

# Heart Pumps Blood

*Arlo Langham*

THE SUMMER OF 1948 was going to be hot, I could tell—but of course they always were in Adelaide. The dry winds from the north would toast any natural splendour that the city had acquired over the winter. Fields that had just reached their lush, green zenith would descend to yellow rasps and reeds. Those winds could sweat the life out of a man.

There was a place I knew from my childhood, a place where one could escape the constricting dry air. It was a place that I only visited a few times but that made an impression on my young heart. Somerton Beach was as close to home as I had ever known. On a summer's day the foreshore would glisten, attracting the local children like silver would a magpie.

I remember the precise prance we took from the bakery, down to the dunes, tiptoeing across the swaths of white sand unlucky enough to fall short of the soothing tide, before finally splashing into the tingling shallow waters, hands above our heads to save our lunch from becoming sodden. It was an elegant dance that stuck with me through years of ungainly roving. It was a dance I intended to take one more time before I faded.

And fade I would. They would think of me as dead, and although they would be incorrect in doing so it would make no difference. There would be no one to tell otherwise. No one to cloud their judgement with stories of valour or fortitude. No one to feel sympathy, or indeed contempt—because it would be at my own hand.

I say 'fade' because I didn't want 'death', as it had come to be known. 'Death' was lying in mud and gore whilst watching your own

heart pump blood out of the open wounds in your body, miles from home and family, alone but surrounded. I did not want this 'death'. I merely wanted to fall asleep and fade away.

I had always been content to wander and I always longed to stray. Never far from the cities and towns, but never close enough to become intoxicated by their comfort and community. My beloved *Rubáiyát* said 'Wilderness is Paradise', but I had not found that to be the case.

I am not sure exactly how old I was in 1948, but I certainly remember a few years of innocence before the darkness of war engulfed us all in 1914. My age was not important to me; I always had a feeling that I would know when it was my time to depart. It was always just me and the Earth, and I knew which would prevail longer.

By the time summer arrived and the blades of grass began to wither, as I predicted they would, I knew I could not face it. I knew the time had come for me to fade. As the *Rubáiyát* said, I was *Taman Shud*; I was finished.

I had been staying in the suburbs, walking and hitchhiking, catching trains and buses from place to place, spending my days in the throws of spring. Adelaide's springtime was as holy as its summers were harsh. The sun would not so much hang in the sky as soar, refreshed from its winter break. As I would sit in the shade of the still-lush trees I would find myself falling asleep, dozing and napping. Over days and weeks these naps grew into slumbers, and from slumbers into languor until one day, whilst leaning against the trunk of a particularly expansive plane tree, I found myself comatose.

I was conscious, but only within my own head—and even then I was slipping away.

Luckily a kind stranger shook me before the night fell or I might have permanently faded there and then. At first the lack of control frightened me, but it quickly began to excite me. Knowing I could be moments from the end, feeling my thoughts grow disparate and weak gave me a sense of control paramount to any other.

And so I would tempt it. I would sleep in places where I knew I would be awoken; pubs, parks, by creeks. I would check my watch upon closing my eyes and waking up and I concluded that I could fade away within four hours of comatose sleep. I also concluded that it would not be long before I hit that four-hour mark. I could fight it and slip away without knowing or I could invite it, plan for it and control it. I decided I would do the latter.

Nobody considers the concept of home more than those who do not have one. I knew I was from Adelaide but I could not decide on a reason as to why I still felt attached to that city—and yet I knew it would be where I left the Earth. I spent my last November walking its streets with a focus I never had before. I followed my anxieties down dark alleys and my hopes to flowing streams. To a stranger I may have looked like another lost vagabond, but I was not lost; I was searching, searching for a place to breath my last breath.

And then one day towards the end of the month it dawned on me. Where was the one place I had experienced pure, unadulterated happiness in my life? The one place where I did not feel alienated and alone? Somerton Beach. Nothing could ever tempt me from she. Perhaps the only place I smiled in my war-ravaged childhood. The only place I had ever felt the sense of belonging I have evaded yet reluctantly strived for since. That would be the place.

Today is the last day of November and the last day of my life.

This morning I arrived in the city early to take care of my final affairs; if I was to leave this life in peace I had to be free of possession, free of ties to a life I no longer wanted. I dropped the few extra clothes I had at the music building at the university on North Terrace before heading to one of my favourite places in the city; the library. The library is an ornate building reeking of the earthy notes of piles upon piles of books and papers. I often carried around books with me, and whilst I struggled to adhere to their loans policies I would always endeavour to return and even donate books. In fact it was through studying at the library that I discovered my one true love; the *Rubáiyát*.

It is a book of short poems, musical in construction, vivid and poetic in word. I would sometimes sit within earshot of the music building at the university reading those poems in time with their songs.

The library's sparingly regulated donation section—my personal favourite—housed a long-ago vandalised copy of this beautiful book of verse, covered in random letters and gobbledegook. It was this version that I had fallen for, and I needed it now more than ever. It had long been a plan of mine to replace the library's damaged copy with a freshly printed one, and a trip to a printing town in Victoria afforded me the opportunity to do so.

I switched the books, walking away with my beloved if ragged copy of the *Rubáiyát* and boarded a bus down to Somerton. On the way there my nerves grew; I had essentially chosen this little beach

as the place of the most important moment of my life based on a decades-old memory. What if it had changed? What if the magic and magnetism that I experienced as a boy had been demolished by war and depression?

As my faith wavered I turned to the *Rubáiyát* for guidance and discovered a verse I had seldom dwelled on. As I sit here now it is branded on my mind:

*The Moving Finger writes: and, having writ,  
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,  
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it*

As it had done so many times before, the *Rubáiyát* quelled my doubts and eased my stress. I had devised a plan and I could not look back or cry over it. *Taman Shud*; finished. I tore that line from the final pages of the book and kept it with me as I got off the bus at Somerton.

I was wrong to doubt Somerton Beach; the place's beauty had not wavered. Like the rest of the country, this sleepy suburb had endured two periods of war in my lifetime, but the way the sun glistened off the spray as the waves rolled in surpassed any superficial wear it may have had. The point where the sun met the sky was only distinguishable by a shade, the blues swimming into each other like paint on a palette. I had chosen wisely, my time had come. It was time to dance.

As I remember it the dance involved bare feet, the hot road and a fresh pastry in my hand. Unfortunately I could not meet these requirements as the sun had gone down, I was wearing the best shoes I have ever owned and had bought the pastry in the city that morning. This did not change the feeling behind this frivolous frolic—although I added a step to its choreography; I decided on my walk down here to the beach that the *Rubáiyát* could not fade with me. I am aware that what I am doing here will cause some burden for the local people, people whom I may have played with at this very beach decades ago. I decided to repay one of them by leaving my *Rubáiyát* in their car. I can only hope that they gain as much guidance from it as I have.

And so here we are. I am sitting on the beach, back against the seawall that is still warm from the glorious sun. My eyes are closed,

and a short while ago I realised that I can no longer feel my body—I am comatose. I can hear dull thuds of blood pumping into my veins, but they are becoming few and far between. These reflections of my decision and final hours will be my final thoughts.

Soon I will fade. *Taman Shud*—finished.