



VINTAGE

# HOMESICKNESS

MURRAY BAIL

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## About the Book

Thirteen Australian package tourists set off around the world on the holiday of a lifetime. But as they trawl from country to country, through cities and round ever more obscure museums they find nothing as they expect it, least of all themselves. *Homesickness* is an enchanting novel: a wry, witty look at the ways people interact, a catalogue of comic digressions and tantalising information in which the world becomes a museum with no exhibit more bizarre than human nature itself.

## About the Author

MURRAY BAIL was born in Adelaide in 1941, and now lives in Sydney. He is the author of three novels and a book of short stories, *The Drover's Wife and Other Stories*. *Homesickness*, his first novel, won the National Book Award for Australian Literature and the *Melbourne Age* Book of the Year Award. His subsequent novel, *Holden's Performance*, won the Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction. *Eucalyptus*, which was published by Harvill in 1998, was the winner of the 1999 Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Miles Franklin Literary Award.

***Also by Murray Bail***

THE DROVER'S WIFE AND OTHER STORIES

HOLDEN'S PERFORMANCE

EUCALYPTUS

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THE FABER BOOK OF CONTEMPORARY

AUSTRALIAN SHORT STORIES (EDITOR)

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**Non-fiction**

IAN FAIRWEATHER

LONGHAND: A WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

“A work of brilliant and resonant artistry”

***Australian Book Review***

“His sentences have a perpetually off-balance wit which gives you life’s jumble, its mystery, its unexplained compactness. You take in the humour first, but then they deepen and deepen”

**FRANCIS SPUFFORD, *Evening Standard***

“Bail is one of the very few highly-accomplished stylists among contemporary writers”

**ANDREW RIEMER, *Sydney Morning Herald***

“*Homesickness* revealed Bail as a prickly and extravagant comedian, and its portrait of a young country trying over-earnestly to connect with its Old World heritage was as poignant as it was humorous”

**MICHAEL UPCHURCH, *New York Times***

“Bail is a writer of great talent and extraordinary concentration”

***Melbourne Age***

*To Margaret*

# **HOMESICKNESS**

Murray Bail



Harvill Secker  
LONDON

“Sicily, if ever I can go there, presents two advantages: human nature there is as distinctive and curious to see as the nature of plants and stones.”

STENDHAL

Strange sensation then (August 26). To finally have the turbines cut, metallic whistle dying in the ear, and that drumming of the horizontal holding them to their seats like a hand, replaced by solid upright pressure, relative silence, of earth. They sat becalmed, benumbed. The hum and vibration remained within them, and would for some hours. For the time being they felt more like gazing than looking. Chins rested on hands.

Out there all around was concrete, colour of tarpaulins, stained with fuel. This canary-yellow tractor of obscene squatness came crawling towards them. It had a canvas canopy. The local people were going about their work; they took their time. The driver wore khaki and drove one hand.

Chins rested on hands. A majority of the party had flown long distance before; but it was always strange. The immediate end result was strange. Out there lay the beginnings of the foreign country known through hearsay (*heresy*) and photography, its name and persistent shape on the map. There was plenty to see; any minute now. Yet each one felt unable or reluctant to grasp the first impressions. It was as if their bodies had arrived—vaguely they were aware of that—but feelings for time and place were still

back at the point of departure or at some point along their flight path; and who can say whether these ever catch up?

Strips of turf and grey, those browns: several dozen browns out there. Oblong cream patch to the left and the obligatory silver roof, and another, hooped. Blurred purple undulating beyond, creased, folded like dropped cloth, and tunnelling cumuli just above it. It's a clear day. Yet the fragments, static and commonplace, are stationed far apart. It's a mosaic—slabs broken, separated. Soon it would become a slowly moving fresco, clarifying, but with certain parts vague or completely missing; always be missing. Several pets, cats and a planter's dalmatian, and someone's tortoise in the tail of the jet recorded similar sensations.

The Kaddoks, the couple in their fifties, sat near the back of the group. Here she drew in her breath: it shows the difficulty.

'It's a typical ordinary aerodrome,' she told him. 'Not very large. Some propeller-driven planes over there—hangar—some men coming here; native-looking—I can't see their faces—a dog—another dog.'

'Dogs?' said Kaddok, looking straight ahead. 'They shouldn't be here. What sort of dogs?'

These were cattle dogs with sandpaper noses, with dry skins, eczema (itching papules and vesicles) and the fleas; always jogging: in vast arcs like foxes.

'Brown grass to the right,' she went on, ignoring him. 'I don't see the airport lounge. Yes, I can.'

Behind them Dr Phillip North closed his book. During the flight he had looked up several times as Kaddok, a pale heavy man, felt his way down to the plane's lavatories, blessing each seat with his hand and occasionally someone's startled head. Kaddok wore dark glasses, an open-necked shirt, and a suit of some black thin linen material. Strapped across his chest in bandolier style a Pentax and a spare 75mm lens together looked like some ingenious directional-finding device, a magic eye; and the

camera was enclosed in a black leather hood with button, the same as Kaddok's wristwatch and his eyes. The V of his shirt showed a hive of silver hair bursting forth, yet he was thin on top.

Most of the long flight had been over water. About the only other time North looked up was when they had met land again, and then he followed the hypnotic doodles left by animals, the paths to water, and occasionally a straight yellow road, all part of the earth crust with the eroded beds and lengthy fissures, outcrops, lodes; old, old statements. Thorn trees spotted the land: blackheads on its jaundiced face. North recognised the Longonot volcano, that ancient sore, as the plane's shadow skated and fell into the crater's inkwell. In a dreamy state he waited for it to emerge—half anxious. It had. He still remembers 'where'.

Now Mrs Kaddok smiled at North.

'We made it, touch wood'—her way of introducing herself. The others too began standing, slowly looking around, and put on expressions of unconcern and anticipation.

'No, he's all right,' Mrs Kaddok said, as North offered to help. 'Get a move on, Leon.'

Down on the tarmac the air was colder than the clear sky and the land had led them to believe. An aerodrome breeze, inevitable and international, scribbled at their faces; whiff of kerosene there seemed to be produced by distant artificial trees. With trousers and skirts rattling the group walked to the terminal, more or less duplicating the fuselage shape of their seat positions, even maintaining the aisle—though perhaps without knowing it—with the Kaddoks and Dr Phillip North taking up the rear.

The airport like any other was still neutral territory. Only outside the gates and heading towards the capital did they begin to spark up. The British-built bus had sliding windows and an incredibly long gear lever. Lining the road were typical airport trees resistant to the winds, obviously planted recently, but then the road turned sharply left into

the foreign country itself, all exposed now, open for inspection. It was like a curtain pulled back on a foreign-produced film and they were driving into the scenery. It offered no resistance. The bent figures of women scratching at the earth didn't even look up. Occasionally a car passed. These were small English sedans, postwar, and crowded with joint families. In the bus some twisted in their seats to see, staring and switching from side to side, anxious not to miss anything.

From the front a young man assumed the role of lookout.

'A baobab tree, see, over there!'

He was right.

'The Traveller's Friend,' someone told them. 'You find tons of them up in our north.'

Dozens of the bloated baobab: bursting out, scattered like magnified pineapples.

'A bit of the old wattle there. Fancy. I would never have thought . . .'

Someone nodded: 'So it is, look!'

Behind the bus an elderly native had fallen from his bike, but no one noticed.

'Acacia,' a man told them. There is always one who knows the names of things.

*Acacia melanoxylon*. And to Leon Kaddok the landscape became coloured and jagged with their exclamations and he had to lean towards his wife, Gwen, to catch her running commentary.

The baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*). Wattle. Then the lookout leaning forward down the front appeared to mutter to himself and blink before he swung around, pointing hoarsely, 'Gum Trees!' True: at a bend in the road, like the one at Rapallo, a superb specimen with the peeling trunk, the usual mess on the ground.

'Have we left home?' a wag called out. 'Everybody please check their tickets.'

They had to laugh.

And they saw others at mid-distance, solitary old wool clippers under sail, and other eucalypts clustered on the grassy slopes, grazing gums.

'Eucalyptus globulus,' the man said, raising horse laughter. But he was being serious. It was Kaddok. He said it again, louder.

*Eucalyptus globulus.*

It could almost have been their own country: these sections with the gums briefly framed like a traditional oil painting by the slowly passing window. The colours were as brown and parched; that chaff-coloured grass. Ah, this dun-coloured realism. Any minute now the cry of a crow or a cockatoo; but no.

A tall figure in an ochre robe crossed ahead, sauntering, or rather floated among some cattle, and the cows were scruffy, with pre-historic pouch throats: drifting apparently aimless across the ground, kicking up dust. He was only a few yards from the bulky bus but ignored it, heading out into the stones and emptiness. They noticed his head partly shorn. His face was clay-dyed: jewellery glittered from his forehead. His gait had adapted to the jingling drift of cattle. Perhaps that had endowed him with the ancient stateliness. At any rate he silenced them; and they swung in their seats. The women sighed.

They noticed then other details.

This was an old, tangled land. It was complex, far more than they had realised. For there were thorn trees and oceans of swaying foreign grass, seeds flying off like spray, and at intervals the protruding thatched cone of a storage hut. And what was that species of tree, its blurred foliage isosceles triangle in shape, flat on top, unlike anything they had seen—growing everywhere here? (*Acacia senegal*.) Increasingly, the gums became incongruous. These were transplanted, surely: something from their past, their own country, and yet for that very reason worth mentioning on their postcards. Entering the capital the streets gradually

became dense with rusty velocipedes, mechanical insects whirring, and early motorcycles British again, many fitted with chairs, Velocettes and Ariels, even a Panther, and silver scooters and hissing buses too were honking and dispersing the pedestrians, beggars on wooden skateboards. It was a scattered, low-skyline city. Their hotel was the tallest building, in pride of place.

Doug ('Howdy') Cathcart paddled backwards and forwards alone doing his own private breaststroke: appearing/disappearing, his metronomic head giving the impression he was treading on springs. Actually more decibels were produced by his wife in the deckchair, slapping oil into her thighs which shuddered something terrible: stubby woman of principle. On the lawn close by, Louisa Hofmann carelessly offered a comparison. She was slender, well-exercised, late in her thirties. Facing the sun, her head resolutely held to one side declared she wouldn't be going for a dip. Her husband sat up reading the latest *Time* and every now and then looked at the water. There were cane tables, and waiters in white jackets came around with colourful drinks. The pool area was protected from the elements by the L shape of the hotel, and on the two open sides by a powerful thorn hedge and a concrete wall; jutting from the wall a pergola converted into an aviary held tiny shivering black-and-white birds, though no one, not even Phillip North, had gone over to inspect them. They could hear over the wall the cries of fruit sellers and the blindmen.

Cathcart climbed or rather crawled out and fumbled red-eyed in a Qantas bag for his towel. He found his sunglasses and sank in the chair beside his wife. How many lengths had he done? It must have been a good seven.

'Did nine lengths, dear.'

A thud-bang and a spoilt double somersault/jack-knife: the way the board kept going like a tuning fork could easily

get on some people's nerves.

Who kept doing that? The show-off in Hawaiian shorts.

At that point Sheila Standish came into the lawn at a half-trot, one hand shielding her eyes, but relaxed when she recognised the group. It had taken her several seconds. Strange how people alter when they shed their clothes. The men: it must be like them in a room just in their underpants, although here the thing wasn't hanging loose. Upstairs Sheila had a floral costume, a one-piece with bones. She'd brought it as always just in case. Sheila knew the longer she didn't put it on the more difficult it would be later. And yet she carried a cardigan and postcards to write. She chose a place next to the Cathcarts.

In the shade by the pergola someone plomped himself in the chair next to Phillip North. It was the diver patterned in tropical flowers. North had all along intended going for a walk, a stroll, to look around, and was dressed for it in an open shirt, cotton trousers and sandals, but the long flight and probably the events before it had made him tired.

'How's it going? Garry Atlas.'

Dr North shook the outstretched hand. It was dripping wet.

'This is the life, aye?' said Atlas, looking around. 'I'd say this is what it was all about. What do you reckon?'

Transparent globules hung all over his chest, caught the sunlight, and suddenly merged to piddle down between his legs. He was purple-lipped, shivering a bit. The silver watch on his wrist, of large diameter and sporting a black dial, leaked water. Staring at this North showed concern at the tiny white cloud forming under the glass. North noticed other signs of his ostentatious indifference to water. It seemed to be deliberate; it could be an affectation. A silver ring on one finger; and there jammed between his hip and saturated elastic he'd shoved his cigarettes and a box of matches! North began smiling, almost laughing.

'What are you reading?' Garry reached over.

And smiling North watched as he held the book in his wet hands.

'Shit!' said Garry, turning the pages: Goddard's *Method of Reaching Extreme Altitudes*. It was the 1919 edition.

'I haven't read this one,' he said, glancing at the pool. 'Was this what you were reading on the old plane?'

'Some light reading,' North nodded, seeing the joke.

But Atlas wasn't interested. He leaned forward and spoke out of the corner of his mouth.

'Listen, if you get browned off here, come over to us. There's a spare chair. You can meet some of the women. There's three of them.'

Dr North, who had a grey beard, gave a tired smile.

'No, I tell a lie,' said Garry putting his hand across his heart and looking up at the sky. 'There's only two-and-a-half. They're all dogs. But what the hell?'

Bending over, the neck and ears redden. Intestines appear in the forehead. Gazing at the young Adam's Apple, the neck of the racehorse, North saw a tremendous even suntan which wasn't coloured by blood-pressure: solar energy, solar myth. And as in his neck, veins ran wild on the back of his hand. Cigarettes were on his breath (non-filters).

'Have you tried that local brew they've got here yet?'

Before North could answer ('No') Atlas was on his feet.

'Jump!' he shouted. 'Now!' Grinning, nodding he made mock charges towards the girl on the diving board. 'Excuse me,' he said to North.

He sat down, shaking his head.

'There's one for you. She's a character.' The girl sat on the end of the board and turned her back on him. 'Did you see one of her tits fall out before?'

'No,' said North.

He immediately regretted saying it. He wasn't interested.

'Only one,' Atlas explained. 'Her top slipped off. Phew, it almost knocked my eye out. Ver-ee nice! Sasha is her name.'

Sasha-somebody. She has a friend, an actress if you don't mind! And I thought it was her bloody mother.'

Only one swimmer now travelled the pool. It took a lap to see who this was: Hofmann, Kenneth Hofmann, without the glasses. And he was further altered by the Australian crawl. It requires the mouth to regularly twist sideways for breathing, giving the swimmer the appearance of a sergeant shouting to men behind him. Hofmann's etherised wife still lay facing the sun, her mouth pulled slightly to one side (similar to her swimming husband's).

About then Kaddok came shuffling in, holding onto his wife. A number of people stopped in mid-sentence or lowered their voices. He had one hand slightly outstretched and his black suit was dusty. They'd been outside. As they passed she bowed slightly at North and smiled—energetic teeth! Kaddok's suit was buttoned up and one hand cupped his camera. Alongside the blue transparent pool he looked out of place.

Thud-bang again. Garry Atlas showed them how it was done. Most looked up: a reflex action. And sure enough he held them by staying under for an inordinate length of time, finally standing up ankle-deep with a gasp and swaying, blowing his nose.

In the midst of such activity Sheila Standish had put on her cardigan and dated only one postcard. Doug had said 'Howdy' and commented briefly on the climate, the exchange rate he had managed to get at the hotel, and their holiday last year, a caravan tour around Tasmania. Nothing of course compared to this trip which he called the Big-Un.

Hello? Louisa Hofmann had sat up and leaned back on her elbows. Other eyes had turned to the glass door.

A man wearing a vivid blue suit and holding a silver microphone had come through giving loud instructions over his shoulder in a language only Phillip North understood. He was stopped short. '*Merde! Allons!*' Small as it was the

microphone wire had caught under the door. One of the waiters—they were all crowding the door now—silently sprang forward and freed it. Then came four young men each with a neat black moustache and carrying various bits of equipment, some of it heavy. One had the TV camera on his shoulder and trailed cables. A red-haired girl wearing a silk shirt and no brassière held a clipboard. Garry Atlas had been about to do another jack-knife but changed his mind.

For the first time Hofmann murmured something to his wife. Both sat up looking at the door.

The redhead acted all stuck-up. She had her back to them while the man in blue strode over to the edge of the pool. They noticed then he had a pink unnaturally perfect complexion, and beautifully combed hair. His crew stumbled after him. At the chrome steps he stopped with his back to the camera, ran his tongue over his teeth several times, and slipped on a pair of rose-tinted spectacles. Oh là là! As he turned, a red light on the camera lit up. 'Raymond Canterel, *Antenne Deux, en extérieur,*' he said earnestly, almost worried. The rest of his spiel rose and fell among the chairs and tables: a never-ending sentence to them. Punctuation consisted chiefly of visual effects: a rhythmic shrugging of shoulders interspersed with a kind of hunching-up, look-up of surprise, and like a busker who simultaneously plays the drums, cymbals, bells and a mouth organ, threw in a wide range of calculated eyebrow movements and frowns, his hands describing sweeping arabesques and numerical symbols. '*Economie . . . Briteesh Empire . . . capitalisme . . . capitalisme . . . capitalisme élancolie . . . éléphants . . . phants noble sauvage . . .* were some of the recognisable words.

In an adroit movement he turned unexpectedly to the nearest nest of chairs.

'Pardon,' he smiled. 'What are your *impressions d'Afrique?*'

Poor Sheila. She froze. Her grey eyes which were normally magnified grew even larger staring at the microphone.

'Beg yours?' said Doug Cathcart, stepping in. A shade too loud.

His wife though understood perfectly.

'We've only just arrived,' she told them firmly, or rather the camera to the man's right. She gave the skirt of her bathing costume a few tugs.

But this didn't satisfy the Frenchman.

'First impressions, don't you find them interesting? Interesting, if perhaps dangerous?' Turning to the camera he rolled his eyes, *'Ah, ces Anglo-Saxons!'*

'Interesting! Oh, yes,' said Sheila, nodding.

'We've been told,' said Cathcart in his nasal voice, 'not to drink the ice here.'

'It's not exactly tidy,' agreed his wife. 'But we've only just arrived.'

The people . . . people, she felt like saying. Or they smell different. And they don't talk. They stare or glance at us. Still, it's a holiday and interesting. We're on a holiday.

The TV crew had moved on.

No, not Kaddok! They all squinted as the crew surrounded him on the other side of the pool.

'My husband is blind,' explained his wife.

Profuse apologies! But Kaddok interrupted.

'Interesting country. Thorn trees, spoor and so on. The tall animals such as the giraffe. A colourful dark people. The women in their brightly coloured costumes—dyed from berries, I believe. Naked kiddies, Africa. I've always wanted to visit Africa. Livingstone's trek, remember? The Masai—very proud people. Burton and Speke. I've taken already, let me see, a number of subjects. Ektachrome X, I use,' tapping his camera. 'ASA Speed 64. I wouldn't use anything else.'

Looking straight ahead as he spoke Kaddok sweated. The camera's little light was off, saving valuable film, although the man in blue remained in front still holding out the microphone, *un diplomate*.

Garry Atlas who had trailed the crew stood beside the redhead, and dripping water, spoke to her. It was his method usually to crack a small joke. But she turned her head away: hominivorous bitch, look and lighting up yet another Gauloise.

They moved on to Sasha and her friend, the actress; Garry began whistling.

Violet Hopper, recently Mrs: chiefly a taker of bit-parts in film, the distant ageing sister in a period dress. Ibsen? Trollope? Her apparent trouble was: only occasionally could she go outside her own smooth surface, even there being interviewed. She lifted her chin, tilted her head and spoke. As for Sasha she could only hitch up her top and laugh across as her friend offered the answers. Sasha was no help, none. She was on the verge of collapse. North found himself smiling. Not even the Rive Gauche redhead could object. And matters were made even worse by Garry Atlas in the background there standing on his head, supporting the earth, waving his legs whenever Sasha looked up. Everyone had their mouths open, and some began laughing.

'Africa?' someone else answered. A tall wide-shouldered man in a wash-n-wear suit. 'Africa's got the ball at her feet. Good healthy climate. Not a bad diet when you look closely at it. Labour and natural resources: I think it's got a bloody good future.'

'Is he with us?' Louisa whispered. Her husband, Ken, was supposed to never forget a face.

'Was he on our plane?' asked another.

'I don't think I've seen that one,' said Ken Hofmann. He smiled. 'But he should be with us.'

‘Nothing like the Aussie accent,’ said Doug, pretty loud, nodding at the bloke. The stranger gave him the thumbs up.

Fancy being on television! Sheila, for one, had found it fascinating. That was always the thing about travel: the unexpected. The proof lay clearly on her lap. In all honesty she could say she hadn’t had time ‘till now’ to write ‘even a postcard’.

‘I am with an interesting and rather nice group of people,’ she quickly began. But by then she saw most were getting up and going inside; and when the Cathcarts followed suit, with Doug yawning, she decided to gather up the postcards and finish them in her room.

Three tables had been pushed together, camouflaged by a loose-fitting cloth, more an iridescent blanket than ‘tablecloth’; but away from their own country, in an unfamiliar dining room, even eating off an unstable surface seemed to be an adventure. They had dressed for dinner. The men appeared in patterned jackets and cotton trousers, their hair combed, and Cathcart and Ken Hofmann both came down in the same click-clicking white shoes. The women had put on special blouses, and skirts, some in long skirts or long dresses, and silk ribbons—Gwen Kaddok wore a shawl—and for some reason the wives entered with folded arms and solemn expressions. Skirts and dresses. Interesting . . . Interesting is supported by the hips. The skirt is. Its weight must tug and remind that part of the body all day. In Africa: the grass skirt. Resting on the hips it creates a constant swish. Its removal eventually is in parts, two time-delaying motions: woman ‘steps out of skirt’. The sensible floral dress was Mrs Cathcart’s. Supported by the shoulders the dress is (eventually) lifted up over the hair, mechanical, elbow-jerking motion: those few seconds of blindness. Violet Hopper’s dress had all lines, angles and energy aimed at the waistline: so narrow

and brittle. As for the jeans worn by Sasha they traced the soft hourglass shape and other differences: how a woman's knees touch, as underlined in Life Classes. With Violet Hopper this could take place only beneath her dress. And Sasha had barged in ahead of her friend, swinging her leather bag.

At this stage the party kept to its original groups. Sitting with the Cathcarts suited Sheila. She could watch the others and appear to join in. Garry Atlas stuck with the girls. At the other end, Phillip North took his place with the Kaddoks without thinking; Gwen nodded acknowledging the habit. The Hofmanns sat together: he already gazed at a spot on the bare wall, drumming his fingers on his teeth. Behind him was a mural showing ('depicting') a tribe of wrestlers rolling entwined in the sky above a tiny but widespread European-styled city. They were thick thighed, these coffee-coloured wrestlers—of course—and wore fur coats. Evidently it was the work of a well-known local surrealist. It was reproduced across the menu cover in full colour but unfortunately out of register, so that the menu or the dining room itself seemed to vibrate from the falls of the heavy men.

Two empty chairs: gradually they had an irritating effect. Just about everybody glanced at them and became distracted, some frowning and glancing at them again, as they tried to recall the missing pair, wondering where they were. There was fidgeting of forks. It had grown dark outside. Some who twisted in their seats seemed to think the waiters would arrive only when the group was complete—the anticipatory hunger of travellers.

Gerald Whitehead hurried in, and with him a younger man wearing an old US air-force jacket, tropical style.

They quickly sat down. Gerald nodded at his neighbours, apologetic, and seeing the rest of the table looking at him with interest, put his head down. People naturally thought the two had been together but the younger one put out his

hand and introduced himself. James Borelli. *Borelli*. Italian? He waved the fork like one. At the same time Gerald began spearing the bridge of his nose with his forefinger, to poke his glasses back. The odd thing about that hand, as Sheila and Mrs Cathcart observed, was that it had an additional small finger, a burden to that side which is connected to the brain's reasoning, non-creative sector.

But they quickly became accustomed to that and Gerald's nose-spearing (seven, eight times a minute), and turned to Borelli. He was a little over thirty but carried a walking stick. He hooked it over the neck of his chair. He had pleasant keen eyes. As he discussed with Gerald what they had seen outside he saw Louisa Hofmann watching, and gave an open slow smile.

Evidently Gerald Whitehead must have felt it. For then he looked up too.

Garry Atlas here took the opportunity.

'Say, you missed out being on television. We were all stars'—looking around—'weren't we?'

'There was a film here,' nodded Mrs Cathcart down the end.

'Yep.'

'Sixteen-mill,' Kaddok told them.

'French television,' others explained, several talking at once, and all looking at Borelli for his reaction.

'And I don't suppose we'll ever get to see it ourselves.'

Although he kept listening Gerald Whitehead remained staring at his hands.

'I went dry inside,' Sheila whispered to Mrs C. 'You were good. You told them exactly enough.'

'I wouldn't drink that if I were you,' Doug advised.

'Doug's right,' Mrs Cathcart turned to Borelli. 'You'll get the trots.'

'Never mind. We're not living long.'

'Don't you get constipated travelling?' Sheila asked, leaning forward. 'I find I do.'

‘Thanks, chief,’ said Doug to the waiter. Plates were now being served.

‘I simply love the French language,’ Louisa Hofmann was saying. ‘I could just sit and listen to it all day.’

Her husband turned to her. ‘You don’t know a word of French.’

She was about to protest when the film crew trooped in and sat at the other long table, talking loudly.

For Borelli’s benefit Garry Atlas pointed with his forehead, ‘That’s the crew there.’

It was the last mention of the film.

‘I can’t eat this,’ Cathcart pushed his plate away. ‘It’s yams or something. How are you people finding it?’ he called down the table.

‘Right!’ Atlas nodded with his mouth full. ‘A T-bone anyday. But I’m wading through. When in Rome, you know . . .’

‘I’ll eat anything,’ Sasha murmured to Violet. ‘A horse or anything. Gosh, I’m hungry.’

‘But you always are,’ said her friend looking away.

Garry was going on, ‘The beer’s pissy too. It’s not within a bull’s roar of ours. Have you had any yet?’

‘You’re a vegetarian?’ Mrs Kaddok asked.

North nodded.

‘We too,’ she smiled.

North cleared his throat. ‘Yes, the diet of harmless beasts with slow reactions.’

‘I hadn’t thought of it that way.’ And again Gwen showed her teeth. She turned, ‘Did you hear that, Leon?’

North frowned. He hadn’t exactly meant it like that.

‘Elephants,’ Kaddok confirmed, ‘eat eight hundred to a thousand pounds of grass a day. They weigh up to seven and a half tons. Both sexes of the African elephant have tusks.’

‘Eight and a half tons,’ Dr North corrected gently.

'Our waiters,' Mrs Cathcart announced to the rest, 'if you look, have got bare feet.' And she made a clicking noise with her tongue.

The waiters too could understand English.

'Oh dear,' said Sheila, perplexed.

She'd asked for tea, they'd given her coffee. Sheila looked around and decided to drink it.

'Say, guess what?'

This was Garry Atlas again leaning forward with a quiz question; veins on his neck bulging. 'Guess what I saw on the end of the diving board?' He turned to everybody at the table. 'Someone had scratched on it with a knife, or something. "REMEMBER-DAWN-FRASER". It's there. And in brackets they've put A-U-S-T.'

'Austria?' Borelli suggested.

'She's our swimmer!' Cathcart cried out down the end.

'Right!' Garry nodded.

'Someone's been here before us,' giggled Sasha to Violet. Sshhh.

'One of the best,' said Doug. 'The 1960 Rome Olympics, remember?'

'The first woman to break sixty secs for the one hundred metres,' Kaddok said. 'Freestyle.'

The stranger they'd seen at the pool passed but didn't stop at the table. He gave them the thumbs up.

North lit a small cigar and glanced at his watch.

There was a lull as they realised where they were; or how far they had gone away.

'Have you been overseas before?'

Sasha shook her head. 'This is the first time.'

Directly below lay the pool illuminated by Dutch underwater lamps, ultramarine slab sloping to dark cold at the deep end. The surface tilted with the shifting dining room fixtures and candles, fluid lights, and the board floated, an interesting twisted rectangle. The board and the surrounding tiles were still riddled with pools. Further out,

the bordering lawn was soaked in shadow and suggestion, black but not completely, Reinhardt's black. And from the dining room they could see over the wall large silhouettes, evidence of new constructions, capital, and a hidden flashing light. There was no muffled racket from there now; no distant sibilance of wheels, not even the last truck or a bicycle bell. It was late but the window-wall also possessed pleasant editing properties. The entire continent felt empty.

'There aren't many lights,' Hofmann reflected as he folded his serviette, breaker of silences.

Does he mean neon?

'This is Africa,' Whitehead reminded him, almost rudely, looking down at his cup.

The Museum of Handicrafts: MUSEUM spelt MUSEU. Of handicrafts, arts'n local artifacts perhaps. These people were known for their woven baskets and the painted gourd; grass bags; jewellery as strapped to the forehead: and so on. Fabrics, but to a lesser extent.

Many other groups after sitting down to the English breakfast must have strolled the same three or four blocks to the Museum, for although they took up the full width of the footpath, talking and pointing things out to each other, often pausing for photographs, little notice was taken of them by the locals, the natives preferring the road. Doug Cathcart had a pair of powerful binoculars and now and then stopped, his bow-legged wife alongside, as he focused on a distant cyclist or a woman breastfeeding. The morning was clear and pleasant. Except for his shuffle and the way he leaned to hear his wife, Kaddok looked no different from anyone else. Most of the others wore special sunglasses too. As they turned into the square and saw the building, someone—it was Gerald Whitehead—let out a low whistle of disapproval.

Facing them the Museum dominated, overwhelmed the square. It was para-Palladian, ambitious in scope, hoping to gain kudos from one of the previous high points in Western civilisation. It had the grey steps, the portentous columns, porticos and mock balconies; while the square in the foreground had been set aside as a piazza, concave à la Siena. Such was the Museum's presence (pressure) the roofs of the ramshackle shops lining the square had splintered upwards. On the short left side a collapsing lazaretto and a basket factory had trees and shafts of grass growing out of the cracks.

There were other things wrong. Gerald stood making sounds of unbelievability with his tongue.

- 1) Look, that proposed 'piazza' in the foreground was a dustbowl. It was paved with mud bricks but crowded with squatting apothecaries and vegetable dealers; skinny men flogged aphrodisiacs (displayed on folded blankets); outdoor butchers there to one side, a Club; rhythmic Malevich knife-grinder next cranking a large stone with one foot; what looked like rows of Medicine Men (their arcane jars, powders, animal skins); an elderly ocularist; Sirdarjis and drifting Somalis; the inevitable tellers of fortunes—at least two dozen of them under torn umbrellas; and there were canvas awnings, an acrobat suspended between nasal monotonous hawking. The function of the 'piazza' was neatly eclipsed.
- 2) The museum itself. Somehow its ratios were out. It was ungainly, oppressively so. Through an oversight or to fit into the square it had been made squat. A good case of the Golden Rectangle ignored or misunderstood. Architects should sign their names on buildings, as they do in Argentina.

Gerald kept shaking his head, muttering. Was anyone else so aghast?

- 3) On the roof to one side had been grafted a cupola. Quite incongruous. It was pink, a huge Moscow breast, pierced by a tilting television aerial.
- 4) And flanking the entrance, two rusting pedestals held a half-ton pair of vulgar terrestrial condors—or were they crows?—cast in concrete. These were visible from a great distance. Dr North told Sheila they were African vultures.

They had climbed the steps and were approaching the main doors. From behind the pillars figures stirred. A beggar on crutches managed to stand up, other gangetic shapes moved and as both Louisa Hofmann and Violet felt it necessary to lift their hems, bones shot out, fingernails, yes, for baksheesh.

‘Don’t give them anything,’ Doug Cathcart shouted, his mouth dry. Borelli had one hand in his pocket. ‘Or you’ll never get rid of them. They’ll tag along!’

And Kaddok, raising his camera at one—a face swollen with ganglia—nicely caught the open mouth and milky stare of a native, blind.

Looking up then they could see that the sans-serif MUSEU OF HANDICRAFTS was ‘printed’ in neon pipes. MUSEU was not a misspelling or an example—as Sasha had assumed—of some local dialect. The M had long ago fallen off in a wind and as they passed underneath they were showered in sparks from the permanent short circuit.

Sheila attached herself to the Cathcarts as they moved inside and immediately began looking around for the handicrafts. The unexpected bright lighting, circuits of flickering fluorescent, punctuated by duds and ceiling fans, and others about to expire, made her sneeze. She blew her nose. The Museum sounded completely empty. A few

divisions of plywood broke up the cavernous space. Even from a distance these looked rickety.

In a peeved voice Gerald asked whether it was open or finished yet.

There was after all a smell of fresh paint.

Doug Cathcart cleared his throat, a bit irritated.

Ah! a tall robed figure appeared. He had bare feet and so they hadn't heard him. Sasha and Violet exchanged glances, raising their eyebrows. He was a Masai, stone-faced, and smelling of cattle. Although he said nothing they all followed him. Now in the bright hall they could see heads and eyes of the museum staff in cubicles apparently waiting for their arrival. The guide stopped and looked on with them. An attendant—or was he curator?—in khaki shorts and bare feet busily wrapped some rope around a dented lawnmower. His cubicle was crowded with lawnmowers. All appeared to be in original condition (the bottle-green duco) although the filigree of scratches and the mirror-finish of the flywheels indicated a long hard life. One still had the rare canvas grass-catcher, a British invention. Borelli speculated whether that model would have been pre-Suez. Along with the sturdy British motorcycle, the mowers (*By Appointment* . . . in gold transfer) held the lion's share of the export market. At the height of the Empire . . . Empire the Empire's decline, the BSA motorbikes and Moffatt & Richardson mowers of the 1950s developed stasis in their design and model range, proclaimed more a sturdy heaviness, as if the traditional arteries from Head Office had gradually and irreparably hardened.

With a leap backwards the mechanic/attendant started a two-stroke. Within the stone walls it kicked up a tremendous reverberating racket and the blue smoke made the ladies step back and press handkerchiefs to their nostrils. He started another, then a third—a small one with an unusual kick-starter. Then he turned to the one which