asks yet again, as so often before.

And as so often before, fugitive creases flit from the corners of Father's mouth and eyes.

"God alone can judge," he says with an upturning of the hands.

God. Again God - for five weeks past, Father's guide, support, judge. Even though it is Spinoza that he has been reading and Sholom Aleichem, Peretz and Sholem Asch. I squeeze between them, wonder again where is that God that Father has lately so often invoked.

To the west, now behind us, the sun is drowning beneath a crown of flame. Inland, harder, sharper edges emerge chiselled out of stone, not blue, not grey, yet both, as first the pier appears and then the derricks, the sheds, towers, trucks and gates and, then too, the lattice of rails along which little red carriages crawl in sluggish motion. From the water below rises a tang of sea-weed while with the taste of the sea-salt and . bitterness all about, there merges something more rancid, of grease, decay and sulphur that bring sour bile vaulting to the throat. On the lower deck, a sailor is imperiously shouting orders in Italian and on looking down I see crushed against the rails a host of folk leaning over, dozens of them waving - waving hands, hats, handkerchiefs, shawls - as though to tell the new land of their arrival. But only the sea-gulls, squealing in their circuits, seem to respond at all.

Nearby stands a sparrow, a small woman, undernourished and dull-eyed. Her companion beside her is more of an owl, heavy-jowled and beaked. Her eyes flit and flicker, large black spheres oscillating in gluttonous startled motion.

"Australia," murmurs the sparrow dismally into her scarf.

"May we find better fortunes here than over there," says the owl.

To which Father - if he were a bird he might in that moment be a rooster - draws himself up, pouts his chest, brightens as he sees solid structures usurp the shape of smoky fantasy, and feels impelled to utter into surrounding space a spirited "Amen."

How close now that solidity, that firmness! After five weeks at sea, an end to pitching and rolling, to reeling stomachs and searing bile, and to the ceaseless circuitous talk whereby Father with the Sosnowskis and Kalbsteins in tow tell of the sure prosperity to come in the new land. Millions of words have they sprayed into the spray of the sea about them; together, from Genoa to Port Said and through Colombo and on to Fremantle, have they set up partnerships; and with wisdom as impeccable as perfect diamonds have they bought and sold and made fortunes hand over fist and come to own half the streets in Melbourne without yet having set foot in it.

How close now that visible solidity, that firmness! How immaculate the fantasy spun by the grown-ups, a fantasy lustrous and sublime that touches all, all, that is, except Mother who has sat, day after day, knitting her memories quietly into a cardigan, a shawl or a pair of gloves, her lips pressed pale between her teeth. Somehow, the ocean, the vastness of green water and foam,

the bitter air and impenetrable darkness of night at sea have cowed her into inordinate submission. She cannot rise, she cannot fly. Wherever she moves, reality chains her to itself, reality for her being the limbo of the present and the harshness of the past, a chastening past that has clipped any wings she might otherwise have ventured to flutter when Father or his friends have talked, within her hearing, of the future that is to be theirs. But there are moments, precious because rare, when she does bow to what might pass for hope, when, drawing me to her side, she whispers as if secretly into my ear, "For you, my child, for you have we left Europe."

Now, standing stiffly before the rail, Mother bites her lips again, with palpable distaste honing her nose to sharp severity.

But Father, with Joel Sosnowski on his other side, actually begins to laugh. To laugh, so that all his amalgamed molars show. To laugh, as if the first hundred pounds that he will make in the coming months behind a cutter's bench are already in his pocket.

His hair prances in the wind. The lapel of his jacket flaps wildly.

"It's not Poland," he says, "it's not Paris, but it's soil under our feet. Firm soil. And people say, there where the earth is firm, that place is home."

"Home," Mother huffs.

"Yes, home!" Father repeats, which I too repeat after him, "Home!" trying to catch shafts of Father's gaiety.

Home.

I gulp the sea-air in draughts, knowing these to be the last, and taste the new limitlessly expanding country to which a tugboat, brown, rusted and rickety, has taken to towing us in a narrowing arc towards the pier. I break away, clatter up and down the gangway, fore and aft, root out whatever is solid before me, trying to gorge myself upon the whole fringe of coastline with ravenous bites, returning to report, trusted scout that I am, every new particular that rises from the growing giant that is Australia.

"Look, Mother! Houses, Father! Trees, sand, cars, lamps, people!"

I glow. I burn. Touch me and be scalded.

"He is a clever boy," says Joel Sosnowski, his fingers pinching my cheeks stinging with scorpion's pincers. May his own fingers touching my cheek be burned by the fire within me.

And then comes the long-awaited first touch with Australia. With steel striking rubber – the rubber tyres hanging from the pier to buffer the impact of steel against timber – upon which I hold my breath, the ship glides into port, bumping once, twice, three times against the wharf, quivering with jerky jolts, and rocking to rest as weary wavelets of murky water lap around her stern. All about there is a hubbub now - sirens, whistles, creaking wheels, scraping steel, clattering feet, but more than anything voices, voices, laughter, greetings, exclamations, squealing - voices escalating to a babel that wraps around the whole milling mass of sailors, officials, passengers and visitors as they hurry, scurry and seek whatever it be - each to his own purpose, each to his own design.

On the port side, the gang-walk is lowered.

I tug at Father's elbow.

"Let's go down now, let's go down!"

"Wait," he says, holding me back. He scours the swarming platform for a waiting face. "Another minute. Two."

A minute now is an age, two a millennium. Beside him, I stand, wait, watch, my feet at the same time ready to run, to spring, to soar. Nearby, hoists whirr into motion. Crates rise, touch the clouds, swing, glide, dive. A breath away, trolleys scuttle. Beyond, carriages shuttle along ringing rails. Successions of cars arrive, depart near iron gates. And in the ears, the wind whistles, seagulls screech, men in overalls gesture and scream. And then the first of the passengers descend. Descend, stumble, fall into the embrace of ecstasy, fervour, delirium. For Joel Sosnowski the clasp of a brother, for Lea Kalbstein the tears of a sister, for the sparrow a cousin, for the owl a friend. A profusion of kisses down below, cascades of laughter, brisk passionate little dances, arms about shoulders, fingers to cheeks.

For a while longer, we watch. Two millennia now. Father. Mother. I. Father, hair in wind-lashed chaos, still rooting out the faces in the throng. Mother frosty. And I – I...

I...

Young heart. Plaything of the maudlin and of mawkish passions. Victim to others' pleasures and tears. I watch. The throat of its own accord constricting - ecstasy, grief. Tremor through every pore. Goose pimples along the arms. And yet heat, inner heat, prickling, tingling, as a sense of brittleness - or is it vulnerability, exclusion? - fixes me to immobility, steeled by an awareness, acute and sour - that there is joy below which we, Father, Mother, I, do not share. For we are orphans, a huddled self-contained isolated group as, with Father in front of me and Mother behind, we take the first steps down the gangway to the firmer steadier ground that is Australia.

We are orphans. No relative, no friend awaits us. Only Reuven Altman from the Welfare Society, an ox, huge, florid, beaming, his shoulders humped from stooping, his hands the hands of a giant as he extends one to Father.

"Welcome to Australia, my suffering brother!"

- then to Mother -

"May this become your home, my sister!"

- then to me, doubling over, all glow and golden canines, with a buoyant bellow to ask my name. I tell him, feel the moisture, warmth, force of his clasp.

"Another member of the work-force!" he booms loudly and laughs. "New blood, young blood, a gift to the land. Now come with me, let me take your bags."

The pier, as he strides along its length, is all his. We tread quickly to keep pace with him.

"This is Melbourne," he says, the very horizon falling within the arc described by his sweeping arm. "There is Queenscliff and opposite - no, you can't see it - there is Portsea. But that is for the rich, for them", he says, "not for us", then turning his massive face squarely upon us, he pouts his ample lips, raises his brow and adds with a tone of mellow tenderness, "my children".

Then he is off again, pace and patter again swift and vigorous.

"A golden land this, some say. No, it's not gold. But opportunity, yes, and work, if you are willing to accept. Here is no Vilna nor Warsaw nor Lodz. Here, a Yiddish word is a pearl, something rare. We have a Yiddish theatre, a newspaper, a choir. But there is more, much more that still needs to be done. You, my brother, you, my sister, you survived. By God's will, it must have been for some purpose."

By the gates at the exit from the pier, he bundles us into a black Vanguard, starts the motor twice, releases the handbrake and - oh delight, delight - we are away, behind us the sea, the ship, the wharf, the emptiness of weeks, as we drive through streets growing grey with drizzle and evening, through streets spacious and narrow, straight and tortuous, flat and rising, trams down the middle, tall buildings by the sides, and houses, milk-bars and recessed churches and bill-boards, signs and flashing lights, and bustling women scurrying in all directions and paper boys crying out outside hotels - driving through all these streets and through quieter, darker, gloomier ones, turning finally into a drab rough-surfaced bumpy road to stop outside an ill-lit cottage - an ancient terrace in the heart of Carlton - where a single room has been prepared for us.

And here we bundle out this time. Jaded by weeks of ocean and empty scenes, my legs discover freedom. No rails, ropes, banisters now to limit my caprice. No tilting, reeling, keeling to shuttle me, a quoit, across the deck. Liberated, I leap about, seek out, explore, even in the rain, eyes, hands, feet, taking in the garage, the factories, gardens, shops and potholes, everything, everything in one vast ravenous grasp. Father, ever-practised, makes straight for the door, while Mother, standing slightly hunched and huddled at the gate, adrift, still drifting, between the Vanguard and the house, falters, struggles visibly with her will, maybe against her will, and enters only after the soldering of some mighty unspoken resolve.

"No, it's not Paradise," says Reuven Altman touching her arm, a giant beside her, "but for three months, six months people have known worse."

And to be sure, no palace is the room assigned to us. A mere box. Cracked green walls cobwebbed in the corners, a single dull unhooded light bulb, and a bare table, scarred chairs, two double beds, mattresses sagging, ragged tears along the roller blind half-drawn and askew across the grimy rain-peppered window, and the smell of mothballs damp and mould. All drab, spare, oppressive. Oppressing Mother, with Father, I know, feeling the accusing bitterness of her silence behind him as he opens a suitcase, and seeing it in the oval mirror above the fireplace from which, when their eyes meet, Mother looks away.

"Patience, calm, we shall manage," he says in an offering of placation. But he, too, then turns away, words alone, he knows, unable to shake the impact of lostness and entrapment wrought by the surroundings.

Reuven Altman, out of the room at that moment, returns, towering over Luba Fleischer whom he has brought with him, a comical pop-eyed long-necked goose of a woman wiping her hands in a red chequered apron.

"Well, then, I can trust you, Luba - no? - to be good to them?" Reuven Altman booms as ever, bending over and bracing her shoulders with his huge encompassing arm. "For you, too, were among the slaves in Egypt, hm?"

"But of course," Luba Fleischer says, clicking her tongue.

A mole sits on her cheek and a cyst with hairs over an eyebrow. Still young, she has the makings of a double chin. "There is soup on the stove and brisket that all it needs is just a little warming. Your first meal in Australia to make a blessing over."

She talks of food and my tongue, palate, lips grow moist.

"That is more than good of you," Father says.

"Psha," Luba Fleischer bursts out with a little explosion. "It is nothing. After Europe - if *we* can't show a little charity towards one another, who will?"

"The words of an angel," says Reuven Altman, his own words resounding in every corner as, upon laughing, the gold in his teeth glint even under the dull light of the globe, and adding, bowing first to Mother then to Luba Fleischer, "You two should become good friends."

Mother promises nothing. Still dressed in her coat, although unbuttoned now, she raises her chin towards Father and says, "You go and eat. And take the child. I shall stay here, I'm not hungry."

"Not even just a little soup?" coaxes Luba Fleischer.

"I'm not hungry," Mother says again.

Reuven Altman, with a flourish, looks at his watch.

"You are in good hands," he says to Father and Mother, nodding in tribute to Luba Fleischer.

Then, lifting my chin with a hand that is at once enormous yet soft and tender, his eyes, the black of their pupils ringed with grey, root out mine.

"You have the whole world before you, my young man. Watch. Grow. Listen. Learn. Do your lessons. Think no foolishness. Make your blessed father and your dear mother ever proud of you."

Then he releases my chin but the tenderness remains. I float on feathers, soar on the ringing resonance of his voice, ready to promise anything, anything, as, retreating, he leaves, huge, luminous, golden, bowing one more time as he passes through the door.

Shortly after, Father breaks our first bread in the new land and drinks a glass of wine poured for him by Victor Kopecnik. The little kitchen - if it seats seven, it can seat seventy - smells of garlic, matzo balls, fried onion, kasha and simmering oil. Not the grease and detergent of the ship penetrating every mouthful or the salt and seaweed odours of the relentless sea, but something homely, familiar even if distant, in memory belonging to Paris where Mother, preparing for dinner the Esperanto of a Jewish recipe, manufactured scents as savoury, tantalising and all-pervasive as these. But now it is Luba Fleischer at the stove, salting, stirring, smelling, tasting, while Arnold Fleischer and the Kopecniks sit with us - with Father and Mother who has relented and with me - at the table.

"To the future in a free land," Father says, his laughter tinkling like the glasses he clinks with Victor Kopecnik and Arnold Fleischer.

"To health," says Victor Kopecnik.

"To prosperity," says Arnold Fleischer.

To which Mother, not drinking, but witness, mutters a curt "Amen", conceding at least to a glass of tea.

In time, we eat. Conversation sprouts wings, it flies. Alights like butterflies, now on one leaf, now on another, aloft again in scintillating circuits which I sense even if I cannot fully comprehend. Names, dates, places whirl around the dusty bulb, impinge upon the walls, touch the ceiling. Each person has a story to tell, an observation to make, an opinion to express. Fingers probe the void, hands gesticulate, words, words, words spray the air like the spray at sea. Victor Kopecnik, dribbling soup down his chin, talks hurriedly, with a lisp. Slawa Kopecnik dominates. It is not in her nature to speak softly. Arnold Fleischer insists on trifles. Words revolve, as on the ship, recurring circuits of things that were, that are, and that will be. And words like Warsaw, Hitler, 'thirty-nine, Auschwitz, 'forty-two, the Kopecniks to Paris, 'forty-seven, the Kaplans whom Father and Kopecnik both seem to have known gone to Canada, and the Frankels to Brazil, and still other words, other names: Sosnowski, Kalbstein, Menzies, the Communist Party, Russia, the Internationale, Australia, security, fortune, future. Europe is behind you. Here, you are safe. Here, you are free. Find work, be patient. Your young one will thrive here, he'll be whatever you want him to be. Time is all he will need. Time. And a bit of work, of course. And he will be whatever you want him to be. Whatever *he* wants to be.

And remembering Reuven Altman, I watch, I listen, I try to learn, sucking at the words - savouring them as I do the homely food - with delicious delight.

The meal over, I leave the table, drift - exploring - down the passage. Behind me, Slawa Kopecnik's high-pitched shrill shrills on; her husband soars on the crests of his own sibilant ardour. Fountains of words continue to gush. Paris, Warsaw, Siberia; bunkers, barracks, brigades; and Melbourne, Carlton, home.

I step outside, confront an evening that is alien, but moist, cool, redolent with the neighbour's flowers - orphans in this street of concrete and brick - their odours mingled with the acidity of compost in the gutters and the tarriness of rubber and grease. Opposite, silent as if stagnating, stands a garage; near the corner, a huddle of factories, graffitied grated gates and whitewashed stone with stark script, incomprehensible words, a playground nearby, and trios, quartets of cottages interspersed by a shop here and there, concealing interiors under the bilious light of yellow lamps swaying to the capricious rhythms of capering breezes.

Memory burgeons. Fleeting. Touching with flickering breath. Receding. Andre, Gerard, Jacques. The school in Rue Rodin, lemon meringues at midday, prize-giving, the first tooth lost in bodily somersault down a flight of stairs. And feet ringing on stone around Bastille on Quatorze Juillet, across Place de la Republique, along Belleville. And solidity and sunshine and snow, under skies, between edifices different and remote, separated now by time and by oceans into which a tattered quoit has tumbled and disappeared, flight in fear leading to a glimpse, then a vision of land arising grey, amorphous and creeping nearer, a growing gentle beast stretching upward, gliding closer out of a long and mute horizon.

Australia!

Australia!

Beyond the end of the street are other horizons, opaque cyanic blue settling over the Indian black of low houses, pealed rooftops and sluggish traffic, all obscuring that vision - mine - that would reach out even now, no matter the hour, and ferret out the sheep and those hopping creatures and furry bear-like animals I have read about in my French Larousse under the heading "Australie", and, in my chase after them, glimpse the world, that world out there promised to me by Reuven Altman. But shadow, unfamiliarity, timidity - the ultimate blight of adventure - keep me rooted to the gateway, the cold of its iron rails against my back, the creaking of its hinges yielding comfort against the unknown.

Out of the unknown but close at hand emerge crowing noises, punctuated by screeches, cackles, yelps and caterwauls. Not animals these, neither dogs, cats, parrots, nor fowl, but three boys, running, whirling, reeling, sundering vaporous air apart with the cacophony of a menagerie. One is a reed, the other round, the third neither tall nor short, nor slender nor broad, forgettable against his companions were he not the one with a stick striking avidly at lace-iron railings and swishing whipingly at void. From around the corner have they come, turning from Canning into Pitt Street, careering between footpath and roadway in heedless abandon, while I lean against the gate and from that quiet station watch and ogle and stare.

It is the squat round one who brakes to a halt before me. Even lightning is slower than he. Scarcely can I blink before his pudgy palm clamps my shoulder as with the other and with a raucous "'ey, come 'ere fellas!" he beckons to his mates who, in turn, come running, the one with long strides, the other with smaller steps, that stick of his still lashing at air. They may be freckled, pimples, beginning - all of them about twelve already, perhaps thirteen - to sprout whiskers. Evening's shadows, the darker kin of those swinging gloomy overhead yellow lights, whish across their faces, their fluid shapes cavorting wilfully, their eyes out of formlessness, with the light falling upon them, gaining life, flickering, shining, now playfully, now curiously, then menacingly.

"Whoa!" drawls the tall one, drawing up the reins of an imaginary horse.

"Whee!" cries the second, cracking the void with his stick again, its vibrations reaching my ear.

The little fat one holds up his free hand, not having yet released the other. Clearly the leader, he is obeyed. Silence waits for him to speak, which he does, with words coming between hard-set teeth, their tone that of questions, of searching, and taking the form of lip-skewed camaraderie.

But go understand him! What words are they that for all his .smile are coated with marble hardness?

"'ere's a reffo 'ere." "Nover o'vem bastids." "Nuboy." "Juboy."

Pressing for anchorage against the gate, I feel its moist coldness in my back, together with another, clammier, moistness - of perspiration and vague dread.

The leader claps me on the back, shouts "Yipes!" in peculiar triumph, winks to his fellows on mischief bent.

He seizes me by an arm. His companions enclose my other side. Space becomes a cage. The steam of their breaths laps at me with unwelcome warmth. The tall one, the horseman, now so close, smells of laundry soap. The middle one sports a sicklier smell. First, he farts, then sniffs, clears his throat, and spits. A thick blob of spittle appears on his lips. There it hangs, clings and swings, finally finding its liberation, dropping, heavily, on his shoe. The leader laughs. The horseman bursts out, "Bewdy!" The spitter, himself laughing, threatens them jocularly with his stick, then more menacingly turns to me. His eyes are mice, flitting schemingly between me and the blob on his shoe.

I would cry out, but with that weapon swaying before me, I smile instead, making sounds in efforts to form comprehensible speech.

"Je ... Je ne , " I try. "Ich bin arrive aujourd'hui... fun Paris de Pari ... France oif a shif ... "

"Wow," says the horseman.

"Getim!" says the fat one. Once again, turning to his fellows, he crooks a finger and winks.

Babel has come to Carlton. I reach with words; with other words do they respond; but nowhere lie the crossroads where they may meet. The phrases I have learned, knotting my tongue and over which I have broken my teeth on the boat "Thank you," "Good morning," "How do you do?" - of what good are they to me here as first the fat one, then the horseman, and, last, the farter grab my arms more tightly still, burn my wrists with Chinese twists, and have me squat, then kneel, then bow, pressing my face towards the farter's spittled shoe, they the while laughing, hissing, snorting with some brutal frenzied passion as over and over they shriek "Lickit! Lickit! Lickit!"

Perhaps it is the result of their own clamorous merriment, perhaps I have myself screamed out, but arising in confusion from that ever-more-tightly constricting cage come other noises, an anarchy of voices and of shuffling, scraping, clattering and stridency as, one after the other, my arms are released, the pressure on my head is leavened away, and there follows the ringing of feet on asphalt and a high-pitched refrain piercing the thin moist air: "Kikies! Buggers! Bastids! Pricks! Kikies! Buggers! Bastids! Pricks!"

In a huddle they surround me now. Father, Mother, the Kopecniks, the Fleischers.

Arnold Fleischer has chased the boys around the Rathdowne Street corner and returned; Luba Fleischer, all solicitude, and repeating "What did they want, the *shkotzim*? Did they hurt you? What did they want?", taps my head, my shoulders, my neck; while the Kopecniks, with Victor Kopecnik clinging to Father and Slawa Kopecnik to Mother, try to succour, console and subdue, saying, "They mean nothing. They're only *shkotzim*, hooligans, louts. They have nothing else to do."

Perhaps Father listens. With his "Yes, I understand, they are everywhere," he is prepared to believe. For, whenever touched by doubt, he is given - as he will always be given - to turn his face to the more comforting side of any unsettling fact. It is Mother who does the trembling for them both, for us all, Mother, who fears, dreads, grieves, sees black in the whitest cloud, in pearl

and in snow, and apprehends with palpitation every deviation, uncertainty and change. Never mind that humiliation has nearly reduced me to burning tears. Never mind that, for me, what began as expectation and adventure has crumbled into hateful chaos. Never mind that Reuven Altman's marvellous words, so gentle and so full of promise have suddenly fractured and collapsed into a rubble mound of lies. Never mind that...

Never mind anything as Mother grabs my hand, pushes past Father, and the Kopecniks, and the Fleischers, and tows me behind her into the gloomy corridor of that melancholy cottage, spitting venom, hissing, seething, "Even here?! For this we have come?! For this we have bled?! For this?! For this?!"

-----  
From collection of stories: *A Universe of Clowns*.