

Dr Skogg was unhappy. He always was, on Bloomsday, and always for the same reasons; but he went ahead in the same way every year, obviously expectant that just this once everything would go off perfectly.

It was inherent in the nature of his expectations that they were never to be fulfilled; but, acute enough though he was in all other ways, this was something that had simply never occurred to him. Each of the long list of fiascos — and he had been trying for over ten years now — he ascribed to a different, wildly unlikely, never-to-be-repeated accident or catastrophe which had exploded unexpectedly upon a set of otherwise irreproachably acted out procedures. It was noticeable, true, that each time disaster struck at a different point in the ritual peregrinations which constituted his day's observance, but that, after all, was surely only to be expected, given the length and complexity of the ritual and the series of elaborate correspondences and analogies which had to be built up between his own largely fortuitous experiences during the day and the events of Joyce's novel. He sometimes wished that he could allow others into the secret: no-one was aware, had ever been aware, that on the sixteenth of June Skogg was laboriously going through as close as possible a re-enactment of the events of *Ulysses*; no-one had noticed that on one day of the year he behaved with conspicuous oddity, and that there were striking points of resemblance between the oddities of each year; not even the alert staff of the *Clarion* had picked up the significant fact that Skogg visited their offices once a year and once only; it had not been remarked upon by the clientele of the Wessex that once and only once a year Skogg, normally an apolitical if not exactly a pacific man, tried to pick political quarrels at the bar (it should be noted that he found himself to some extent obliged to play *all* the characters in the book himself, which added notably to his difficulties); and the residents of the various purportedly non-existent brothels of whose services he was compelled, this one night of each year, to avail himself, took it all, so to speak, in their stride. All of this was very much as Dr Skogg wished it — it was *his* ritual after all — but did lead to inconvenience from the very beginning and, eventually, the sort of disasters that occur when incomprehension of one's motives leads to misunderstanding — serious misunderstanding — of one's actions.

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Passage A
(pp 193-195)

And what of our protagonists on June 16th? We have dropped hints, but not perhaps sufficient for the reader to be able to differentiate: who is doing what where and why? We shall try, without being overly old-fashioned and explaining everything — which is insulting — to make things a little clearer, at least as regards those whose actions are not, at this stage, supposed to be altogether shrouded in mystery. It is, come to think of it, a lot more convenient to do that here, and more or less synoptically, than to devote perhaps a chapter apiece to people who in many cases have already had more than their fair share of talking space: we hear calls for equal time.

But more of this later. Now for some meteorological special effects.

This particular June the sixteenth, in Sydney, was — though this Dr Skogg had not yet noticed (improperly, he'd bought his offal the previous day, and at Grace Bros., not Dlugacz's) — a wild, howling sort of day, with great black and acid-yellow nimbostratus skating dizzily across the sky, potbellied with unshed cataracts of rain; leaves were whirling like razors across people's faces, the birds in the parks huddled clotted under the heavy leaves in miserable quivering clumps. The gunmetal waters of the harbour swelled up in great slow pregnant bulges, startling with their deliberate thunder downwards again after abruptly breaking into moments of Hokusai levitation, like a courtship dance of dolphins. The flower-sellers in Martin Place toppled about in pursuit of their drunken roses, and men in pub doors saw the beer whisked from their glasses and slapped across the faces of stooped hurrying passers-by. Over miles and miles of red suburbs clothes-hoists and gum trees held bacchanal, sheets cracking like stockwhips; and even the cats jumped down from the fences. Dr Skogg, in other words, was unlikely to get much joy from the beach.

And then it changed. Suddenly there was only the calm blue of a pagoda-patterned china plate, the yellow light withdrawn momentarily into itself, leaves and seaspray held in suspension, the high buildings floating, blue in the shafts that shot down through the heavy clouds and spread blue on their undersides, leaves, clouds and buildings placid and substanceless behind the thin ukiyo-e screen of precipitated dust, caught between winds. And then the flung mists of fountains and waves whirled back into their courses, flattened and curled under the towering onslaught of rain. Nicky Osgood — here

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Passage B
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they come, after all — Nicky Osgood, who had crept (or was this another day?) into Vlastos's room to play patterns with the chessmen, wilted a little as the window shook and yammered and the roof boomed, but forgot to after a moment and returned to his arrangements. Sean McIan turned over in his sleep and hunched under the pillow.

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Vlastos had left home early and was mooning around Paddy's Market, his usual well-worn interleaved openings tome under his arm, thinking about buying zucchini and cabbage, and also about early openers; shortly he entered one and settled down with a drink and his book; there he can be left for quite some time.

Sean McIan eventually woke up, sweating and with a fluttering pulse, and realised upon looking at the clock that he had to go to work in about three hours. The storm broke over Sydney again and again. Piles of vegetables were swept past the market pub where Vlastos was still reading; a man had fallen off a ferry rounding Cremorne. In late afternoon, with Dr Skogg's schedule about half-finished, despite many difficulties; with Dr Skogg, though, still without a Stephen, and annoyed at the account he had received from Blazes Boylan of Blazes' reception by Molly — the storm simply went away. The clouds whipped over the horizon in a matter of minutes and the city was washed in warm apricot light as the wind sank to a gentle insinuating whisper. Dr Skogg was much relieved, for the time was coming when a crossing of paths had to be effected, and he felt that this could be done a great deal better without mud and debris littering the streets; the paths concerned had to be literal ones too. He set forth quite cheerful again, at about the same time as Vlastos left the pub and McIan left his flat.

Vlastos drank meticulously. He had had six Scotches so far and thought he might have more. He was thinking, and talking, very precisely, very cogently, and people were listening to him with interest and respect. It had been a while since he'd been to the pub and he was enjoying it, in a way.

Nicky walked away. The girl in the park adjusted her blue dress around her skinny thighs, stood there for a moment, one leg arched, one foot irresolute a few inches in the air, and went back to the seesaw. She nearly slipped off before arranging herself, cat-neat, sprawled there still staring into the empty night. She looked without blinking at a bougainvillea spray blown up against the wire fence, fluttering like a sick hummingbird before sinking into a dirty puddle, vanishing. The wind was rising again fast; the rain swept in beaded waves across the street, rattling at windows, whisking her hair heavily across her face and into her eyes, the wind rising, blowing green and yellow whirlpools of leaves into the pool of yellow light. Nicky had turned the corner. The rain boomed and crashed, caroming, slapping off walls, trees, street, fat slow drops from the ground bouncing back into the falling miles-high strands, the tall glassy vortices, in a billion invisible explosions, battering Nicky's head as he negotiated the spreading puddles and the foaming gutters, past the waterlogged trees and the shuttered windows, across the road and round another corner, down through the tunnel under the railway bridge where the sprawling mosses dripped as though the shattering rainstorm was the work of some flybynight parvenu, and thin streams of thin green sludge trickled slowly down the dark red walls as they always had, rain or no rain. Nicky stood leaning against the wall as a train drummed overhead. Here it was very dark: through the walls of rain he could see a solitary lamp blinking in stroboscopic eclipse, its faded soft pinpoint radiance like the yellow eyes of a dying cat, itself drifting, scattering as its rays were grabbed and bounced up and down and whirled away into the night by the rain, smashing against walls and tree-trunks. In the tunnel under the bridge Nicky felt wet for the first time. He walked on out into the rain, partly because he had to anyway sooner or later and partly so as not to feel so wet. Streets away, the girl in the blue dress got off the seesaw. Vlastos was quite drunk. In a small room elsewhere the man with the chessboard was sitting with thumb and index finger hovering over the board. Nicky slipped, recovered himself and walked on.

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Passage C
(pp 165-166)

Cicada Gambit: A Note on the main characters (Nadia Wheatley)

Martin Johnston's poetry needs no introduction. Thanks to Matt Rubinstein of *Ligature*, it is again available, in *Beautiful Objects*. But Martin's only novel, *Cicada Gambit*, is long out of print.

Insofar as *Cicada Gambit* has a main character, it is the narrator, Vlastos, who introduces himself by saying:

I am of course — my name makes that much clear — of Greek blood; and, something unusual among my countrymen, I excel at chess.

An immigrant to Australia, Vlastos boards with a couple of Anglo-Aussie battlers called the Osgoods, who have an adopted son named Nicky — also of Greek extraction. Aged in his late twenties, Nicky is a little younger than Vlastos. Somewhat of an idiot savant, he is fascinated by the chess set in Vlastos's room. A third character of significance is Sean McIan.

Those of you who knew Martin will realise that Vlastos's Greekness and his passion for chess are shared by the book's author. But Vlastos is not an alter ego. Sean McIan is the closest Martin came to writing an *autobiographical* character. And indeed, Martin had used the name 'Sean McIan' as a pseudonym for a couple of short stories he had published while he was at university. He describes Sean as:

A very low-ranking reporter on the morning *Clarion*... the second string police roundsman... It seems likely that he [Sean] feels himself capable of better things; authorship, the suggestion is.

When Martin dropped out of university in 1968, he became a cadet journalist, and indeed worked as a police roundsman — a job he hated, because he hated going to visit a bereaved family after a tragedy and getting a story.

Cicada Gambit is to some degree a thriller, and it is Sean McIan who hears the news of the crime — if it is indeed a crime — on the police radio. So who is the *deus ex machina* who sets the plot in motion? It is our fourth character, the odious Dr Skogg, an academic.

(In parentheses, as Martin would say, I could mention that Martin left university because he could not stand the Sydney University English Department, which was in the hands of the Leavisite faction.)

SO — this academic, Dr Skogg, has a private ritual each year of celebrating Bloomsday by attempting to mimic Mr Bloom's June 16th journey through Dublin in the streets and pubs of inner Sydney. I am indebted to Julian Neylan, a Joyce aficionado, for the wonderful tagline he put on his Bloomsday website:

“If Greece has the *Odyssey* and Dublin *Ulysses*, then Sydney has *Cicada Gambit*”.

I am, of course — my name makes that much evident — of Greek blood; and, something unusual among my countrymen, I excel at chess. I am not, I think, a vain person, despite the extraordinary and unwelcome attentions that have been lavished upon me recently, and my estimate of my own abilities you may take as an objective one.

These, at any rate, I regard as the salient facts so far as the events I propose here to recount are concerned. That other facts, perhaps other perspectives, glimpses through unexpected interstices, will reveal themselves during my narrative I know: to set down an experience such as mine on paper is to submit oneself to the circumambulations of the curious or the merely morbid, and I do so in full foreknowledge that judgments will be passed, comments, aesthetic and moral, not always pleasing, will be bandied about, there will be talk in pubs.

And on talk: I am aware of a certain formality, a certain, how shall I put it, stiltedness in my use of the English language; but I do not think this something for which I ought to apologise. It is not my native tongue; it could not in any case be said to possess the emotional, the musical expressiveness (the fustian quality?) of Greek; and what I am about to relate partakes in some ways of the formulaic, of the ikonic almost — if ikons could be said to move, as, in the chiaroscuro of a whitewashed village chapel I have sometimes seen them do — to the extent that an idiom looser than this of mine would tend to blur and soften the already blurred lineaments of those experiences which are of consequence in the midst of so much admittedly colourful but supererogatory detail.

For, as is perhaps commonly the case, much has apparently happened; there have been moments in recent months when I have felt myself swirled about somewhere near the centre of a whirlpool of overwhelming facts (Herakleitos truly said — if he said it, a topic, after all, of conjecture among scholars — that one cannot step into the same river twice; still, having stepped once one may be swept away by it) — yet upon analysis the essential elements can be seen to be as pure, as diagrammatic, as a Reti study or a rook-and-pawn ending by Rubinstein.

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Vlastos

Apart from what he himself cares to tell, not very much is known of Sean McLan; it's suspected that there isn't really much to know.

It is known that he is a very low-ranking reporter on the morning *Clarion* (reporter: one occasionally sees his byline; low-ranking: not often) and that he has for perhaps the last year been the second-string police roundsman there, which makes him something like a D grade. Beyond this, even here information on matters of detail is markedly unforthcoming, partly due to the intransigence of the paper and partly owing to the current inaccessibility of McLan himself.

There is a good deal to show (indirectly as usual, and partly on the basis of his own statements) that

he is far from happy at being a second-string police roundsman: one item here is the slapdash quality of the stories he produces in that capacity, when forced to express himself beyond the mere conveyance of facts, another that when in drink, which makes him loquacious, he has said so. It seems likely that he feels himself capable of better things; authorship, the suggestion is.

First, Dr Gordon Skogg, fifty-one, expert on eighteenth century literature, author of an erudite monograph on Martinus Scriblerus, a brief but, some say, definitive study of Soame Jenyns, a book on Pastoral Homiletics and a useful book entitled *Images of the Chase in Augustan Pastoral*. Squat, hirsute and hostile.

Dr Skogg, it ought perhaps to be noted, has in common with many persons of academic habit a propensity for formulating his conversations in terms of a sort of Socratic elenchus, expressing himself largely through questions; and particularly so when being asked questions himself. From such people it is immoderately difficult to obtain information.

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Sean McLan

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Dr Skogg

Nicky — Nikos or Nikitas, I take it, originally — had seemed perhaps a little slow for his eight years when they brought him from the orphanage where he had spent most of his life.

After a few years, apparently, it became clear even to the Osgoods, not themselves quicksilver thinkers, that there was something wrong. School reports can be shunted aside ('What do teachers know?' — not an unreasonable sentiment anyway, often enough) but they did grow worried as it became very gradually clear that the reason Nicky brought no friends home from his class at school was that they were all much younger than he, with the disparity increasing. He started showing sullenness, unresponsiveness, an indisposition to reply to fairly simple questions; he showed signs of actually falling

further back. He left school as early as was legally possible and had worked, since then, at jobs — a touch that slightly amuses me, though certainly I feel sorry enough for him — similar to those in which I myself had had, for so long and wasted a time, to engage: undemanding, repetitive tasks from the performance of which he seemed to derive no pleasure but no particular sense of boredom either.

He is now in his late twenties, a little younger than I am: a large, remarkably good-looking, slovenly young man who says little (and that in a slurred and sometimes almost inaudible English) and rarely looks at people directly, though his eye is sharp enough in other ways. I doubt that the Osgoods have ever come close to grasping his situation: 'Ah, you don't want to worry about our Nicky; he's a bit slow, you know' seems the limit of their awareness.

As to Nicky's own awareness — of others, of the world, of words — I sometimes have the impression that he sees everything, or as much as you or I do, but through a screen of slowly flowing water, his attention gripped from time to time by a fish or a twine of seaweed floating by, so that his eyes often focus disconcertingly like a cat's upon some moving point in air between himself and you: in any case, he never looks at anyone quite straight on, which gives him a curious and deceptive look of naive slyness. Poor Nicky could never be sly to save his life, should he have occasion to feel impelled to be so.

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Nicky Osgood
(adopted son of
the couple with
whom Vlastos
boards)