

DAVID MALOUF

WINNER OF THE 1996 INTERNATIONAL
IMPAC DUBLIN LITERARY AWARD



Remembering Babylon

ENIGMATIC, SUBTLE AND BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN
DAILY TELEGRAPH

V

David Malouf

REMEMBERING
BABYLON



V I N T A G E

Published by Vintage 1994

16 18 20 19 17 15

Copyright © David Malouf 1993

The right of David Malouf to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

First published in Great Britain
by Chatto & Windus Ltd 1993

Vintage

Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney
New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited
18 Poland Road, Glenfield
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Random House (Pty) Limited
Endulini, 5a Jubilee Road, Parktown 2193, South Africa

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009
www.randomhouse.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Papers used by Random House are natural,
recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable
forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the
environmental regulations of the country of origin.

ISBN 0 09 930242 X

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire

REMEMBERING BABYLON

David Malouf is internationally recognised as one of Australia's finest writers. His novels include *Johnno*, *An Imaginary Life*, *Harland's Half Acre*, *The Great World*, which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Prix Femina Etranger in 1991, and *Remembering Babylon*, which was shortlisted for the 1993 Booker Prize and won the inaugural IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 1996. He has also written five collections of poetry and three opera libretti. He lives in Sydney.

ALSO BY DAVID MALOUF

Fiction

Johnno
An Imaginary Life
Fly Away Peter
Child's Play
Harland's Half Acre
Antipodes
The Great World
The Conversations at Curlow Creek
Dream Stuff

Autobiography

12 Edmondstone Street

Poetry

'Interiors' (in Four Poets)
Bicycle and Other Poems
Neighbours in a Thicket
Poems 1976-7
The Year of the Foxes and Other Poems
First Things Last
Wild Lemons
Selected Poems

Plays

Blood Relations

Libretti

Baa Baa Black Sheep
Jane Eyre

Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not.

WILLIAM BLAKE: *The Four Zoas*

Strange shapes and void afflict the soul
And shadow to the eye
A world on fire while smoke seas roll
And lightnings rend the sky

The moon shall be as blood the sun
Black as a thunder cloud
The stars shall turn to blue and dun
And heaven by darkness bowed
Shall make sun dark and give no day
When stars like skys shall be
When heaven and earth shall pass away
Wilt thou Remember me

JOHN CLARE

I

ONE DAY IN the middle of the nineteenth century, when settlement in Queensland had advanced little more than halfway up the coast, three children were playing at the edge of a paddock when they saw something extraordinary. They were two little girls in patched gingham and a boy, their cousin, in short pants and braces, all three barefooted farm children not easily scared.

They had little opportunity for play but had been engaged for the past hour in a game of the boy's devising: the paddock, all clay-packed stones and ant trails, was a forest in Russia – they were hunters on the track of wolves.

The boy had elaborated this scrap of make-believe out of a story in the fourth grade Reader; he was lost in it. Cold air burned his nostrils, snow squeaked underfoot; the gun he carried, a good sized stick, hung heavy on his arm. But the girls, especially Janet, who was older than he was and half a head taller, were bored. They had no experience of snow, and wolves did not interest them. They complained and dawdled and he had to exert all his gift for fantasy, his will too, which was stubborn, to keep them in the game.

They had a blue kelpie with them. He bounced along with his tongue lolling, excited by the boy's solemn concentration but puzzled too that he could get no sense of what they were after: the idea of wolf had not been transmitted to him. He danced around the little party, sometimes in front, sometimes to the side, sniffing close to the earth, raising his moist eyes in hope of instruction, and every now and then, since he was young and easily distracted, bounding away after the clippered insects that sprang up as they approached, or a

grasshopper that rose with a ponderous whirring and rolled sideways from his jaws. Then suddenly he did get the scent. With a yelp of pure delight he shot off in the direction of their boundary fence, and the children, all three, turned away to see what he had found.

Lachlan Beattie felt the snow melt at his feet. He heard a faint far-off rushing, like wind rolling down a tunnel, and it took him a moment to understand that it was coming from inside him.

In the intense heat that made everything you looked at warp and glare, a fragment of ti-tree swamp, some bit of the land over there that was forbidden to them, had detached itself from the band of grey that made up the far side of the swamp, and in a shape more like a watery, heat-struck mirage than a thing of substance, elongated and airily indistinct, was bowling, leaping, flying towards them.

A black! That was the boy's first thought. We're being raided by blacks. After so many false alarms it had come.

The two little girls stood spellbound. They had given a gasp, one sharp intake of breath, then forgotten to breathe out. The boy too was struck but had begun to recover. Though he was very pale about the mouth, he did what his manhood required him to do. Holding fast to the stick, he stepped resolutely in front.

But it wasn't a raid, there was just one of them; and the thing, as far as he could make it out through the sweat in his eyes and its flamelike flickering, was not even, maybe, human. The stick-like legs, all knobbed at the joints, suggested a wounded waterbird, a brolga, or a human that in the manner of the tales they told one another, all spells and curses, had been *changed* into a bird, but only halfway, and now, neither one thing nor the other, was hopping and flapping towards them out of a world over there, beyond the no-man's-land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome, and since it lay so far beyond experience, not just their own but their parents' too, of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark.

A bit of blue rag was at its middle from which sleeves hung

down. They swung and signalled. But the sticks of arms above its head were also signalling, or beating off flies, or licks of invisible flame. Ah, that was it. It was a scarecrow that had somehow caught the spark of life, got down from its pole, and now, in a raggedy, rough-headed way, was stumbling about over the blazing earth, its leathery face scorched black, but with hair, they saw, as it bore down upon them, as sun-bleached and pale-straw coloured as their own.

Whatever it was, it was the boy's intention to confront it. Very sturdy and purposeful, two paces in front of his cousins, though it might have been a hundred yards in the tremendous isolation he felt, and with a belief in the power of the weapon he held that he knew was impossible and might not endure, he pushed the stick into his shoulder and took his stance.

The creature, almost upon them now and with Flash at its heels, came to a halt, gave a kind of squawk, and leaping up onto the top rail of the fence, hung there, its arms outflung as if preparing for flight. Then the ragged mouth gapped.

'Do not shoot,' it shouted. 'I am a B-b-british object!'

It was a white man, though there was no way you could have known it from his look. He had the mangy, half-starved look of a black, and when, with a cry, he lost his grip on the rail and came tumbling at their feet, the smell of one too, like dead swamp-water; and must have been as astonished as they were by the words that had jumped out of his mouth because he could find no more of them. He gaped, grinned, rubbed his side, winced, cast his eyes about in a hopeless way, and when he found speech again it was a complaint, against himself perhaps, in some whining blackfeller's lingo.

The boy was incensed. The idea of a language he did not know scared him. He thought that if he allowed the man to go on using it, he would see how weak they were and get the advantage of them. He jerked the stick in the direction of the man's heart. 'Stop that,' he yelled. 'Just steik yur mooth.'

The man, responding to the truculence of the boy's tone, began to crawl about with his nose in the dust. The boy relaxed - That's better, he thought - and even Flash, seeing

now that the fellow was prepared to be docile, stopped yapping and began to tongue the stranger's knees.

The man was not keen on it. With a childish whimper he began to hop about, trying to shake the dog off. Lachlan, disturbed and a little disgusted by this display of unmanliness but eager to show that he could be a generous victor, as well as a stern one, called Flash off. 'Ge on wi' ye,' he told the fellow in as gruff a voice as he could manage, and soon had his prisoner going, but at a hobbling gait – one of his legs was shorter than the other. He ordered his cousins to keep back, and in the glow of his new-found mastery they let themselves be led.

After a time the man began to grunt, then to gabble as if in protest, but when Lachlan put the stick into his spine, moved on faster, producing sounds of such eager submissiveness that the boy's heart swelled. He had a powerful sense of the springing of his torso from the roots of his belly. He had known nothing like this! He was bringing a prisoner in. Armed with nothing, too, but his own presumptuous daring and the power of make-believe.

So the little procession made its way to where the girls' father was ringbarking in the gully below their hut.

An hour later news of the affair had spread all through the settlement. A crowd had gathered to see this specimen of – of what? What was he?

They stood in the heat, which was overpowering at this time of the day, and stared.

Distractions were unusual up here; even the Syrian pedlar did not trouble to come so far. They were isolated, at the end of the line.

Apart from their scattered holdings, the largest of which was forty acres, there was nothing to the settlement but a store and post office of unpainted weatherboard, with a verandah and a dog in front of it that was permanently asleep but if kicked would shift itself, walk five steps, then flop.

Opposite the store was a corrugated iron shack, a shanty-pub, unlicensed as yet, with hitching posts and a hollowed log that served as a trough.

The area between, the open space where they now stood, was part of a road perhaps, since horses and carts went back and forth upon it, and women in sunbonnets, and barefoot youths who, with nothing to do in the evening, came to sit with their feet up on the rails of the verandah and tell raw jokes, practise their spitting, and flick cigarette butts with a hiss into the trough. It was not yet a street, and had no name.

The nearest named place, Bowen, was twelve miles off, but the twelve miles meant that they were only lightly connected to it, and even more lightly to what *it* was connected to: the figure in an official uniform who had given it his name and the Crown he represented, which held them all, a whole continent, in its grip.

'He's an ugly-lookin' bloke, aren't you, eh? Faugh! Don't 'e stink, but!'

'Dumb. I reckon 'e's dumb.'

'No he's no'! He spoke t' me. Don't shoot, he said, didn't ye, eh? Don't shoot! Don't shoot!'

The man, recognising the words as his own, showed his blackened teeth, which were ground down to the stumps, and did a little lopsided dance, then looked foolish.

'Don't shoot,' the boy repeated, and held the stick up to his shoulder. One of the smaller children laughed.

'Ah'm the wan he kens,' the boy repeated. He was determined to keep hold of the bit of glory he had won. 'Don't you, eh? Eh? Ah'm the wan.' With a boisterous persistence that kept him very nearly breathless, he scampered off to collar newcomers, but always dashed back to be at the man's side, at the centre of their gaze.

For a moment back there, seeing himself as these grown-ups might see him, a mere kid, a twelve-year-old and small for his age, he had felt a wave of anxiety at how shaky his power might be. But he'd recovered – all his recoveries were like this, as quick as the fits of despondency he fell into – and was fired once more with the excitement of the thing. The air crackled around him. He shone. Over and over, in words that each time he repeated them made him see the event, and himself too, in a light more vivid, more startling, he told how it had happened: how the fellow had come flying at the fence

'as if an airmy o' fiends were aifter him', and when he leapt up onto the rail, his words.

The words were what mattered most to the boy. By changing the stick he held into what his gesture had claimed for it, they had changed him too, and he did not want, now, to change back. So long as he kept talking, he thought, and the others listened, he would not.

Janet McIvor, who had also been there and seen all that occurred, though no one seemed interested in her version, was surprised that he was allowed to get away with it; their father wasn't always so easy. But he and their mother seemed as gawpingly awe-struck as the rest. Neither of them had made the least move to bring him down.

The fact was that the event itself, which was so unusual and unexpected, had made the boy, since he claimed so large a part in it, as strange almost to their customary view of him as the half-caste or runaway. Something impressive and mysterious set the two figures, Lachlan Beattie as much as the straw-topped half-naked savage, in a dimension where they appeared unreachable. So the boy simply had his way till his aunt, who had never seen him in such a state, darting this way and that like an actor on a stage, out of a fear that he might be about to explode under her very eyes, told him for heaven's sake to cool down, and his uncle, woken as if from a dream, stepped in and took a hand to him.

He looked about him, open-eyed at last, rubbed the side of his head where his uncle's hand had come down, and was again just a wiry twelve-year-old. The runaway, who might, they now thought, be some sort of simpleton, was alarmed at this outburst and began to moan.

'Me and Meg found him, just as much as Lachlan,' Janet McIvor put in, seizing her opportunity, but no one paid heed. 'And anyway, it was Flash.'

'Oh for heaven's sake, lassie,' her mother told her, 'dinnae you start.'

Meanwhile the man stood waiting. For what?

For one of them to start something.

But where *could* you start with an odd, unsettled fellow

who, beyond what the boy Lachlan had heard him shout, had not a word you could make sense of in the English tongue; a pathetic, muddy-eyed, misshapen fellow, all fidgets, who seemed amazed by them – as if *they* were the curiosities here – and kept laughing and blinking.

He was a man who had suffered a good deal of damage. There were scorch marks on his chest and arms where he had rolled into a camp fire, and signs that he had, at one time or another, taken a fair bit of knocking about. One of his eyebrows was missing. Strange how unimportant eyebrows can be, so long as there are two of them. It gave his face a smudged appearance. He had the baffled, half-expectant look of a mongrel that has been often whipped but still turns to the world, out of some fund of foolish expectancy, as a source of scraps as well as torments.

His joints were swollen and one leg was shorter than the other and a little twisted. When he got excited he jerked about as if he was being worked by strings, one or two of which had snapped. He screwed his face up, grinned, looked interested, then, in a lapse of courage or concentration, went mute and glanced about as if he did not know, suddenly, how he had got there or where he was.

The country he had broken out of was all unknown to them. Even in full sunlight it was impenetrable dark.

To the north, beginning with the last fenced paddock, lay swamp country, bird-haunted marshes; then, where the great spine of the Dividing Range rose in ridges and shoals of mist, rainforest broken by sluggish streams.

The land to the south was also unknown. Settlement up here proceeded in frog-leaps from one little coastal place to the next. Between lay tracts of country that no white man had ever entered. It was disturbing, that: to have unknown country behind you as well as in front. When the hissing of the lamp died out the hut sank into silence. A child's murmuring out of sleep might keep it human for a moment, or a rustling of straw; but what you were left with when the last sleeper settled was the illimitable night, where it lay close over the land. You lay listening to the crash of animals

through its underbrush, the crack, like a snapped bone, of a ringbarked tree out in a paddock, then its muffled fall; or some other, unidentifiable sound, louder, further off, that was an event in the land's history, no part of yours. The sense then of being submerged, of being hidden away in the depths of the country, but also lost, was very strong.

In all their lives till they came here, they had never ventured, most of them, out of sight or earshot of a village steeple that, as they stooped to carry stooks and lean them one against the other, was always there when they looked up, breaking the horizon beyond the crest of a rise or across open fields.

Out here the very ground under their feet was strange. It had never been ploughed. You had to learn all over again how to deal with weather: drenching downpours when in moments all the topsoil you had exposed went liquid and all the dry little creek-beds in the vicinity ran wild; cyclones that could wrench whole trees up by their roots and send a shed too lightly anchored sailing clear through the air with all its corrugated iron sheets collapsing inward and slicing and singing in the wind. And all around, before and behind, worse than weather and the deepest night, natives, tribes of wandering myalls who, in their traipsing this way and that all over the map, were forever encroaching on boundaries that could be insisted on by daylight – a good shotgun saw to that – but in the dark hours, when you no longer stood there as a living marker with all the glow of the white man's authority about you, reverted to being a creek-bed or ridge of granite like any other, and gave no indication that six hundred miles away, in the Lands Office in Brisbane, this bit of country had a name set against it on a numbered document, and a line drawn that was empowered with all the authority of the Law.

Most unnerving of all was the knowledge that, just three years back, the very patch of earth you were standing on had itself been on the other side of things, part of the unknown, and might still, for all your coming and going over it, and the sweat you had poured into its acre or two of ploughed earth, have the last of mystery upon it, in jungle brakes between paddocks and ferny places out of the sun. Good reason, that,

for stripping it, as soon as you could manage, of every vestige of the native; for ringbarking and clearing and reducing it to what would make it, at last, just a bit like home.

It was from this standpoint that the little crowd of settlers, drawn together in such an unusual manner at this time of day, faced the black white man the children had brought in.

Little by little, as the afternoon wore on, an explanation came forth – but slowly. They were in no hurry to have things resolved and an occasion ended that offered so much in the way of the marvellous, and was, besides, such fun.

His name was Jimmy or Gemmy according to how you heard it (by the end of the day they had settled for Gemmy and were thus, in a familiar way, addressing him) and his other name was Fairley or Farrelly. Sixteen years before, when he was not much older than Lachlan Beattie, he had been cast overboard from a passing ship and had been living since in the scrub country to the north with blacks. All of which he made them understand partly with signs, partly with words that he dragged up at need, but in such a distorted form, as he hummed and hooted and shot spittle out of his mouth, and tried to get his tongue around them, that it was the signs their understanding leapt at. Guessing what he intended became a game, and at last, as they eased themselves into the unaccustomed jollity of it, a noisy carnival.

Occasionally, in the dead light of a paddock, all bandaged stumps and bone-white antlers, there would come a flash of colour, red or blue or yellow, and it would strike a man, but in a disconcerting way, as his heart lifted, that a country that was mostly devilish could also at times be playful; that there might be doors here, hidden as yet, into some lighter world. There was something of that too in the occasion, as, standing in a clump on one side with Jimmy, or Gemmy on the other, they scratched their pates, turned from one to the other, and he signed, mouthed, shook his head at their failure to catch on, till one of their number, quicker than the rest, or more foolhardy, piped up and said: 'Well I don't know. Maybe he's up a ladder. Pickin' cherries. Or hops – what about hops?'

The others scoffed. 'Don't be daft, Jack, that couldn't be it. What a noodle! Hark at the ninny! Hops!'

Amendments were offered, new suggestions made, and at last, after a good deal of argument, they settled on something between the lot of them that made sense.

'A ship! He was a sailor.'

'Something's got him scared.'

'No, I've got it, a fever! He means he was sick.'

Some of the younger fellows, rowdy youths not easily subdued, were very solemn about it, as if the guessing game was a test. Eager to be right, they vied with one another, got hot under the collar, shouted, and when they were defeated, went mean at the mouth and sulked. Others thought it a fine chance to act the goat.

Children, whose only experience of such communal get-togethers was Sunday church and the gatherings organised by Mr Frazer, their minister, where their parents, constrained by collars, ties, bonnet strings, buttons, remained stiffly intimidated, were astonished now by so much levity. They could never have imagined their fathers, their mothers too, shouting and chiacking like this.

Meanwhile, the man himself was hauling at imaginary sails, puffing his cheeks out, rolling his eyes up and shaking his wrists in a passion to have them comprehend. He clenched his brow and made little hissing noises through his nostrils while he waited for them to come up with a suggestion, and when they looked at one another, drew their mouths down and remained dull, grew fierce with exasperation.

In his wish to make an impression on the grown-ups he had turned away from Lachlan; but seeing now that the boy was among the quickest of all at guessing what he meant, he fell back on what he felt was an affinity between them. He would, out of deference to the adults, make a sign in their direction, and when they failed to grasp it, turn to Lachlan; or someone in the crowd itself would. 'What is it, lad? What's he trying to say?'

The boy, seeing his power restored in a new form, was determined to make the most of it.

You see, the line of his mouth proclaimed, as once again

the fellow laughed and paid tribute to his cleverness with a slap of the thigh, Ah told ye Ah was the wan! Or he would deliberately hold back and make them wait, screwing his face up, pretending to be stumped, so that, with a shout of triumph and a little knock of his knuckles against his skull at his own stupidity, he could the more dramatically come up with an answer. 'Yer a clever little bugger, ain't ye!' one of the older fellows hissed in his ear.

But at last no more facts suggested themselves to the man. He looked about, uncertain; then, as a proof of what he claimed, tore away the cloth he wore round his middle and held it out to them. There were giggles and an embarrassed clearing of throats as one of the men, Ned Corcoran, took hold of the rag and in a gingerly way looked it over.

It was the remains of a jacket. Salt-stained and stiff with dirt, it had once been blue, maybe royal blue, and still had a hint of colour to it.

Ned Corcoran frowned. What was he expected to do with the thing? Holding it at arm's length, he passed it to the next man. He too examined and passed it on. One of the women, offered the foul-smelling bundle, wrinkled her nose and turned away. Gemmy, his brow furrowed, had begun to skip about on one leg. Little whimpering sounds came from him.

'He wants it back,' one of the smaller children said dreamily out of her own experience, and looked about, suddenly shy at having spoken.

'He does too. The bairn's right. Give it 'im back.'

Jock McIvor, whose hands it had come to, passed the rag back, and the fellow grinned and hugged it to his chest but made no attempt to restore it to where it would do most good. This was too much for Jim Sweetman. 'For God's sake, man,' he exploded, 'cover yourself.'

Jim Sweetman, an ex-blacksmith, was a man who was accorded a good deal of respect among them. He was a big, stern-faced fellow who in all weathers wore a flannel vest out of which grey wire crawled. He disapproved of swearing and had only one oath of his own, which was 'By Godfrey', but was a dancer with the lightness of a man half his weight and half his age and was often seen with his three-year-old