

David Malouf

An Open Book

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CONTENTS

Parting	1
Kinderszenen	3
<i>Binomial</i>	3
<i>Learning Curve</i>	4
<i>Eavesdropping</i>	5
<i>The Open Book</i>	6
<i>Pot-hook</i>	7
<i>The Wolf at the Door</i>	8
<i>Dancing with a Giant</i>	10
<i>The Brisbane Line</i>	12
<i>Fifth Column</i>	13
<i>Cestrum Nocturnum</i>	14
<i>Odd Man Out</i>	16
<i>Empty Page</i>	18
<i>Deception Bay</i>	19
<i>A la Recherche</i>	21
The Morning of the Holiday	23
Sweet Recurrence	24
On the Move, 1968	26
Aubade.com	28
Windows, II	30
House and Hearth	32
The New Loaf	33
A Tavola	34
Cockcrow at Campagnatico	35

Sagra	36
The Double Gift	37
At Pennyroyal II	38
Waiting for the Moon	40
Garden Poems	42
Pyrra	48
A Magic Craft	50
La Belle Hélène	51
Asleep at the Wheel	52
Understood	53
Terms of Endearment	54
Aquarius III	55
Incident on Myrtle Street	56
Still Life	58
In the Presence	59
Northern Gothic	60
The Memoirs of Casanova	62
The View from the Winter Palace	64
Old Pop	65
Kite	66
Late Poem	68
A Stone's Throw From Peace Park	69
<i>Saturday Morning</i>	69
<i>Sunday Afternoon</i>	71

The Prospect of Little Anon on an Inner-city Greensward	72
A Knee Bent to Longevity	74
<i>A Word to the Wise</i>	74
<i>An Emblem</i>	75
<i>A Knee Bent to Longevity</i>	76
<i>Gravitas</i>	78
<i>Small Wonders</i>	79
<i>Imperium</i>	80
<i>Letting Go</i>	81
<i>Donation</i>	82
<i>As living is</i>	83
<i>Incremental</i>	85
Before or After	87

Parting

Parting, a bearable
distinction of bodies,

like continents
detaching, seeking perfection

of their own ends,
another history.

How we long for the adventure
of a new page,

catching our breath
in the light of its silence.

All things new
move us. The moon

in its cycle plucks our sleeve
and we

reach out to other islands
in the room, breaking away

from here, from now,
from never to be caught by

the last loved event, its heavy
sighing to be complete.

Fresh beginnings!
Blessèd also

the partings they lead out from.
We look back with no

regret to where we lay
lost in each other's gaze.

Parting is where
we began. Where we begin.

Kinderszenen

Binomial

Privacies. Tongue-and-groove
whispers at a knothole,
bare bathroom
plumbing, bare bodies,
shock-white minus their clothes.
We put two and two
together and make more
or less a family.

The house, half a dozen
rooms in spin around
finger-to-lip
asides not to be sounded.
Later we take
its silences
off into a silence
space-deep beyond breath.

Empty suits
in a wardrobe.
Under the warm subtropic rain
empty faces
turned upwards underground,
forever dazed by
the distance between terms:
to a tittle, rule of thumb.

Learning Curve

From nipple
to cup lip
to lip the comfort of kind

That water
is other

That weather
is Here
and There the four
quarters

From under
the bed
-covers in myth

that nothing is ever
done with
or over

That thunder overhead
is horses in stampede

and wishes
are horses in clover

Eavesdropping

on all that a household
offers of the world
in small.

After the guests
have taken themselves off,
the crumbs of what is left

unsaid, or between
what was said
and silence, another story.

Bed-talk, a door
ajar to the future.
Learning to catch in the slight disturbance

of an empty room the held
breath of an occasion
missed, as

later, between the lines
on a blank page, what sent the dogs howling
into corners, under beds.

From a clear sky
the whine, beyond human ears,
of a long-distance missile. History.

The Open Book

My mother could read me, or so she claimed,
like a book. Fair warning! But I
too was a reader and knew that books

like houses have their secrets. Under the words
even of plain speakers,
echo and pre-echo.

I learned to stay quiet, play apart,
and waited for the plot
to thicken.

The Cinquecento light of early autumn.
In the ample
frame of a bay window, half-asleep

and dreaming, a staid madonna.
And wide-eyed, wordless, still
new to a world

of happenings as yet
unhappened, her child.
The open book in his mother's lap.

Pot-hook

An anchor against the sky's
unthreading
blue, as of a garment
worn thin or worn through.

Nature will not provide.
It is too busy with its own
recoveries, its green
revisions against loss.

A handhold on what is there
to be seen, to be grasped;
a more dependable
version of breath.

With all that would hang upon it,
at a pinewood
desk, the first
pot-hook I learned to make.

The taste
on my tongue
of the first
mark on a muddy slate.

The Wolf at the Door

The chilblain and cold water
years, in the shadow of the meatsafe.
The nail-biting, bitter aloes
years, a Grimm decade.

Fathers on the road, mothers keeping
house and soul and body
together, like Penelope
faithful to Patons and Baldwins, purl and plain.

The wolf at the door, and when it staggered
away, six little kids swallowed whole
in its belly; the seventh curled
breathless but still breathing in the base of a long-case clock.

Fairytales have happy endings
for some, real life also,
or not. The wolf last seen weighted with stones,
dancing lightfoot

in the underlight of a brook, the kids
on their feet again, all seven, likewise dancing.
(But one little kid had been too long
a survivor and only child to get safe home.)

At decade's end
the fathers gone again, shoulder to shoulder in the Lambeth
Walk, Oi! into war, the mothers and children
into thin air as carbon. The wolf,

with flour-whitened paw, still lurking, ghostly
-insistent at the door.