



LOUIS ARMAND  
**ABACUS**

VAGABOND PRESS

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SYDNEY 2015

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First published by Vagabond Press, 2015.  
PO Box 958 Newtown NSW 2042 Australia  
[www.vagabondpress.net](http://www.vagabondpress.net)

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Parts of this book first appeared in *Litro* and *Numéro Cinq*.

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Cover art by Glendyn Ivin.

Author photo by Adam Aitken, showing Brett Whiteley's *Almost, Once* at 2 Raper Street, Surry Hills.

ISBN 978-1-922181-49-7

*Each human being has at the final core of self a crystal from which the whole manifold of the personality develops, a secret molecular lattice which governs the unfolding of all the structures of the individuality, in time, in space, in memory, in action and contemplation. Asleep there were just these dreams and no others. Awake there were these actions only. Only these deeds came into being.*

— Kenneth Rexroth

# LILY



Meningitis, they said. Tuberculosis. Rickets. Truth was, none of them really knew why Jenny's cripple sister died.

"Macabre," Jass Davis mumbled into his drink, "putting the wheelchair next to the grave like that when they buried her."

Davis, in hand-me-down regimental black, was just returned from the Church of England cemetery. Old Tanner grunted. The two were propped on the verandah of the Australia Hotel beneath a sign for Resch's Waverly Bitter Ale. Across the street a Union Jack hung breezeless above the Victoria Park rotunda.

"We've got our own bloody flag ya know," Old Tanner muttered, a Peter Lalor cast to his eye.

"There's that Kraut teacher," Davis said, inclining his substantial chin in the direction of a tall man in felt hat crossing the north-west corner of the park.

It was a July mid-afternoon, the weather had cleared and fugitive rays of sunlight fell on pools of muddy water. The man's shadow tilted at an angle as he approached, an ambulant sun-dial.

"I'm told she was his favourite," added Davis, by way of afterthought.

"Oo?"

"The cripple."

"Somethin' dodgy 'bout that cabbage-eatin' bastard. Now there's a closet I'll bet money 'as skeletons in it."

Professor Zwerg caught sight of the two drinkers semi-reclined in the shadows of the hotel verandah, but offered no greeting.

\*

The boy genius was seated at the piano, blond with round steel-rimmed glasses, struggling his way through *The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba*. Zwerg paced back and forth behind him, beating time against a dark trouser-leg. Here he was, once more in the belly of the whale. Mrs Acheson's parlour. The room with its imported bric-a-brac never failed to stir his conviction that here civilisation

was not in reach. The woman herself was lugubriously conventional, as convention demanded. Her husband owned properties. Owning properties had been his calling in life. His portrait hung over the piano, a large grey daguerreotype retouched with loose lines of charcoal in a comically ornate picture-frame.

Zwerg stopped his pacing to give the boy genius a reassuring pat on the head. The boy looked up helplessly through smudged lenses. Handel evaded him. Just as Grieg, Mozart, Beethoven and Bach had all in turn evaded him. In a moment his eldest sister would appear at the door and march him off, and Zwerg would hear her berating the boy down the hall. "Your brain's not working," Miss Jenny would say. "What sort of idiot are you? Can't you read the notes?" And then it would be the invalid's turn. Lily. For Lilian. A third sister would wheel her in, in her invalid's chair. And then this third sister would sit in the corner for the duration of the lesson, feet tucked-up on a settee, sketchbook in hand. The third sister had aspirations, he supposed, to being an artist. A creature with dark wiry hair and darker eyes, she rarely spoke except to say "Hello Professor," "Goodbye Professor," always watching, always scratching diligently with her pencil.

Lily, however. Lily possessed the true sensitivity of a neurasthenic, eyes forever averted, hunched over the keys. The slope of the shoulders, the pale tapering of hands, conveyed a gossamer fragility. It spoke of Debussy. Demanded, one might say, Debussy. Zwerg at first demurred, had temporised, had inevitably relented. He had no talent for Debussy, but his invalid pupil had from the outset maintained a robust indifference to his talents. Zwerg hoped it might be otherwise. He sought to inspire her with higher thoughts cribbed from manuals. But the girl was set on Debussy. It was an eccentricity the stern matriarch tolerated solely on account of her daughter's affliction. The woman had read Tennyson, she knew what culture was supposed to be.

Zwerg resisted the temptation to caress the exposed nape of Lily's neck as she settled into her scales. She wore no corset, her affliction precluded it. He couldn't help wondering what else it precluded, what it incited. How she must get claustrophobic stuck in her own head all the time. Zwerg had an involuntary vision of the girl's naked back, swaying over the keyboard. Great blocks of towering sonority rising beneath her hands. Motivic atoms stirred into collision by urgent, insistent fingers, florid and



expansive. Chordal outbursts in the diminished seventh, *ma non troppo*. The curbing of the *appassionata* before the coda, the angular accentuations, the syncopated figures in sated repose. The sister in the corner smirked over the top of her sketchbook as though she'd read his mind. Lily awaited his instruction.

"Zee intellect," Zwerg said weakly, "und zee zenzen muss be ved-ded if *die Wahrheit*, zee *troo-the*, ist to be un-covered..."

"Don't you mean *discovered*, Professor?" interjected the sister, positively leering at him. Zwerg could feel the sweat gathering about his collar.

"*Genau!* Das ist exactly vat I mean."

The sister jabbed with her pencil, as if to catch his features just so. *In flagrante delicto*, he thought, taking up a cardboard folio and struggling with the ties. Lily waited with hands crossed in her lap, the hidden curve of the loins. Zwerg fumbled the sheets onto the music stand. *Clair de Lune*. "Votre âme est un paysage choisi..."

"It ist ne-zee-zar-y," he murmured, "to reach zuh *tip-ping* point. Zee notes muss be *dis-cov-ered*, zee muzik muss come az zee un-ex-pec-ted vint zat ca-rez-zes zee tulip..."

Zwerg's face reddened.

Lilian stared at the dots on the stave, like flowers on a Dutch chamber pot, blackened under smears of cracked varnish. If she tilted her head, the dots would sway on their stems.

The sister laughed.

"Zuh tip-ping point," Zwerg groaned, morose, "ist ein *mo-bile po-tenz-ial-ity*."

Ungracefully he commenced his pacing. Lily dragged her fingers down upon the keys. In Zwerg's mind, the sister's laughter rang out more shrilly. He tapped the 9/8 tempo on his trouser leg, *andante très expressif, con sordina*.

\*

It was Reverend Stokes's considered view that philanthropy would be the nation's decline. "Liberals," "blacks," "kanakas" and "Chinese." He'd preached the Transvaal war from the pulpit of St John's. Jass Davis nodded his assent, Australia for the white man. Though for all that, Davis considered himself "temper democratic." He'd served in the Mounted Rifles. Unlike the Reverend, Davis had no great sympathy for the King and Empire mob. A free-selector's

son, he believed Australia should be governed by Australians, not some cousin to the Kaiser. On the question of women's suffrage he abstained from opinion. Women had given their vote to Alfred Deakin. There were worse things that could've happened.

"God," the Reverend was in the process of saying, "is not an advocate of the gradual lessening of inequalities. Each to his assigned task, each to his rightful place in the divine conception."

The Reverend and Jass Davis were awaiting the boating party at Willowdene. They'd strolled the Pleasure Grounds and were contemplating "high tea" at the Summer House once the party returned from its jaunt to Farrand's Island. The Reverend poked his cane at a thistle growing out of the riverbank. Some boys were dangling fishing rods beneath the weir on the opposite bend. Young Heinke greeted them from the terrace. The Heinkes had built Willowdene after the gold-rush and operated a granary. Davis was a foreman at the new silo. He supposed by now they were native enough. Rosettes and bunting adorned the landing where the boat would put in at six if it wasn't late. It was ten to six now.

Young Heinke came over and shook their hands. The Reverend smiled benevolently. The lad had just returned overnight from the city. The family had spent Christmas at Black Wattle Bay. Davis was itching to find out about the Boxing Day fight but, before the man of God, resigned himself to wait.

"And how's your father?" asked the Reverend.

"Very well, sir," the lad said.

"And Mrs Heinke?"

Shouts interrupted this exchange of inanities. The boating party had been sighted. There was movement down on the landing, men in shirt-sleeves readying the ropes. Davis took the opportunity to make his way onto the terrace, leaving the Reverend to his inquiries. A maid appeared from the Summer House to inform Davis that refreshments would be served directly. He smiled vacantly at the girl and wandered out under the vines to the balustrade. A dozen tables had been arranged about the terrace. He found a spot in the shade, spying the boat chugging around the bend. A group of ladies were standing at the gunwale under parasols in the latest confections like a French funeral. The Reverend and Young Heinke had gone down to the landing to greet the arrivals. Davis made a wry face. With respect to the churchman, he wished the whole lot might perish without unnecessary suffering. If only to get it over with.

Davis brushed a fallen leaf from his lapel, casting a glib eye about the terrace. A phonograph was set up in the far corner waiting to be animated to life. People would be expected to dance. He experienced a nauseating twinge of anticipation and reached for the ends of his moustache by way of comfort. A drink, he thought, was long overdue. By luck someone had left out a copy of the day's *Gazette* on a nearby chair. Davis snatched it up and turned straightaway to the sporting pages, just as the riverboat sounded its whistle. World heavyweight Jack Johnson, before a sell-out crowd at the Rushcutter's Bay Stadium, had mauled contender Tommy Burns. Burns was God-fearing and white, Johnson was a negro who drank champagne in all the ritzy hotels. Police stopped the bout in the twelfth round, to save Burns from being murdered outright. There'd been a riot. The Reverend would not've been pleased.

The first of the boating party to mount the terrace steps were Justice Clive Mallory of the Court of Petty Sessions and Irma Flannery. Coming behind them, J.J. Flannery the publican was freely expostulating to Noah Farrah and Reverend Stokes about the New Year's raffle of a prize Hereford. The raffle was to be in aid of a new roof for the Town Hall. Then came the youth faction, the two Acheson girls (Jenny and the artist one) with Sam Smith's lug in tow, Misses Skinner and Webster, Old Kirby taking up the rear. The maid appeared with glasses of beer and sarsaparilla. Davis tucked the paper away in his jacket and rose to join the Reverend and Noah Farrah. Flannery had collared the Smith boy about some publicity he wanted drummed up.

"Are bulls all you ever talk about, Mr Flannery?" the younger Acheson sister teased.

Mallory roared, —

"Talking bull again, are we Flannery?"

Mrs Flannery was seen to blush.

"Must be an election year coming up," the Reverend winked.

"Taking the bull by the horns," Old Kirby chimed in.

Noah Farrah stared mirthlessly at the tray of drinks being offered. Davis accepted a glass of warmish ale. The Reverend demurred, smiling benignly neither here nor there.

"Here's to your health, Reverend." Davis raised his glass and strained the suds through his moustache, then sucked his moustache with lower lip.

"What's a man have to do to get a real drink?" grumbled Farrah, brushing a fly from his earlobe.

Young Smith seized the opportunity to come and shake hands with the Reverend.

"That's Councillor Reymond's bull they'll be raffling next Thursday, isn't it?" asked Reverend Stokes. "Are he and your father on speaking terms yet, or will the grand feud live to grace us another year?"

"I couldn't tell you," the Smith boy said.

"For a man of the cloth," Davis butted in, "you're a tactless bastard."

"There are ladies, I believe," Farrah muttered.

Mallory came across with Mrs Flannery on his arm. The maid brought punch. The Acheson sisters helped themselves with a ladle.

"A glass for you, Mrs Flannery?" the elder sister offered. "And how about you, Mr Smith?"

"Sued him for libel in the High Court, didn't he?" Mallory chortled. "For a farthing. Earned a right royal dressing down for his trouble."

"Please gentlemen," Mrs Flannery admonished, "no politics."

"And how did *you* spend the festivities, Mrs Flannery?" the Reverend asked.

\*

It'd be better to be nothing at all, Lily confided. Dust motes settled in lost corners. The sunlight made a dizzying montage of her reflection. In response the room was silent. As if to fill the void, an involuntary summons called forth the didactic, overbearing voice of her elder sister. "You ought to be less conspicuous," she'd say, "flaunting yourself like the hunchback of Notre Dame." The way Jenny tried in her adopted premature matron's rôle to run everyone else's lives. Lily's mirror-body regarded her with all the sarcasm of a deliberately distorted perception. Perhaps, she considered, the God of interior religions had, after all, blessed her. To be sainted, like the mentally defective. Some ingrown faculty of the world, making a bottomless depth out of a pasteboard scenery where nothing as indecent as a thought had ever been permitted to happen.

Her reflection gazed back stoically. Behind it, behind *her*, the uncurtained window burned in the sun. Her eye contrived to see the Professor's red face metamorphosing there. Grubby Zwerg, become a comic pantomime of himself. All that high-sounding truth and beauty, like a German opera. Was there such a thing as a *Dutch* opera? She, who'd spent a life in rooms, had no affection for a music that sermonised. Rather the spaceless light of a wrought secular conversion.

The door opened, the apparitional Zwerg became a thin white shape framed in a black rectangle. Annie, clutching a sketchbook, come to wheel her from this Circean sty. To be posed, she considered, Gioconda-like, against a paddock crisscrossed with irrigation ditches. One of a series: Lily at the piano — Lily in the bath — Lily with hibiscus — Lily and the poor lamb. She'd sit on the porch tapping quavers on the arms of her chair while her sister drew. It'd be the same impressionistic music she always heard, bowdlerised into a compulsive morse. It might just as well be a creaking water drum, or rain on a tin roof. But there'd hardly been a drop of rain in months.

\*

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\*

"Like secondhand piss," Knob Hanson spat, dragging a dark tanned forearm across his mouth. With his boot he kicked the billy over on the coals. White smoke billowed up from the hiss. Dusk would soon be settling in.

"Maybe it's the sheep dip," Black Margie said.

"Wrong season for dip."

"Maybe somethin' died in it."

Knob Hanson glanced over at the shore, where the shadows drooped down into the water. They'd found one of Horbach's Friesians bloated on the riverbank once, stinking the place up. The Lindsay kids were throwing stones at it, trying to make a hole in its gut. He'd put the fear into them, said if they breathed the gas they'd choke to death. Dumb beast had been maggotty a week by the look of it. He'd gone back and shifted the camp upstream.

"Reckon it's that Reymond bugger dumpin' 'is slurry."

"Oh," said Margie, rescuing a loaf of damper from the fire before the tea soddened it.

They called her Black because she tramped and took up with anyone it suited her to. She'd been with Knob Hanson on and off since the last flood, sometimes giving him a hand with the traps. But she could be one for the grog when the mood came over her and Knob Hanson always kept a wily distance when she was sozzed. He'd fished and trapped all up and down the river, from Gooloogong to the Great Cumbung Swamp, but times had changed in the eight years since Federation and a man wasn't free like he used to be. The future looked grim.

This had been the substance of Knob Hanson's pondering since he'd set up along the stretch from Farrand's Island to the Weir, where the water was deep and there were sometimes cod, silver perch, yellowbelly. Or if not, an eel maybe. He used spinnerbait for the cod. "Long as yer arm," he told Margie who just yawned at him, she'd heard all about the monsters that always somehow got away. He'd learnt to take the extra catch up to Heinke's cook who let him have flour and backy for it, and the men left him pretty much alone. It'd been a dry summer, there'd been fires out at Cowra, but rain back further east had kept the brown river in flow. And as long as Knob Hanson camped on the island and didn't strike a campfire in daylight, no-one seemed much to mind. But that Reymond bugger was sure to be trouble one of these days. Always up to something, sneaking onto Heinke

land and mucking up the river. Supposed to be a councillor too. "Only goes to show," as Margie would say. "Ya can't trust none a them *poly-tishuns*."

"Someone oughta catch 'im at it."

"There's them Hankies now," Margie pointed a scabby finger upstream. The damper lay half-ruined on the grass.

Between the willows Knob Hanson made out the shape of the Heinke's launch slowly approaching. In a minute they'd be able to hear the phonograph and chatter, and everything in the bush'd go still except the mozzies. He kicked dirt over the coals and they both slinked back away from the water. It didn't pay, Knob Hanson always thought, for too many people to know a man's business.

\*

## OBITUARY

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### MISS LILIAN E. ACHESON

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The funeral of Miss Lilian Acheson, daughter of Mr Robert Acheson and Mrs Elizabeth J. Acheson *née* Mills of The Grove, aged 18 years, moved from St John's Church, Court Street, yesterday, to the Church of England Cemetery, after a service conducted by the Rev. I.H. Stokes. There were among those present Messrs Hugh, John R. and Thomas Samuel Acheson (brothers of the deceased), Misses Jenny and Annie E. Acheson (sisters of the deceased), Miss Edna Acheson (niece), Mr Robert Mills (nephew), Justice C. Mallory, Mr Noah Farrah, Mr and Mrs S.S. Smith, Messrs Frank and Jim Heinke, Mr Francis F. Moreland, Dr Siegfried Zwerg, Mr J. Davis, and Messrs S.W.G. and Norman J. Smith. It is with the deepest feelings of regret that we together with the whole of this community mourn the sad death of Miss Acheson.

*Bedgerebong Gazette*  
Sunday, 19 July, 1908

\*

Chat Bourke leaned over the slant-top, searching among the type cases for a missing full-stop to bookend his last line. Lindsay Doalman was always fiddling with his cases, trying to trip him up. Old Tanner said Lindsay Doalman was an ass. It was Doalman's idea to give him the death notices first up. "Test yer mettle," is what he'd said. The fourteen-year-old Burke bent to his task. Nobody he knew, thank God. A cripple they said. A girl. Older than him, but not so much.

Seeing the boss's name on the crib sheet, Chat Bourke made double sure to set it right. He liked the feel of the type under his fingers, even as a first year apprentice it was obvious he had an instinct for it. He'd always been good with letters. "If only somethin' useful could be done with it," his mum complained when he got too old to keep in school. "Can't sit around doodlin' all day forever." Though Chat Bourke'd never sat around doodling any day of his life — it was just the way his mum had of making a thing definitive. "Bringing everything to a head," Uncle Beenie called it. What drove Chat Bourke's dad away, in the end, Uncle Beenie said, though his mum said he'd joined the merchant marine and gone down with his ship when it got rammed by a giant whale.

It was Uncle Beenie who put it to Chat Bourke's mum to have a word with Doalman at the *Gazette*. The apprenticeship was a six-year slog, but if he saw it through, Uncle Beenie explained, he'd be his own man, he'd be *set*, trying to make it sound like no time at all. Only half-a-lifetime. But what's that, he thought, to being stuck *here* forever? "*Everyman's* 'is own bloody man," Tanner spat when Chat Bourke told him about it. Tanner always spat when something riled him, which was most of the time as far as Chat Bourke could tell. "Maybe yer uncle's right, tho'. You stick it out. Show 'em wot yer made of. There's plenty a man can't say 'is own name wiffout worryin' it don't belong to 'im." Chat Bourke remembered looking at Tanner kind of perplexed. "You make yer own way son," the old man grunted, "don't owe nobody nuffin'."

\*

Like crows ahead of a storm that dies out before it breaks, was how Tom imagined it'd be like, all those people in black milling outside the church. In the event, though, it'd rained.



He'd sat at the end of the front pew with Annie on one side and held her hand, trying not to talk because then Jenny would get angry and everyone'd stare. And on the other side was Lily's chair, empty, though he kept thinking of her in it, her ghost maybe. He didn't like being in the church, it was cold, the cold made his toes go numb because Reverend Stokes had talked a long time and then the Prof played the Dead March, or Death March, or March of the Dead, or whatever it was on the church organ. Tom knew it was the Professor because Annie told him so. The Reverend had a coughing fit when the music didn't stop, the Prof just kept thumping at the keys and a lot of people shook their heads till someone decided eventually it was time to go. So they took Lily outside in the box and the horses were stamping in the rain and the sky was all black with umbrellas.

Annie said it was okay to cry if he wanted to, but Tom didn't want to, at least Jenny wasn't riding in the same carriage as them, but with Ma and Pop and the brothers, she didn't seem sad at all that Lily had died. They'd all expected it, is what Annie said. But why, he'd asked her.

"Because she was sick."

But why? And Annie had frowned at him and said he wouldn't understand. But *why*? And when she took out her sketchbook he'd turned his face to the window and watched the houses go by and an old Wiradjuri man sitting under a cabbage tree in the rain, till his breath fogged the glass. But he didn't want to wipe it, didn't want to do anything then, just sit staring at nothing, the carriage jolting and jerking down Bogan Gate Road, and wishing they weren't going to put Lily in a hole in the ground.

You could see where the river had flooded from the top of the cemetery. He'd heard stories about dead people washing up in the lagoon in winter, and boots with bony feet still in them, and coffin lids with scratches all up one side where someone had been buried alive and tried to get out.

"What if she isn't really dead?" he asked Annie, who told him not to be an idiot, of course she was dead. "But how do you know?"

And she still hadn't told him when they were walking out in the rain, with the brothers in front and two other men shouldering the box Lily was in, and the Reverend, and Ma and Pop, and Annie wheeling the chair, and him with the umbrella, holding it up so she wouldn't get wet.