

In this corridor of legs and heads and wheelchairs and trolleys and signs, it is hard to think of absence in this fullness of things; yet he is to become absent, he who walked on long legs with head thrust back like a Victorian explorer. He explored many things, even though he was a ditherer before setting out. As I find the lift and press the button, the button is not absent and there are others in the lift – nurses and dieticians and physiotherapists and another visitor without a nametag – rising through the levels to oncology, a hard-edged word, an unpleasant word, unpronounceable in Maori, a language in which he is expert, to enter the ward of the doomed, although some may recover. This is the place where they try to kill the invader without killing the host.

Now there are different legs and heads, going about the busy business of monitoring whatever there is to monitor, blood and levels of this and that, as I search the numbers to find him, in a room of his own, not a good sign, the long legs stretched along the bed, no longer up to walking, the face stubbled, the eyes lit with fear – is it fear – what do I know of another's fear, as he glares at me. He wears loose trousers and a blue jersey.

Hione. Why are you here? For I've travelled to visit him.

How to say to see you for the last time? – an appalling cliché, Something Shakespearian is required. To be or not to be, that is the question? That will not do either in this prosaic room. Mate atu he tetekura, ara mai he tetekura. Old fronds die, new ones arrive. That's a cliché as well. So there is no answer other than an embarrassed shrug. And is it useful to say, how are you? Or, what have they planned for you now? After many phone conversations during which he related chemo sessions and radiations and pill taking, and the many prognoses, he is thin but has always been thin, but thinner now, upper arms scrawny with loose skin.

A Filipina brings in a cup of tea with a straw. Do I sit? Yes, I sit, removing a shoulder bag which he follows with anxiety. Don't lose it. I need to have it close. He has a permanent catheter which he points at. How can I go out with this thing taped to me? Questions, questions about questions. I am silent, tongue tied. What use am I? What use is this visit? I have no ministerial gift. No talk of an afterlife. The light through the window is surreal. Outside, a northerly blows. It is one of Wellington's windy days.

Do you remember when we worked at the butter factory? Blather, but he looks interested. Perhaps reminiscence is all that's left. How we came to hate butter? He almost smiles. I would pick you up in my Austin Seven, in which you barely fitted, knees around your chin and we'd drive to the small factory. We packed the butter in boxes and had to stamp the top with the company insignia. Some of the men had worked there all their lives. We even worked Christmas morning. Milk continues to arrive, I suppose. In utter boredom we would throw balls of butter at the roof, where they stuck, to fall unexpectedly at some future time. We were still at school. Had just sat School C.

He's looking at me with the look of the interrogator. He is obviously usually focused on an internal dialogue. He picks up the bag I have dropped beside the bed and fossicks in it. I can't find my library card, he tells me. The least of his worries, I would have thought.

Anyway, what are you doing here?

To see you.

Why?

Why am I seeing you?

He laughs. It's irrelevant.

Me coming to see you?

I would've thought so. He's often annoyed me. Taurekareka, he says. What? He's calling me a nobody? We become silent. I close my eyes and almost fall asleep. It can happen lately. Something wrong with me?

I spend most of my time trying to shit, he suddenly says. I can't stand it. His mind which knows so much is reduced to anxiety about shitting. A small child's obsession. But now we can be open with each other.

Where do you want to be buried? I ask.

A silence as he acknowledges the question. And my right to ask. Kawhia.

At the marae?

If they'll have me. I haven't been involved.

I'm sure they'll be understanding.

Why should they be? I'm rather fond of the Tibetans. Leave me on a hilltop for the vultures. Gather my bones eventually and tuck them away in a box. Or give them to the dogs.

What do we leave behind? I sometimes foresee a pile of paper and books. A tiresome task for the relative.

Burn it all.

Is the room painted a colour? Hard to tell. What colour are the walls?

Where?

In here.

How do I know?

You've got all day to look at them.

I've got other things on my mind.

A nurse arrives. Excuse me. The physiotherapist would like to see you. Do you want to make a time?

Whenever.

After lunch?

Fine.

What colour are the walls? I ask.

She looks at me and smiles bemusedly.

Why do you smile?

It's an unusual question. Excuse me. She leaves and I look at him.

They're very busy aren't they?

They've got their tasks.

Maybe it's a factory. You're caught up in a health factory. They push you along the production line.

He hates me now. Fuck off.

No.

The Filipina comes and takes his cup. I wonder what her story is?

The usual. He looks at me anxiously. They're terrified of us getting covid in here. You haven't got it have you?

What are they worried about? That it might kill you?

Thankfully, he laughs.

A nurse comes in to change his bag. She's a brisk blonde, slightly plump, with difficult skin. Do you think that words no longer have much meaning? I ask him pointedly. Most of the people in here couldn't possibly communicate with us. Do they communicate with each other?

She is impervious to this. There we go, she says, taking away the bag in a plastic something. She will empty it, place it in a receptacle for disposal, plus her gloves, wash her hands, and then what?

Are there small gaps, do you think, where communication remains a possibility?

Te po, he says. A fragment of Te Po.

How can you have a fragment of Te Po?

The last book I read, he says, posed a theory that the so-called hunters and gatherers had complex political systems, which they freely chose. With agriculture we became trapped. Freedom disappeared. We've remained caught ever since.

An argument for anarchism?

The colonists preferred the noble savage, without possessions, because then they could take the land.

But I realise this is tiring. Once we would have talked for hours. He suddenly looks desperate, his face twitches and tears arrive.

I'll miss you. I take his hand. It's a large bony hand, with one thumb that's bent from a broken tendon never repaired. He'd told me he'd been in some Asian brothel and a hand basin had broken during the act and he'd cut his hand and been too ashamed to get it tended to. Was he capable of an explorer's excesses? A true Victorian? But he was into self harm. Attempts to find the real. I'll miss these moments of meeting, I whisper. They're so rare in a world full of protocol and acronyms.

He sighs, savouring the moment. It's time anyway, he says. Time to die. They can't fix me. They're just going through the motions.

I'd always felt that to be true, from the time he first told me of his diagnosis. Have they told you what's going to happen?

No, that would be too honest. But I can work it out. I'll get tireder and they'll increase the morphine and I'll be sleepier and be getting tireder and slowly fade away. Maybe I'll quickly fade away.

Entering Te Po.

He half laughs. Entering Te Po. Once I would have been screaming in pain but they've got that sorted. And the breath will become lighter, but the heart still goes pitter patter. Until it decides to stop.

In here, with the walls of a non descript colour?

The off white walls. I think it would be called off white. No, they'll find me a place in a hospice, with a view of a rose garden. His eyes close.

I smile. Finito. I better go, brother.

Things to do?

Yes. And you need to sleep.

Ae.

A final hug and I go back to the northerly and the harsh sunlight.

Life goes on.