‘Fell Away Towards the River. . . .’

“By definition, the world is unlimited, endowed with innumerable properties; genre makes a selection among them, sets a model of the world, and breaks up the infinite series”.

*Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*
*Tzvetan Todorov*

For forty years, or near enough to, the man that I see in my mind only as if through glass, had been the more than competent manager of the Government Guesthouse, for forty years when it had still served a purpose, had still had a role to play. That was until his last day came, in the common way in which the future turns into the present, like pale light entering brightness, a day that was by no coincidence at all the final one of their operational life for the few remaining guesthouses of the same sort, of the same sort in the country that the man was satisfied he had served well, for every year of his working days. He felt it only an honour in the very lowest degree, however, that the officials who decide such things had waited until his retirement day in particular, to end the arrangement once and for all of providing convenient accommodation for those people forced to travel, on government business, to the less-populated areas of the land of Australia.

As the removalists passed by the man at the front of the Government Guesthouse, he began to feel sad, sadder than crows in a mass in the evening, on the spot where he was standing, on his retirement-day morning, on the first Friday of the summer.

A story halts, or only seems to.

The sentence before the previous sentence has a main part that could be discussed in the context of anything whatsoever: for example, one could talk about it with reference to both the guesthouse itself, and to the hard work of the removalists. You have the guesthouse, with no striking details on even a single of its million surfaces, and related to the guesthouse, while not really part of it, the million details of the concentrated business of moving nearly everything out of it. And in the midst of all this, an emotion, mentioned just now, also without striking details, and which a lesser man than the man that I see only as if through glass might have mistaken for a sort of neat substitution of the guesthouse, for that part of his self where emotions normally come from.

The manager of the Government Guesthouse, however, knew that he was—truth be told—simply sadder than crows sometimes are, and that the feeling within him, even though also without striking details completely, was only something like the guesthouse, without being it, and that in reality his sadness had much more in common, while not being them either, with the many details of the business of the removalists. Although he also knew that his sadness (for such it was beyond doubt) was not equally related to all of these details, and that it was most akin to one thing in particular that was, and not just because it was only one thing, not unlike the guesthouse itself: a clock with glass hands, which had not been disturbed once in the whole time that the man had been the manager of the Government Guesthouse.

Carefully, the removalists carried the clock with glass hands away, as if their very hands were made of glass.

In forty years, there had been some good times, and some bad times; not to mention many times when things were neither good nor bad: friends, a wife, a daughter once and once a son. Still, after all that time—forty years—it was surely right for the man to linger before leaving, simply to linger on that last morning. Many thoughts were coming to him, thoughts with feelings wrapped around them, or inside of them. Chief amongst these, the man was thinking that he had never once been put in the situation of having to describe the place that he had once in a while thought of as a child might have done, to anyone who had never been there. The visiting officials had always arrived in such a hurry, as if having dropped from the sky; only later, if at all, he supposed, did they merely describe the guesthouse to themselves. And if he had been asked, the man suspected that he would have been unable anyway to find the right words, to satisfy the inquiries of a stranger about even that feature of the Government Guesthouse for which, in the local area at least, it was justly famous. Furthermore, and later on, the man would have been reluctant to use the only words that he had liked to repeat in his head whenever, during the increasingly frequent silences in the guesthouse, he had felt warm towards the place that he would eventually have to leave for good. It ‘fell away towards the river. . . .’ Yes, that was how he thought of it from the very centre of himself: at the back, where the outbuildings were, the land of the Government.
Guesthouse ‘fell away towards the river.’

The man loved the words ‘fell away towards the river’ because they appeared to him to be true of every part of the Government Guesthouse, even though they referred actually to only one part of it. They put him in mind of both the flat stones at the front entrance, and of the warm light that shone sometimes in the glass, on occasions towards dusk . . . each of these particulars being only by way of example. Yet lately he had also liked to think of the outbuildings on the bank without words, and most of all of the low outbuilding where was kept, at separate ends, the black coal for the furnace, and the loose-bodied white ducks for the next day’s market, and where sometimes a white feather floated through the black air of the outbuilding on to the coal, or a speck of invisible black would appear on a bird’s limp wing.

Black was never so black, nor white so white, in the man’s experience, anywhere else he had been, nor anywhere else that he had read, heard or thought about, as these colours were pure and real in the low outbuilding filled with coal and ducks, which the man had sometimes visited, and more often thought about, while nevertheless painstakingly avoiding any sort of intercourse with others in which he might—by sheer bad luck—have heard or read no matter how inconsequential a reference to the special outbuilding that was his favourite. For this reason, the man had tried to steer every conversation that he was part of towards what he thought of as ‘non-earthly’ topics, and he had only read books about non-Australian things (the outbuilding being, of course, a thing in Australia). This last strategy had made it almost impossible that he would accidentally read about his river-bank building; but, the man more often than not lived in dread of a local speaker let’s say suddenly changing the hitherto innocent course of a conversation, about the condition of the dusty roads, say, and using what he or she would have thought of as the least significant of the outbuildings as a reference point for the location, across the river perhaps, of a dangerous tree or a swirl of water. “It’s roughly opposite the low outbuilding,” such a speaker might have said. The man had known that a comment like this one was most unlikely ever to be uttered, but he also knew that in the small community of which he was a member this possibility was not so unlikely as to be nearly, or almost, impossible.

As for an odd remark by a government guest, or an official letter associated with the man’s employment as the manager of the Government Guesthouse, he had always been confident that nothing of these, or any like instances of communication, would ever, in speech or writing, do more than bore him, with their stupidity, and with their irrelevance to the wider state of the world.

A story appears to return to a moment that it has never really left behind.

On his last morning as the manager of the Government Guesthouse, the man was to all eyes an old man. The laden removalists passing to either side of him as he stood in his old man’s shoes on the sandy lawn certainly thought so, as did the few members of the house-staff and the garden-staff who had decided to stay to the very end, and were intently watching him, the busy removalists, and even each other, for tears. I am an “ager”, a “man-ager”, the manager used to say in the last years of his tenure, whenever another government guest arrived, who would always be young, and often not unhandsome. Some of the house-staff and garden-staff, sensing dissatisfaction and change, had cried even then, drawing the curtains of lonely rooms, retethering the goats that kept the grass in check, as the young man or young woman grew unsettled by the bigness or smallness of things, opposite the low outbuilding,” such a speaker might have said.

It was a little over a year before the manager’s retirement day when the Government Guesthouse became so quiet that even an unhappy guest would have been welcome. And things had turned in on themselves a small fraction of a degree. After only a few days of near silence, the garden-staff got together with the house-staff, who will ever know exactly why? and the group decided to raise ducks in an enclosure by the river, with the intention of selling a few of them, each morning of a number of future days, at the market in town. Knowing a bit about this and that, the garden-staff had built the enclosure—with two sides in the water and three on the land—and had slaughtered the first ducks one evening in the summer, in the part of the day when the blood runs slowest, storing the bodies nearby out of the light rain, in the same space as was already occupied by a pile of black coal. The next morning, the house-staff had taken the ducks to the market, sold them all in an hour, and the enterprise was promptly judged a success, with the garden-staff, who would continue to do the bulk of the work, taking most of the profit. No-one had cried then, unless for joy.

It was at about the same time that the manager of the Government Guesthouse had fallen in love with the words ‘fell away towards the river,’ soon afterwards starting to think of the low outbuilding, where now both coal and
ducks were kept, without the help of such ordinary things as words. And the glass-boy had every morning skipped one-hundred flat stones across the surface of the river. In a spray of sheer motion towards the opposite bank, they lodged themselves in the damp soil just above the water-line.

The responsible official in the city had taken a little while to find out what was going on, and, eliciting conclusions from facts, a little longer again to understand that the business with the ducks was the natural consequence of all those empty rooms in the Government Guesthouse; this after finding out that no-one had been required to travel, on government business, to that or any other guesthouse in a remote area of Australia for—and this was how the responsible official had put it—“an unreasonable period of time.” Under some pressure from those above, he decided not to close the Government Guesthouse until the manager’s retirement day, on which date he would shutdown all of the few other such guesthouses not to have suffered that fate already, in the meantime requiring nothing of their no doubt bored staff, nor even of the, as he had assumed, enterprising manager, house- or garden-staff of the Government Guesthouse that had caused all this trouble, other than that they maintain at least the pretence of being open for business-as-usual. And keep those damn ducks out of the guests’ areas, he had added as a joke to his secretary; and if anyone got any bright ideas to start raising cattle and kangaroos, he’d go out there personally, he added as a joke to himself.

The responsible official was the sort of authority figure who liked to laugh at his own jokes, although his staff thought of this man with no colour in his cheeks as himself a joke, and of themselves also as a joke, for having to work for him, which unsatisfactory arrangement was the basic matter of all the bad jokes that they told to each other, when their boss was out of sight but not out of mind.

The same day, the city official’s efficient secretary had typed and mailed the letter dictated to her from a chair of pale leather. After two weeks it arrived at the offending Government Guesthouse, where its contents pleased no end the house- and garden-staff—who as it happens were just starting to think about cattle and kangaroos—and who went to town immediately to make new, more magnificent plans. The manager and the glass-boy, unenthusiastic about both ducks and enterprises, were without a thought left behind, with their similar emotions, at the time, just before the evening really begins, when occasionally a warm light shone in the glass, the same light that the words ‘fell away towards the river’ always had the power to put the man in mind of, although the warm light had been neither shining in the glass, nor present in the consciousness, as some call it, of the manager of the Government Guesthouse. As befitted his occupation, he prided himself on being able to keep in mind simultaneously two or more things, but the only image that he was seeing as if inside his head, as the local heron colony rose and wheeled in the darkening twilight, was a single moving-picture, identical in its shapes, colours and changes to the real appearance and motion of the glass-boy as he, at that precise moment—and as was his habit—began to practise his throwing: in rapid succession twelve stones landed in a new heron’s nest on the far side of the swampy river-ground, crushing none of the speckled eggs, nor the solid dark cuckoo’s.

When you live in a glass house. . . .

That was almost half a year before the last day came for the Government Guesthouse, in the common way in which the future turns into the present, like pale light entering brightness, and for all the time remaining afterwards the duck business continued to thrive, not least because the idea of breeding cattle and kangaroos was seen for what it really was: a passing fad, unsuited to either the local climate, or to the preferences of consumers. Meanwhile, the guesthouse itself, at least for those with eyes to see, resigned itself to almost pure emptiness, resolved its stairways, window seats and wall hangings into a state not far removed from nothingness. But there was something that stirred and shifted in the inner spaces of the innermost rooms, the result not of soil, or water, or light. The peculiar seeds that the glass-boy gathered at night from the surface of the plant-full, frothy water near the base of the only tree by the river whose roots had become tangled in a whirlpool, and which a member of the local community might have said, had they any cause so to say, was roughly opposite the low outbuilding at the rear of the Government Guesthouse, these peculiar seeds, which the house-staff had been instructed to sprinkle onto the hundreds of white, guests’ bedsheets for the sake of their lasting freshness in an indefinite period of storage, each one of these peculiar seeds, had on a certain day started to sprout, all at once, in the folds and layers of the rough cotton bedsheets they were enclosed in, although they were without soil, or water, or light. And no-one had witnessed anything of this, even when little fruit-laden branches closed around the threads of rough cotton produced years before, and hundreds of miles away, in an industrial town on the Australian coast.

Shortly afterwards, on the manager’s retirement day, the Government Guesthouse was deserted by almost everyone well before the heat came into the morning. Most of the goods taken away by the removalists were

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sold later at a Government Auction House, while the rest found their way into various museums, both
government-run and private.

All this took place many years ago. Even the outbuildings are in ruins today, falling away towards the river.
And where the guesthouse itself once was there is now only an unusual stand of trees, good for nothing better
than burning, because its white timber is full of broken glass. When he needs to warm himself in the winter,
Joseph Paxton, the old man who still hangs around the place, sits close to the flames of his fire, thinking mainly
of the time when his eye was good, and his aim was true.

The words that are true of everything to do with the Government Guesthouse, not excluding its destruction, ‘fell
away towards the river. . . .’

Patrick West