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**DE BERG TAPES**

**Tapes Nos. 1165 and 1166**

Corrected document retyped from the  
Transcript of a recording made by

**MARTIN JOHNSTON**

on 23rd June 1980

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two cassettes, two sides of each.

Tape No. 1165

DE BERG TAPES

## MARTIN JOHNSTON

Today is 23rd June 1980, I am Martin Johnston. I am Martin Johnston, I am a writer, a poet mainly, although I've made my living for ten years or so writing book reviews and criticisms, and as well as preparing my fourth book of poetry I'm now engaged on a biography of my parents, the writers George Johnston and Charmian Clift.

The books I've published to date have been: *Shadowmass*, a book of poetry, 1971; another, *Ithaka*, in 1973; *The Sea-Cucumber* in 1978; and the fourth, *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap*, should come out later this year, 1980. \*

I have also published both poetry and reviews and criticism in a number of newspapers and periodicals. I reviewed books regularly for a number of years for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, also the *Sun Herald*, the *Sunday Australian*, *Sunday Telegraph* and *Bulletin*. I've published poetry in pretty much all the Australian magazines and more recently in such British magazines as *Poetry Review* and *The Atlantic Review*, and broadcast pretty extensively, mostly criticism, on such ABC radio programmes as 'Books and Ideas', 'The Poet's Tongue' and 'Quality Street'.

All my life I've been not only surrounded by books, both my parents being writers, but also surrounded by a sort of mental climate in which it was

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\* In fact, published in 1984. [Ed.]

virtually assumed that what one did was to write. This is probably rather odd and still quite rare in an Australian context, and I don't know how good it is, finally, in its effects. I've enjoyed it, but at the same time one result I sometimes fear has been that I was imperceptibly propelled into writing, or conveyer-belted, if you like, into writing, almost without any particular prior volition on my own part. My parents could talk all they wanted about how dangerous, risky and uncertain the life of a writer was, indeed that was only too visible a lot of the time in their own lives, but nevertheless it was as much an assumption in the family and among their friends that that was what one did, as it might have been in some strange old oriental caste-ridden or feudal society, that because one's parents were crofters one automatically became a crofter oneself; so that I don't know to this day to what extent I woke up as it were one morning and decided I was going to write, or just assimilated by a species of family osmosis that of course that was what I was going to do. By the same token, neither my brother nor my sister ended up doing so, although my brother has ended up being a very fine musician, which is probably a displacement of the same impulse, slightly to one side. My sister, on the contrary, revolted against the very idea of writing or indeed reading at all, which seems in some ways a more reasonable and healthier response. However, I'm stuck, it would seem, with the line I took.

When I was about twenty-one or twenty-two, and really I suppose only three years after the most rudimentary kind of apprenticeship as a poet, I wrote a series of sonnets which as all proper sonnet series ought to be, and always have been, was very much for and about the girl I was very much in love with at the time. At the same time a lot of motifs deriving from my childhood in Greece and my family seem to have crept into it. There's a line,

or a half line, 'bloody well fly', which fits probably well enough into the poem in itself, but was in fact a remark that Sidney Nolan made to my parents one night on the Greek island of Hydra, when they were feeling desperately depressed about... oh, books not quite coming off and money not quite coming in and how difficult it was, when one was laden down by these things, to fly like Icarus; and Sid just said "Nonsense, nonsense, bloody well fly! You can always fly, you might get burnt, but it's worth having a go!" And that fitted in, into my own very young perplexities about love and families and so on. The poem is on the occasion of the lady in question going away somewhere, how permanently I didn't know. It is from a series called *Uncertain Sonnets (for Julie)*, and the poem itself is called 'Airport'. \*

Her arms are gravelled at the undertow  
of air flung across air as the monster flows  
escaping air. A labyrinth, she knows,  
is where all genial lies and no dreams go.  
The shaggy dreambeast watches the golden leap  
(a dream of Icarus caught in a dream) and still,  
staring and weeping on a Cretan hill,  
sucks at a dried-out marrowbone of sleep.  
'Bloody well fly!'

The styles of our defining  
are words in sleep, and when the words are said  
we lie in the conch of night, entwining  
our double-crossing limbs on the double bed.  
Toppling unbalanced in the wind I hear  
your words lost in the labyrinth of my ear.

I was born in Sydney in November 1947. I just contrived to be born in wedlock. My parents had got married a couple of months before. My mother, Charmian Clift, was born in Kiama in 1923, of somewhat eccentric parents.

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\* This poem appears in *The Sea-Cucumber*, p. 40. [Ed.]

Her father was an English mining engineer, her mother was... well, basically an Irish Jewess of a very bookish frame of mind, in fact both of her parents were very romantically bookish, full of bits and pieces of John Donne and Rabelais and Laurence Sterne, Fielding and so on. My father, George Johnston, was born in the Melbourne suburb of Elsternwick in 1912. His father was a tram driver, his mother was a nurse, and for two or three generations back that's very much the sort of working-class Melbourne people they had been. How true, or how legendary this may be I'm not quite sure, and I'm going to have to find out if I write the biography of my parents I've just started work on, but my father used to claim descent from the George Johnston – Major, later Colonel, George Johnston – who is reputed to have planted the Australian flag in Botany Bay, later to have been mixed up with the Rum Rebellion, and generally a rather picturesque sort of early colonial quasi crook, the Johnston after whom various Johnston Streets and the like in and around Sydney are supposed to be named. I think my father was given to mythologising about family background; there was also supposed to have been another early member who was hanged for barratry. But George Johnston, the original one, may or may not have been there somewhere. But, in any case, I come from on one side a very working-class line, with what at least in my father's case were rather sardonically held dreams of past grandeur, and on the other side from a distinctly eccentric, not overtly literary but certainly bookish and unconventional, sort of background.

I try to deal with this whole problem of family, tracing the roots back as far as they go till they tail rather incomprehensibly out, in one of a recent sequence of sonnets which were published in *New Poetry* in May 1980, and will be in my book if and when that comes out. The sonnet is simply called

'Biography', because what set it off was precisely my feeling of the enormous problems of writing a biography of one's parents. Anyway, this is it. —

*Biography*

About love and hate and boredom they were equally  
barracudas, took an arm or leg quick as winking,  
their totem Monkey Aware-of-Vacuity.  
Empedocles added to the four elements  
Love and Strife to set them spinning, Aeschylus  
invented tragedy by adding the second actor.  
Back past the sold houses in the lost domains  
down in the midden-humus  
glows the rotting trelliswork of 'family',  
odd slug-coloured tubers wince at the touch  
with feigned unanthropomorphic shyness,  
naked pink tendrils explore holes. It is all  
tentative, and these days the Island supports  
a 'Jungian sandlot therapist'.

During the three years that my family lived in Sydney before we moved to London, we lived in a broken-down sort of a flat in Bondi where, I gather, although I have no great recollection of this, all the furniture consisted of tea chests in various arrangements, depending on whether they were supposed to be chairs or tables or bookshelves or whatever. The only real memory I have up to this age – and it's an absolute beauty of a Freudian one – is being taken for a walk to what apparently I referred to as 'the big chimbley', which I understand to have been some sort of enormous industrial chimney or smoke stack, possibly the one that still stands in Bondi, and being taken by my parents past the local fire brigade and, to make the thing even more Freudian, admiring tremendously these characters in their gorgeous uniforms sliding down the slippery pole which our fire station still had at that time. According to my parents, at the age of a bit before three I'm supposed to have labelled

all these tea chests, now suddenly metamorphosed into items of luggage when we set off to England, but I think for them this was a rather satisfying early myth of their child's precocity and I don't believe a word of it myself.

My sister Shane was born early in 1949, when we were still at Bondi, and in 1950 my father was appointed to head a bureau of Australian papers in London, and we duly set off on the 'Orcades', arriving in London I'm not quite sure when, in 1950. My second clear memory of childhood turns up here, and that is of my sister and myself (I would have been three and bit, and she two) winning the shipboard traditional fancy dress competition (presumably this was, I would imagine, the rather revolting tiny tots section) as an artist and model; I was done up in a smock and carried a palette which my parents had extorted from someone or other, and my sister was dressed in black fishnet stockings and nothing else!

Well, we landed up in England, and into a life which, retrospectively, seems quite extraordinarily Aladdin's cave sybaritic. My parents were well off, social even. All of this comes back largely from photographs of which I have an immense stock, because I think my parents were really both a wee bit vain about their looks. I must have a box of some four thousand photos of them, with people like Olivier and T.S. Eliot, and whatnot. The general impression, looking back on it these days, is of a quite extraordinary velvety, rather cocooned sort of opulence. It can't have been that plush, but that's the way it seems. And in accordance with all this I went, at the age of about three and a half, to naturally one of the liberated experimental Montessori schools — which, so far as I remember, I loved, although the only activities I have any recollection of going in for there were, on the one hand, drawing innumerable pictures of hugely elaborate battles of all sorts, Greeks and

Persians, Picts and Scots, terribly terribly gory with severed limbs lying all over the place (I'd been exposed to the Bayeux Tapestry at an unfortunately sensitive age), and this wasn't approved of so much. However, I could already read and write; and so, by the age of about three, could my sister. So I suppose that drawing battles and growing mustard and cress would have been the main functions of school, at the time.

What we don't seem ever to have done — and this may be one reason why moving to Greece later on was such a shatteringly liberating experience, for all its difficulties — what we don't seem to have done was run around very much or climb trees, things like that. My mother mentions, in one of her factual books about our move to Greece, that 'at the age of five or six young Martin could classify any number of varieties of trees but had never climbed one and would undoubtedly fall down if he tried', which may be the genesis of a physical clumsiness which has beset me ever since, or a running war between Martin and twentieth-century technology, but started with trees.

The fact is, oddly enough, that there are no memories from London, between the ages of say three and six, quite as sharp and specific as the earlier ones from my first three years in Australia. Things that must have been terribly important in my parents' life and therefore ultimately in my own tend to flit through the mind as a succession of what I now realise to have been cocktail parties and dinner parties and inexplicable absences; certainly there were the few weeks every summer which my parents spent in Europe, during which time my sister and I were dumped at what was probably a perfectly decent boarding school for toddlers, but which remains in memory as some absolute nightmare in terms of intensity of experience, even though it's very hard to remember what it was that was so awful, except being fed fish, which



has left a psychosomatic allergy (or whatever it is) that endures to this day. But, in any case, as I say, apart from certain emotional tones like the horror of those summers by oneself, nothing very concrete remains of London.

Things suddenly become much more real and much more vivid in 1954 when my parents — who had been struggling to combine their lives of being pretty successful journalists and still rather so-so novelists, trying to live in a London which evidently they found increasingly unsatisfactory as a place in which to work — heard a BBC broadcast about the Greek island of Kalimnos, and more or less sold everything off, packed their bags, quit their jobs, and suddenly and dramatically went off to Kalimnos to live. And, rather as in Laurence Durrell's view that somewhere between Calabria and Corfu the blue becomes realer, or whatever it is, experiences, or at least the memory of them, becomes very very much sharper, not always more favourable. My strongest memory of the first few weeks in Greece is the fact that it was impossible to get peanut butter there! There's the absolutely all-encompassing egocentricity of that age — which may still be there, but was certainly very much there at the time — which still takes over when one tries to remember.

At about this point I would like to read two poems, contrasting in a number of ways. The first a rather recent poem, or a poem written in late '78 but talking about London; and the second a very early poem indeed, a poem I wrote when I was about nineteen but which, however much it may be a naive apprentice effort, conveys I think something of my first feelings, my first intuitions about living in the Greek islands.

The first poem I'll read (but the much more recently written) is called 'The Scattering Layer', and it refers in fact to a stay of mine in London a few

years ago and not to my stay there when I was a child. Although oddly enough I was living, albeit in much more squalid circumstances, in very much the same bit of London I had been as a child. So, 'The Scattering Layer' \* —

Rain walks all night across the greenhouse roof  
on awkward spike-footed stilts, and in the yard, where weeds  
and furtive clothespegs interweave, it smears  
bluegreen on appleblue leafmould frottage, snaps open  
galls where grubs gleam and wrinkle, silverfoil  
uncurling waterfalls among the twigs, and cats stare up at the stickman.  
The stock-car races slide across the compass,  
lurch with a crunch and glass breaking up against the end of the street,  
burglars are picked out in light on the doorsteps, even primroses  
glow, and the wingcases of dazed beetles. There are chalk  
diagrams but what goes on  
up beyond the Van Allen belt, the scattering layer,  
we're not sure: pick up glittering striations, unreadable patterns of dots  
in the strepitant blueblack undersea rivers, krill or seedspill  
raining on us, down here where we swirl in our own light.

And I'm not sure whether it's London that went down in the world since then, or me. But one or the other.

The other poem (which, as I say, I was eighteen or nineteen when I wrote) is in fact the first section of a sequence called *Dross* – the 'dross' being actually a rather too easily ironic reference to the things that one's memory doesn't in fact jettison, which, whatever their triviality, irrelevance, banality even, stay there. And it's about growing up, on the Greek islands.\*\*

*Dross*      **Part 1**

There was, I remember, a golden storm  
a gong tolling over water:  
splinters of cyclamen washed among the sponges

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\* The poem appears in *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap*, p. 15. [Ed.]

\*\* This poem appears in *Shadowmass*, p. 14. [Ed.]

and the sea's tolling. Somewhere a bell  
tasted red and gold winds, shook itself  
sang stretched tightly over tossing islands  
and islands

                                where a fisherman climbed  
over a rock and  
Look, he said, look: a mullet floated  
drowning among the cypresses.

Nobody stepped into the water.  
Only the bells and the gong  
and great darkening seabirds blown from the mountain's conch.

We lived in the Island of Kalimnos for a year. Even by the standards of Greek islands in the early '50s Kalimnos was pretty impoverished, pretty primitive. It survived almost entirely on the few hundred of the young men who went off with the sponge-fishing fleets every year, and a dozen or so of whom never came back. Pliny, I think, had listed sponge fishers, already in his time, as among the most miserable of mortals, "for theirs," he said, "underestimating it is a hazardous trade". It was still very much like that. And as though it wasn't bad enough in any case, around the time we went there the synthetic sponge had been discovered in some laboratory somewhere or other, and even that means of livelihood had vanished. So for my parents there was... well, the gift of God to writers of living in the midst of an on-going crescendo-ing tragedy, while at the same time trying to survive themselves, having taken this terrible risk of cutting themselves off from their moorings.

For me and my sister, we weren't really aware of this, of course, of the whole wider context of Kalimnos. There was the business of suddenly picking up a new language, living in a totally new environment, suddenly having to make do without all the things which we had quite unthinkingly grown used

to over the few plush years in London. The language was of course a bit of a problem, but we were at the age where one can pick it up. And I suppose, in a sense being thrust as we were into first year primary school at Kalimnos Primary, number one, sure we were at a disadvantage because we didn't know the language; on the other hand the local kids were at a disadvantage because they couldn't read and write, and we could (even if in another tongue altogether) and we had some idea of the principles.

Contrary to the more utopian ideas of how kids get along under these circumstances, I was fairly early on in the piece in trouble for smashing the nose of a little playmate with an iron bar for making fun of my Greek pronunciation. This is actually something that has been rather a deep and dark secret until now, although no doubt it's still remembered on Kalimnos. On the other hand, in accordance with the utopian theories, we were very good friends after that. In many ways that year on Kalimnos was, had to be, paradise for a small child. After the constriction of London, of not being able to run across the road for fear of being run down, of not being allowed to run free even in the parks, lollies from strange men and so on, suddenly... well, there were no internal combustion motors, one was in some peril, perhaps, if very careless, of being kicked by a donkey, but that was about it. One learned to swim. That was embarrassing too, because the locals all swam pretty much before they could walk. Suddenly you could do pretty much what you wanted — not, as it turned out, right to the outer limits of smashing people's noses, that was disapproved of a bit; but other than that, life was running and swimming and getting tanned and getting one's feet full of sea-urchin spines.

I don't think my parents really wanted to leave Kalimnos. The books they wrote about it, *The Sponge Divers* and *Mermaid Singing*, certainly give the

impression that they didn't. Partly they were in that slightly terrible 'sucking everything into themselves' way writers have, they were engrossed by the tragedy that was enacting itself. But partly for them too, I think, simplicity and the freedom of the place were captivating, paradisaical. My mother, I rather feel, always had a taste for slightly unattainable paradises, and there was one that was actually there. But after a year we had to go because my younger brother, Jason, was due to be born. Jason, according to my parents, was terribly dramatically conceived, on the night of an earthquake, a great earthquake which brought down many of the houses of Kalimnos, and immediately after which all the inhabitants of the town rushed down to the beaches to sleep, with terribly romantic consequences, at least in the case of my parents. For a child conceived under these circumstances obviously a heroic name was called for. And I, having already got rather stuck into the Greek legends as soon as we got to Kalimnos, insisted very strongly for Agamemnon. But my parents, realising should we ever end up again in an Anglo-Saxon country the poor thing would be called 'Aggie', settled on Jason as a compromise. In any case, there was nothing like a hospital or a doctor or even a midwife (except a couple of witches) on Kalimnos, so we had to move either to Athens where there was something like modern medical care, or to an island near Athens. And so we moved to Hydra — or "Hydra" [aspirating the "H", with the vowel a long "ai" diphthong], as it is perhaps better known — where we lived for the next ten years.

[Side 1 of Tape 1 ends at this point.]

**SIDE TWO** of Tape 1

This is Martin Johnston, continuing on Side 2.

Hydra then was a very different matter to what it has become now. It's now probably the most expensive to live on, the trendiest of the Greek islands, the most given to thousands of immense yachts and millionaires' cocktail parties, and old boat-houses that have been turned into the kind of shops that sell instant antiquities, and so on. And there are now reputed to be four or five hundred foreigners living there more or less permanently; trendy celebrities like Leonard Cohen maintain a pied-à-terre on Hydra. Well, Leonard used to live there many many years before, but he wasn't a trendy celebrity at the time.

We were not quite the first foreigners to move to the island. There was a Hungarian lady I think, a potter, who had been there on and off for a few years. But we were the first people to lay down roots there, to buy a house, to have children (my sister and myself; and, when he was born and was old enough, my brother) at school among the locals, to become part of the community of Hydra. I think I'll read another of that very early *Dross* sequence, which gives some impression — if I may be allowed to be so pleonastic, a very impressionistic one — of those early years on Hydra, in which in fact a jet plane as it were cuts through the poem and brings it up to something like modern times. And this is *Dross* (Part 3)\* —

The pedlar lives at the bottom of a well  
painted blue, decorated  
with pale flowers in pots.

Put a spoon in his mouth,  
spit for luck.

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\* The poem appears in *Shadowmass*, p. 16. [Ed.]

He sells dead men's clothes  
in blue shadows of blue stones.  
The subtle anemone tangles curving pebbles  
when a jet shears the sky they eat the fabric  
I dangle my feet in the water  
gold and red and gold  
blue shadows

The pedlar was an actual Hydra character. Hydra, like Kalimnos, had been a major sponge-diving island but had more or less given that up by 1955 when we went there. The pedlar was a crippled sponge diver and also an epileptic, and he did live at the bottom of a well which he had whitewashed. He could have lived in fact in any one of several hundreds of abandoned houses. Hydra in the early 1820s had been the second or third largest town in Greece, it had had a population of thirty or forty thousand, which had declined to perhaps two and a half thousand when we were there. It had been the Naval centre of Greece, it was considered as one possibility for the capital immediately after the War of Independence; but what had happened was that the Hydriot seamen who had made their fortunes as pirates and buccaneers and privateers and blockade runners in the late 1700s and early 1800s sank all of their money and all of their ships into the War of Independence and when it was over they were — as so often happened to other peoples in other wars — glorious, triumphant, much feted and festooned, but quite broke and with no means of becoming otherwise. So that the island's economy had collapsed, and most of the islanders over the century and a half between the War of Independence and when we moved there had emigrated, first of all to America, then many of them to Australia. And in Sydney I still meet people who had left Hydra before I ever went there and with whom there was this odd discontinuous sort of tie. But the houses were still there. The living harbour, which is an

extravagantly beautiful amphitheatric sort of arrangement, is surrounded by this much greater sort of shell of ruined houses which every now and then during the earthquakes, which Hydra is also prone to, just collapse quietly with a small rumbling sort of sound in the night, and which would have afforded the pedlar any number of possible places in which to live; except that, for whatever reason, he preferred the security of the bottom of the well — in which he made a mistake, because during one of the very rare flash floods one winter he was in fact drowned at the bottom of his well.

Again, I suppose, one has to distinguish between the experience of Hydra that my parents had, and the experience that my sister and I had and... well, Jason, insofar as a kid of one or two years old has. For them there was, to start with, very much the same kind of freedom to write, combined with the fact that there was very little money on which to live while doing so, as they had had in Kalimnos. And at the same time, from very early on, there were the beginnings of what was eventually to become the foreign artistic colony on Hydra, and eventually again to become this extraordinary intrusion of several hundred foreigners into the fabric of the place, several hundred foreigners most of whom came in the first place because they heard that there were a lot of picturesque bohemians sitting around.

Now, my parents, as I've said, were probably the first picturesque bohemians there. People like the painter Sidney Nolan and his wife moved to Hydra very early on also; I think Sidney got there in '56. And there was an Irish novelist and his painter wife, and then Axel Jensen, a Norwegian novelist, turned up very soon with his wife who later (through the kind of switchback effect which became very characteristic of Hydra life) ended up as the 'Marianne' of Leonard Cohen's famous song of that name. Leonard



himself arrived in '57 or '58. And you had very much the kind of community that my mother portrays in her second book, *Peel me a Lotus*.

For Shane and myself, having had our first year of primary school on Kalimnos, life wasn't so hard on Hydra. To begin with, the ever-precious peanut butter was in fact available there! For another, we'd now picked up enough of the language to get along reasonably happily at school. I remember that both of us in Kalimnos were given, in our final year reports, ten out of ten. Which was a very kind gesture on the part of teachers; we knew about *two* out of ten's worth of Greek, let alone being able to do lessons in it. But after a couple more years on Hydra we really were coping pretty well, and pretty much accepted as... well, not quite local kids, a certain exoticism still clung to us, people didn't really know where Australia was or what language we spoke in Australia, if indeed we spoke one at all or if indeed anyone spoke anything outside Greece, it was a very very (forgive the pun!) insular island still at the time. They'd somehow developed the idea that all Australians lived on spaghetti and nothing but. I can only assume that some earlier emigrant from Hydra must have somehow ended up running an Italian restaurant or something of the sort. But all this 'specimen in the zoo' aspect of it apart, we made friends, and we settled in and did a great deal more running around barefoot and a great deal more swimming, and lived what I suppose in retrospect was a rather schizoid sort of life, running wild with the local kids on the one hand, but (in my sister's case, at least) scrawling anti-British Cyprus slogans all over the walls of the town and shouting "Death to the perfidious British!". I was much too shy and priggish a young boy to do anything of the sort, although I would have liked to if I had had the courage. All that, all that sinking in on the one hand; and then, on the other,

going down to the waterside grocery-shop-cum-taverna (where my parents ran a bill that sometimes ran for a year or two years at a time, before royalties came in and they paid it – the grocers were quite happy to run it on this basis), running excitedly down there when school finished (which it did at twelve noon, oh blessed days), and trying to persuade our parents that there were things infinitely more interesting to be done or to be seen than sitting in a frowsy smoky sort of atmosphere drinking that nasty retsina (an opinion which I subsequently revised) and that they should go off and look at starfish with us or something of that sort.

Kalimnos was good; Kalimnos probably would have retained its paradisaical aspects, I don't know. But Hydra (for the first few years, certainly) was closer yet to the promised land, if only because there were these two sides to it and one could switch, more or less at will, from one to the other, even if it did involve a certain amount of dragging one's parents out of the grog shop.

After about a year on Hydra we actually bought a house. My parents had pretty firmly decided that they were going to go on living there, so they bought this (by Hydriot standards) fairly humble three-storey sea-captain's mansion, for a £120. Admittedly they were gold pounds, but even so, and even though a £120 turned out to be all the money they had at the time and they had really cut loose, this time it seemed worth doing. And indeed it was worth doing. On the third floor there were three rooms, the walls of which they knocked down to make this enormous study, and they would sit down with their typewriters, one at each end of the study, writing away for say five hours every morning; my father writing novels and also writing pot-boilers, short stories for American magazines, in order to be able eventually to pay the grocery account; my mother finishing her book about

Kalimnos, *Mermaid Singing*, and working on a book about Hydra itself, *Peel me a Lotus*. Around twelve they would finish, and potter down to the waterfront to their meeting-place with the other foreigners and with their Greek friends, and we would emerge from school and complainingly join them.

Meanwhile, Jason was pretty much all of the time in the hands of a young girl called Zöe whom we hired for what must have been about fifty cents a day or something. One odd continuity between life in London and life in Greece was that there had always been a cleaning lady or a maid or whatever around the house, although it was certainly a far cry from Mrs Dapp in Notting Hill Gate, and Sevaste the aged witch on Kalimnos on the other hand, and Zöe on Hydra. Zöe had, like all the Hydriots, all the old superstitions about how a child should be brought up, such as he should be smothered with sweets and lollies and things at all times, in order to prevent him from crying, or that — and this had happened to Shane and myself on Kalimnos, too — that if a child showed any signs of being a bit off colour this was jaundice, and if you had jaundice the thing to do was to cut open the forehead with a kitchen knife and smear the wounds with garlic in order to entice out the evil worm which caused the disease. But I'm just as passionately fond of garlic. Somehow or other Jason survived all these tribulations, to become a very large healthy bouncing noisy small boy who unfortunately only had one language, that is, Greek.

After a few years on Hydra there would have been, apart from my parents, at any given time anywhere between eight and a dozen or fifteen foreign writers, painters, musicians, more or less permanently living on the island. And this kind of atmosphere of an artistic or creative colony had become very emphatic and very full-time — certainly so for my parents, not

so much for us children because there was also our life as virtually Greek children to be lived. Nevertheless the ambience in which my parents lived, which was very much one in which books and, loosely speaking, culture were things that were being talked about and enacted all of the time. This was something that couldn't be avoided. I suppose it would have been at about seven or eight that I began to assume myself that what one did was write, and I started to write a series of poems which in style were an imitation of my first poetic model, Ogden Nash (which is just as well, because obviously I couldn't have sustained decent rhymes anyway), that is, lines of irregular and ridiculous length with rhymes that were even more ridiculous, sometimes intentionally, sometimes not, and poems which in theme were almost entirely based on the theory of evolution, which at that time (I would have been about seven or eight) I had got very excited about, all the more so because... I got that on the one hand out of books of popular science which were to be had at home, and the Greek Orthodox view on the other hand at school which was that the world and everything in it had been created in (I think it was) the afternoon of a day in late September 4004 BC. This is what I believe is known as creative tension. Anyway, it set me going, and I wrote a great many poems, which unfortunately I've lost, about archeopteryxes and moas and dinosaurs of various kinds. I remember writing one poem about the stegosaurus with his two brains, one in his head and one at the beginning of his tail; and I was surprised many many years later to find that I had virtually duplicated a poem by (I think) Edmund Clerihew Bentley about how the stegosaurus could reason a priori and also a fortiori because of his two brains — a poem written some thirty or forty years before, obviously quite independently of mine, and one which I hadn't read.

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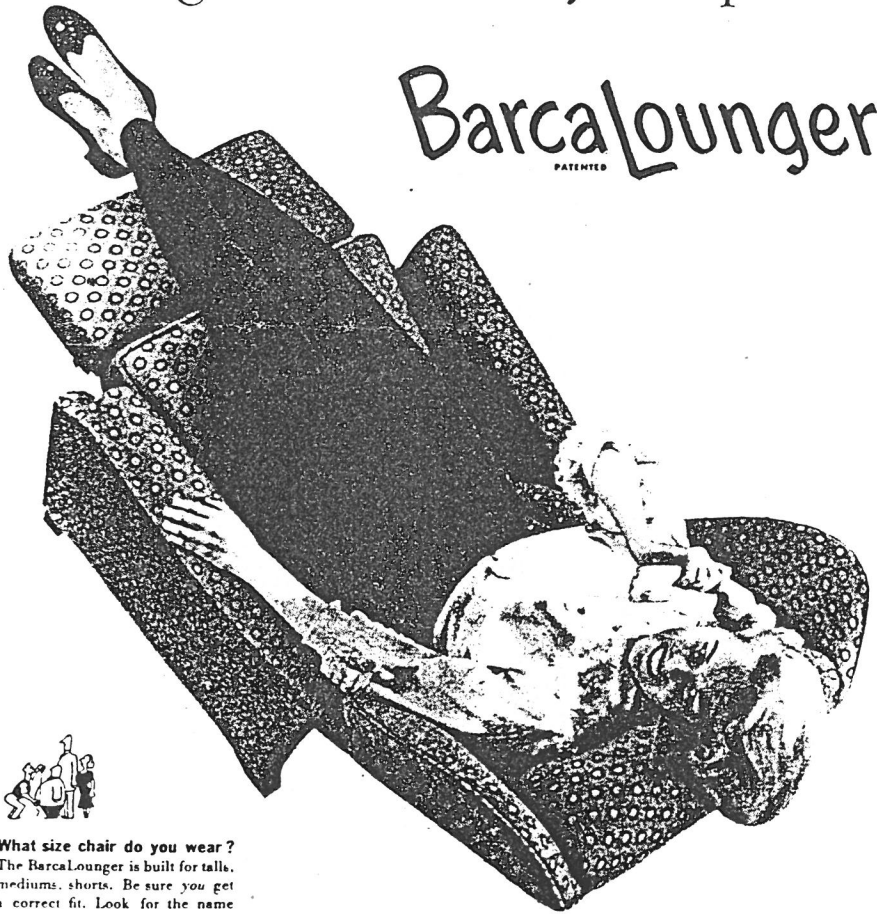
about to leave when the Emperor invited him to stay on and witness the festival at which, in accordance with a Moslem custom that is followed to this day, with some modifications, by the Aga Khan and his followers, the ruler was weighed in public and received his weight in diamonds, rubies, emeralds, pearls, gold, and silver, along with such presents as carpets, brocades, elephants, camels, and horses, from the nobles of his court, the governors of his provinces, and so on. Besides inviting Tavernier to the festival, Aurangzeb offered to let him see his collection of choice jewels, which included the Great Mogul. Tavernier, of course, jumped at the chance.

While the preparations for the festival were being made, Tavernier—so he wrote in his journal—was allowed to snoop around the palace pretty much as he liked, but when the time came for inspecting the gem collection, he was carefully watched. He was vouchsafed a private viewing of the stones—an almost private viewing, that is. It was held in a small open room at one end of a long hall while the Emperor sat on his throne at the other end, keeping an eye on the proceedings; Aurangzeb had stolen the Great Mogul from his father, whom he had overthrown and imprisoned, and he knew from personal experience that where big diamonds were concerned, nobody could be trusted completely. Tavernier sat in the small room with the Emperor's chief treasurer, 'Akil Khan, while four of the imperial eunuchs brought in the jewels on gilded trays, under embroidered velvet covers. Then and there, the stones were counted three times, and a list of them was drawn up by three scribes. When the counting was over, the first gem that 'Akil Khan showed Tavernier was the Great Mogul. The Frenchman was much impressed by the stone. It was, he wrote, "a round rose, very high at one side." "Round rose" was the pattern in which the Great Mogul was cut, and the fact that it was high on one side indicated that, like most Indian-cut stones, it had been worked on with scant attention to symmetry but with great respect for size and weight. "At the basal margin," Tavernier went on, "it has a small notch and a little flaw inside. Its water is beautiful, and it weighs 319½ rattis, which are equal to 280 of our carats."

After Aurangzeb's death, there is no further record of the Great Mogul, although there have been plenty of rumors and legends about it, the least credible of them being that Tavernier

She gets her beauty sleep in a

# BarcaLounge

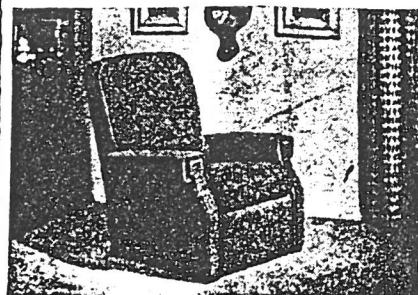


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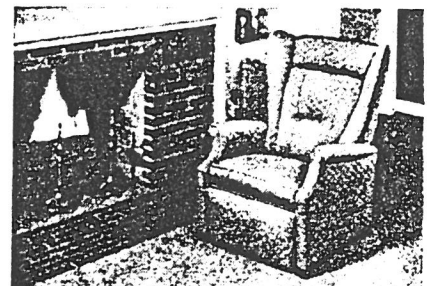
Busy women just can't go popping off to bed every time they feel bedraggled. Anyway, it's unnecessary . . . if you've got a beautiful BarcaLounge in the house.

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Model W261-S-1 in rose beige nylon frieze. Head pillow flips back out of sight when not in use. In many styles, sizes, colors and coverings.



BarcaLounge Model 500 Provincial Wing chair with tufted channel back. Illustrated in Mediterranean Blue woven damask print.

I still think that the poems were, as productions of an eight-year-old, not bad. They had as much wit as someone is likely to have at that age. Oh, and my parents and all the other writers around the place were of course ridiculously encouraging — something which my parents were later to regret when I made it clear that I intended to write full-time. I think there was an air of fake sophistication to them because of the subject matter and the long zoological words with which they were liberally interlarded. At about the same time I started writing a novel, illustrated by myself, along rather the same lines. It was called *Mr Mammoth*, and its hero was in fact a mammoth which had been buried for aeons in the Siberian tundra but had somehow or other got melted out, and proceeded to... I forget whether it was Oxford, or Cambridge, where it became a professor, and was much inclined to sitting around in Parker lounges, a type of armchair of which I had seen a picture in the *New Yorker* and greatly coveted, sitting around in Parker lounges preaching atheism — which must have been a reflection of the Greek Orthodox values I was being taught at my primary school — and drinking, for what reason I no longer remember, weak tea and whisky, “on which [Mr Mammoth was prone to say] he wholly subsided”, — I hadn’t got my long words quite right yet! This novel in fact got to about eighty or a hundred typed pages, before someone borrowed it and never returned it, or lost it, something like that, and I lost enthusiasm.

I should explain about the typing. My English handwriting, to this day, is almost completely illegible; yet my Greek handwriting is absolutely beautiful, it is the Greek equivalent of ‘copperplate’, because that’s what I was taught at primary school. But after the Montessori pre-school business in which they were perhaps a trifle too liberated about handwriting (they tried not to

\* See advertisement *The New Yorker* September 22, 1956 page 111

impose styles on you), I never again really had occasion to write by hand in English, because my parents typed all the time and I actually thought that that was how one did write in English. So, handwriting in Greek, fine. Typing in English. At the same time, since I started typing at seven or eight, I naturally started typing one-fingered, which I still do, with great rapidity and aplomb to this day, something which amazed my colleagues when I worked on the *Sydney Morning Herald* for a year or so, the fastest one-finger typist in the West. But no one, including myself, can read my handwriting.

On the subject of odd connections between oneself now and then, I would like to read another poem which ties in very much with my childhood on Hydra and also with my early adulthood in Sydney. I wrote this when I was, I suppose, about twenty-three or twenty-four, so I included it in my third book, *The Sea-Cucumber*. And it's called either 'Cave', or 'Cavë' (as in the Latin *cave canem* – 'beware of the dog') so it's a poem either about safety, or danger, or both.\*

*Cave*

Sharp morning on railways stations  
before the limeflower flutter of first light,  
brackish mornings, lemon and rocksalt  
in the wind's wake under blue ice  
glitter, the slow glacier of stars.  
My coat wrinkling dun against the silver  
of mirroring elms and streetlamps, giraffes  
eating in tall silence  
night like a safety pin: a pure scream  
of living glass pierces the suburbs:  
dawn and the train.  
  
Half-men fanned embers and beat sticks  
waiting for the anachronistic dragon

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\* The poem appears in *The Sea-Cucumber*, p. 38-39. [Ed.]

gasping mouthfuls of sodden wood, snow,  
whirling crystal lizards around the cavemouth,  
there are relics.

The warm Aegean painted zodiacs of green fire  
on our bodies when I was a child at night  
the tinderbox moon struck sapphires like a mad forger  
(no-one swam past the quiet island  
thirty yards out where nothing rippled).

Sprawled on the rocks we discussed ice,  
atavism, rustling grass, fingernails  
webbing the earth in dance just underground.

A girl stirred and the constellations  
in her mail of seadrops became needles  
rushing down tunnels of indigo, headlights  
in cold rain, in veering night.

Stations are where the lines converge  
think of a diagram  
by a geometer with eyes of quartz.

(old dreams of a woman  
half bone half diamond  
with anacondas coiled against black velvet walls  
and angelfish in a floor of running water!)  
– and there's no choice,  
you are the flute, or the music.

A cold electric trill at the moment of going  
and Central Station, and the long walk  
past puddles and the dim lake, obtusely reflecting  
innumerable scalpels in the night.

Which is, I suppose, the sort of writer I was in the process of becoming, or trying to become, rather gloomily reflecting back upon the possibilities of the kind of writer one might have become — or one might have proposed to (if one had given any thought to the matter) when writing *Mr Mammoth* and the like in between swimming eight or ten hours a day and reading or playing football or sneaking to the movies or doing pretty much what you wanted, all



of the rest of it. We all have these lost paradises, these lost domains, no doubt, as in Alain Fournier's novel, and as in my own references to it in that also rather grim sonnet 'Biography' that I read earlier. And I suppose if I were writing this poem nowadays I wouldn't be as explicit about it as I was then. But, oh, the broker, sicker, unhappier you are now, the more marvellous your childhood is, presumably. And at twenty-four it was absolutely wonderful to be eight.

In late '60 (I think it was) we left Hydra. My parents had pretty much decided that the experiment hadn't worked out. This was partly I suppose for personal reasons, which I think they have probably gone into on their tapes in this series, and partly because... well, the writing just wasn't working out, it wasn't working out financially. My father was more and more having to write detective stories under a pseudonym (which, by the way, was my sister's and my first names put together, 'Shane Martin') and, while the first of those sold well, the others didn't. The grocer's bill and the grog bill and the 'books and toys and goodies for the little ones' bills mounted up and up, and the money wasn't coming in. And, while the money wasn't coming in, the foreigners were, more and more and more and more of the black-sweatered blue-jeaned bearded would-be existentialist beatniks, who had all seen Sartre at a distance of two cafés on the Left Bank and had briefly met Rilke's widow and had no doubt read *The Portable Kierkegaard* or at least reviews of it, and were all expecting acceptances and/or royalties any moment for their little volumes of mostly unprinted (because, at that time, unprintable) verse, unless they were on Guggenheim Fellowships which about two-thirds of them seemed to be, and generally bringing down the tone of the neighbourhood like anything. And so my father was — if I might say so without *lèse-majesté* at

this distance — silly enough to believe that he could pick up a journalistic career in Fleet Street again.

Well, we spent a year in England, and it turned out that he couldn't. It was a nightmare year for my parents. And in fact they just couldn't have survived without the outright gift of money from one or two friends, notably the Australian actor Peter Finch.

It was a nightmare year for my sister and myself, too. By then we were just finishing primary school. I had in fact just finished primary school in Greece, and I was suddenly thrust... Because we lived not in London but in a cottage in the Cotswolds, very beautiful in itself, which we had on exchange with an English friend who took our house on Hydra, we were living in the Cotswolds, this meant that Shane and I, not having passed (because not having sat for) the Eleven-Plus that was so mandatory in England, went to the local secondary modern school, Winchcombe Secondary Modern, which was sheer unadulterated hell. It was also quite difficult in that I, for instance, was thrust into second year, owing to a chronological mix-up, never having done first year at that (or indeed any other) high school. After six years of Greece, I was no longer capable of getting along with English children. I certainly wasn't capable of getting along with those particular English children. I don't think I was consciously élitist or snobbish about my background interests and so on, but undoubtedly that came into it; I mean, from their point of view I must have been absolutely revolting. Shane at least was athletic. I was too, but unfortunately also incompetent at that time. At the same time I was competent, once I got into the rigour of suddenly switching back again to a different language, at the school work; that didn't help either.

So we underwent our own private nightmare at school, our parents were undergoing theirs, and at the end of a year we packed up and went back to Hydra again, just in time for me to do the final exams for first year at Hydra High School — without having done any of the course work for that year, which was one more educational tribulation. The history of my education of the year is just preposterous, and it's quite remarkable (if true) that I have ended up knowing anything at all. I was told at Hydra High that my certificate for having finished the second year at Winchcombe Secondary Modern counted for nothing because, among other things, I had not done the statutory year of Greek Orthodox theology I should have done. I should jolly well hope I hadn't!

Nevertheless we settled back very very very happily indeed. There didn't seem to have been any sun during all the time we were in England. And of course at least we were in the country so we could run around a bit, but we couldn't swim, we didn't really have anyone to talk to, we didn't really (by the standards we had developed by then) have anything to do, and, by the accident of the particular people we had exchanged houses with, there were no books to speak of in the house so there was that misery on top of all the others.

[Side 2 of Tape 1 ends at this point.]