

MILLY VRANES

Heat

It gets cold in Leura during winter. The air crackles and a powder fine frost crystalises on windows. Mists often roll in and thickly cover the area. If you blundered outside you would think you were the only person alive so thickly does the mist descend about your head. It surrounds you like a curtain made of white moiré fabric. Only the mist is not warm. Droplets of water accumulate on your skin and soon run down your face. A single droplet can hang off the end of your nose and quiver till, with an annoyed wipe of your cold and damp hand, it is flung off. It leaves space for another to form and draw ire as your clothes condense and the cold insidiously creeps into your bones. Lips do turn blue and they can turn your mouth into a postbox-like slit. This was why William Beck avoided the great outdoors on days like these. But even indoors on days like these he could not escape the cold.

His house was set in the exact centre of ten acres of bush. It was old. It cost a fortune to heat and so not all rooms were heated. Heat cost money and money, cash money, was something Beck lacked. In fact, the library was the only room with a still functioning fireplace and it was here that a small fire roared. Its light played lovingly on the spines of books some of which were so old that they were worth more than the house.

Beck knew that heat was not the best of things for his books. But, he often thought, as long as his books lasted for the duration of his life then he would not worry. And he was an old, old man. Besides, his beloved loved warmth, too. He could touch their spines gently. Of course the epitome of his tomes were well cosseted behind glass. They sat like the magnificates they were – untouchable and off limits. These were only to be admired from an appropriate distance. They were to be revered.

There is none so obsessed as a book collector. Same book – one hundred editions. Special gloves. No one is to touch. So was William Beck. Huge house, one man, one love. Books. Well, two loves really – books and warmth. Not to say that he also did not love money. He loved money only because he could buy more books – and the fancy shelves that his books required. You did not set a \$50,000 book on a cheap pine bookcase. Over the years his obsession had made Beck cash poor. When one visitor had suggested he sell his books they had been escorted to the door and curtly told to mind their own business. Beck would have sworn that he had heard the pages of his books rattle in delight and paper-thin applause.

Beck did not need real people. He had people in his books. He also had love, adventure and heroics. He was Achilles. He was Lord Byron and Don Juan and Manfred. But, he was also Henry Lawson. He was John Paines. And he had even been Titania. And the list went on.

He never entered his library without the thrill of pleasure tingling along his spine and in his fingers. He lived alone and his library was the only room he cleaned thoroughly. Dust could be several layers thick elsewhere but here there was not one speck. House-keepers be damned was Beck's thought about help.

The thing with having a fire in the library was that all the books came alive without his having to open them. The light of the fire danced on their spines and sent pinnacles of light shining. But today he had no more wood. This fire was the last of his wood for now. He had run out. But worse, he had no money to replenish his supply. His last few thousands had gone towards a folio edition of Shakespeare's works. Yes, it was a reprint but it was worth every cent for it was beautiful.

Beck sighed and sat in his fraying armchair and gazed around him in contentment as his last logs burned and the flames slowly subsided. He gave an involuntary shiver as the flames got lower and lower and just the embers glowed. He pulled a blanket over his knees. Yes, he was cold but he had his books and the sight of them warmed him. He brooded. Oberon at midsummer was not cold. Think about that marvellous wood and how beautifully warm they all were. Just imagine being inside Bottom's mask sweating in the heat of midsummer. Or better still being Puck flittering about in the warm sunshine and causing chaos just for the fun of it. Yes, during the summer, Leura's wild bush could well be hiding the fairies and the lumbering "rude mechanicals". Beck's

head rolled as he fell into a slumber filled with the rustle of leaves and the soft voices of fairies and the warmth of the summer sun on his skin.

But he was distracted by the sound of a car. It crunched its way rudely along his drive. Losing his concentration he shivered. With effort and annoyance he rose from his chair, hobbled to the window, which overlooked his drive, and tweaked the curtain aside. Beck squinted until his eyes adjusted to the view outside. Then, when he saw who it was, he ground his teeth in irritation.

The two figures, one standing by the car and the other just emerging, were unaware they were being scrutinised.

“Silly old codger,” remarked Morton Roland Standish as he emerged from the car and looked up at the house. “Why doesn’t he get the house fixed?” Looking about at the crumbling pile and the wild gardens he shook his frozen head.

“Money,” remarked Lara as she brushed at her red nose with a drip forming on its end. She wiped her mittened hand against her coat. “Every cent he has goes on books. The books are his gardens I suppose, you know, like *The Child’s Garden of Verse*, only this is *William Beck’s Garden of Books, Books and More Books*.”

“He must have billions of them by now,” said Standish and he shivered as the cold found its way down his spine despite several layers of clothing and a thickly padded coat. “His books just cause misery. He once told me off for daring to try and touch one of his precious first editions. And it wasn’t even the only first edition he had.” Standish’s face flushed warmly at the memory but the momentary heat of memory was not presently strong enough to stave off the cold for longer than seconds. His face returned to its rigid white as his jaws clenched against the cold and his mouth turned into a postbox like slit. “Come on, let’s get inside before we freeze.”

“Stupid car,” said Lara as she followed Standish. “What a time to conk out on us.” Wrapping her arms about herself she tried to keep up with her husband’s pace. “Fancy the heating going like that. I can’t wait to get inside and get warm!” Lara only thought of comfort. She did not like confrontation or argument, only comfort.

“We’re going to have to spend the night. We won’t be able to find anyone to come out now to fix it.”

“Do you think he’ll let us?” Lara looked towards the windows half expecting Morton’s uncle to be standing there and waving them away from his house and his books.

“We don’t have a choice and neither does he.” Standish gritted his teeth and ploughed towards the front door.

Lara looked towards the house again. “I wouldn’t be too sure,” she whispered.

Standish picked up the brass door knocker which was in the shape of a lion’s head and let it fall. When there was no answer he tried again and again. He stamped on the doorstep in cold and frustration as he waited. He knew his uncle was there.

Beck opened the door to them on the ninth knock. A wave of air, colder than the Arctic, hit Standish and Lara as they stood on the doorstep.

“Ye Gods!” exclaimed Standish as he pushed his way in past Beck. He was not going to give his uncle a chance to slam the door in their faces. “Don’t you heat this place? It’s colder in here than it is out there. The car’s grounded for now so we thought we’d pop in as we were so close to your place.” His jollity sounded false even to himself.

The forced jollity and entry was not lost on Beck. His beady and blurred eyes gazed at his nephew who was now firmly planted in the hallway. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

Standish forced a smile. It was a mere slit in his face and with no teeth showing. “Visiting my favourite uncle, of course.” He then turned and caught Lara’s hand in his own and pulled her inside.

“It’s warmer outside,” said Lara. Her teeth chattered.

Beck turned his bleary eyes on her. “You’re welcome to stay outside,” said Beck.

“Don’t be like that, Uncle. We can’t see your books from outside.” Forcing a laugh from between his frozen lips Standish then proceeded to squash Lara’s hand in his own and plough along the hall with Lara in his wake. She stumbled behind him. Standish knew his Uncle and so made straight for the library. But when he got there he was disappointed. Only the final few embers burned in the grate. Standish ground his teeth in intense irritation. In milliseconds he realised there were no logs inside. The log

basket stood empty. He pushed Lara into a chair. She sat abruptly and shivered. Standish stood and shivered.

Beck shuffled into the room. As always when he entered his library his eyes travelled lovingly over his books. It only made him more irritated when Standish came into view and interrupted the graceful sweep of his library.

“Where are the logs? I’ll bring some in,” Standish said to his Uncle.

Beck snorted. “There are none unless you chop down a tree which you don’t have permission to do.”

“What are you doing for heating?”

Beck shrugged and then shuffled over to his armchair where he sat and pulled his blanket over his knees. His fingerless gloves exposed his red fleshy fingers which had grown swollen from the cold.

“It’s going to hit below zero.” Standish couldn’t keep the hints of irritation, and even desperation, out of his voice.

“I didn’t invite you.” Beck was trying hard to visualise Titania and to ignore his unwanted guests.

“You’ll freeze, too!” Standish somewhat regretted the retort. “I must be nice,” he thought to himself.

Beck smiled vacantly and looked at his books. What did a fool like Standish understand? Beck knew that all he had to do was open *Treasure Island* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or even *Gulliver’s Travels* and he would be in worlds that sweltered with heat. Or he could be one of the three hundred Spartans in midsummer fighting at Thermopylae. He would most probably be King Leonidas, of course. But wait, he could be Achilles chasing Hector around the walls of Troy and working up a sweat in exertion and hate. Or he could be standing by the burning funeral pyre on Achilles’ final release of the dead Patroklos weeping with grief. Or he could be on the Dawn Treader nearing the end of the world where all was mild and still and he, too, could be seated in a coracle following Reepicheep to the end of the world.

“Uncle William!”

Beck was not so much jolted out of his thoughts as only mildly compelled to look at his nephew. This was the one condescension he made to politeness. He shivered as he

did so and huddled further into his chair. To Beck, his nephew left much to be desired. He was not handsome nor tall nor heroic. He was just a middling man and he would never amount to much. Beck's rheumy eyes took in all Morton was and everything that Morton was not and would never be.

"He's gone ga-ga from the cold," Standish remarked to Lara.

Beck looked at his nephew more closely now. The rheumy eyes of Beck sparkled suddenly. "Ga, ga black sheep have you any wood?" he sang. In his normal voice he followed with, "No, Morton, no wood and I'm not ga-ga. I am merely an old man bothered by his less than welcome relatives."

Standish ignored the last remark. "Haven't you at least got a radiator?" he asked. "And don't call me Morton. You know I hate it."

Beck shrugged. "Roland isn't much better," he remarked. "You're a far cry from *Childe Roland*. Unless you see my house as your dark tower." He smiled suddenly in remembrance of the time of Morton's birth. "Your mother was quite surprised when I laughed at the choice of names. She, too, thought I was ga ga but it was her who was ga ga, hey Morton?"

"This is ridiculous." Standish wrapped his arms around himself and ignored the jibe. "It's dipping to zero, you do understand that?"

"I can't stand it," moaned Lara. "We'll all turn into icicles."

Beck was surprised to hear her voice. He had forgotten she was there and he looked at her. "You can always leave," said Beck.

"We can't!" Standish snapped. "Something's wrong with the car. You know that."

Lara and Standish exchanged a look. Standish's gaze shifted and he glanced from shelf to shelf of Beck's library. Spine after winking spine looked back at him. Standish, caught as if by a spell, started to roam along the shelves. At the back of his mind he remembered some books from his childhood. He stopped before one. This one he remembered aching well because he was there at its arrival. This was the particular book that had caused his uncle to snap sharply at him not to touch. What was it he had said? Oh, yes – "Sticky young fingers cause damage. Don't touch." And Beck had whipped the book away from him.

Standish's brow clouded as the hurt he had felt then rose again and flooded through him. His young face had burned with the heat of both hurt and shame. He remembered looking at his hands which were cleaner than Beck's and wondering how they could possibly damage a book. How could his uncle think he was too filthy to touch his books? His fingers back then had not been sticky. All he had wanted was to share with his uncle the joy of the new arrival for Beck had been so pleased – infectiously pleased. And like contagion Standish had caught it and paid for it.

Now, carefully, and with a slender and well-manicured finger, he levered the book from the shelf. This was a feat in itself for his fingers were so cold. It was a slender volume with hard covers. Inside, however, it was different. The pages were brittle and yellowing. *Heart of Darkness* – a first edition. He half expected an echo of his uncle's voice from the distant past to dash him down again. But it didn't come.

Standish looked up suddenly and looked into the shadowed eyes of his uncle. A light seemed to flicker in Beck's eyes. Did he, too, remember the arrival of this book and the hurt of a young boy? Standish looked towards the fire. In the grate the final embers were making a valiant effort to survive. What was left of the fire was as hushed as the rest of the room.

Standish's thoughts took a connecting road. How simple it would be, he thought, to keep the fire alive. A single page of the book he held would ignite and keep the embers glowing. The heart would be dark but the flesh warm. Standish considered. He looked back at the book in his cold hands. He knew about warm flesh and he was not thinking of Lara or summer. He was thinking about the slow burning and smarting his uncle's words had caused him all those years ago and all over this book. The hurt had never been wiped from his psyche and moreover Standish knew he had not forgiven his uncle and nor would he. The images of that day were etched into his mind as finely as one of the etchings in a William Blake illustration – and just as ghoulish and long-lasting.

With the book in his hand Standish moved towards the fire. He could keep this fire burning and send his boyish hurt into it. What did he stand to lose? Beck was old. It wasn't as though Beck could wrest the book from him now. As he moved towards the fire Standish opened the book and bent it back. He heard the spine snap. Wanting to look to see if his uncle had heard it Standish exercised a control over himself that he did not know he had.

From the depths of his armchair Beck watched his nephew and the progress of his treasured book. The loose pouches under his eyes seemed heavier. Everything had turned to slow motion. His nephew was walking deliberately, and with purpose, to the grate in which dying embers flickered and receded. He watched as his nephew stood before the grate. He watched as his nephew considered the book he held. Beck's brain, however, was not slow. Even though not quite believing what he was seeing he had to act. But his body, however, was slow. He was slower than slow motion. His movements were like a caricature of slow motion. His nephew tore a page – how dreadful was the sound! – from the book. Settling it gently on the embers the fire spurted. It took ten pages before Beck arrived at the grate. There was nothing slow about his fall. That could not have been executed any faster by an athlete who had plunged over the high jump. Smacking smartly onto the floor full-length Beck's eyes were now on a level with the fire as his chin rested on the hearth. The brittle pages of a first edition were going up in smoke. From somewhere behind him he heard a scream. In front of him he only felt heat.

And Standish? Fingers burned, he felt the heat of his boyhood transfer from his burning face to his heat stung fingers as his uncle lay warmer now than ever in a winter, for it gets cold in Leura during the winter – and as Morton would find out, even colder without a bookish inheritance, as the anti-hero to the dark tower had come.