

**Brisbane Summer Nights**

**Part I**

I read two books on Stalingrad  
This summer,  
-By Craig and Beevor,  
In French; my language-love,  
-My wife says I am a slow reader-  
But in secret,  
While the house slept  
I was transposed,  
By the free-flight  
And French-fast colours of my mind,  
Always to the Clavier Bien-Temperé  
And the Goldberg Variations;  
Bach's sonic-rainbow hues,  
Scored in the present tense  
By our hall clock,  
That tall wooden pedant  
With his measured baton-strike,  
On the podium of my mind,  
Each quarter hour,  
And his metronome-come-pendulum,  
Too dull for wily Bach,  
And his multicoloured voices  
Contrapuntal harmony,  
Lyrical preludes  
And interwoven fugues.

There I dissolved,  
On the porch each night,  
In the pale-yellow light  
To semiquaver doublets  
Of the same note  
Played mezzo-staccato  
By ghost-grey geckoes,  
Feigning the cream  
Of our stucco wall,  
And the sometime-silence  
Of a mouthful of a duped moth.

Each night,  
I bathed in the rich solitude  
Of the warm thick air  
Of a Brisbane summer's night,  
And to the distant screech and squabble,  
Of slow flapping foxes in the night sky,

And shadows steeling,  
Night visits to that Moreton Bay fig,  
That shameless flirt,  
That harlot of fecundity and fruit,  
A few backyards away,  
To the rage and roar,  
Of Stalingrad in 1942.

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**Part II**

In 1955, when I was a boy,  
German soldiers still shuffled,  
Anonymous,  
With vacant eyes,  
Forgotten, now old,  
Bound by barbed wire  
And the haunting howl  
Of the white wolves,  
Of the Arctic wind,  
And the rhythm of searchlights  
Dancing like summer sunflowers,  
On bleak pine walls,  
And on these lost lives  
East of the Urals  
And their cruel Arian utopia,  
Their Third Reich.

Waiting wives,  
And pain-waves,  
Chill ripple,  
Through the pale pond  
Of their stunned Fatherland,  
And the hate of an aggrieved foe,  
Whose bright embers,  
Fanned by the bellows  
Of burning years,  
In the dark forge of their memories, Of  
Stalingrad  
And the "Great Patriotic War".

It was Hitler's Ozemandias,  
Lost in the sands of a million lives,  
This Ratkreig,  
In Comrade Stalin's tractor factory  
And by the silent sentinels

Of cement silos,  
And the rubble of his civic dream,  
Along the mighty Volga,  
This national monument,  
Flowing down to Astrakhan,  
Through the endless Steppes  
To the gallop of Russian ponies,  
And strutting ostrich  
Endless grass wind-waves,  
South to the distant Caspian.

The Wehrmacht,  
Then still invincible,  
With eye-rings of summer sweat  
And dusty goggles,

Of blond boys,  
Like sharp-eyed barn owls,  
With field glasses,  
Searching for field-mice foe,  
On roads of yellow powder,  
Fine-ground,  
By boots of black leather,  
Like their ersatz coffee  
And forever-heading east,  
Beyond the Don,  
To the fabled prize  
Of Stalingrad.

This Grand Armée,  
Of many nations,  
Engulfed by the space,  
Of Hitler's "Lebensraum",  
Suffocating in its vastness,  
And sinking in slow death  
In this quicksand-silo  
Of dusty Russian wheat.

And Winter...,  
Napoleon's nemesis,  
All-freezing, mind-slowng,  
A silent death,  
Life-leaching from a night picket,  
An ice sculpture in the morning light,  
Or a frozen template,

Some mother's son,  
Tattooed feldgri and red,  
Into an ice-rink road  
A compacted man,  
Entombed, compacted,  
By tanks and tyres,  
Until the thaw.

Or the quick death.  
A life's punctuation mark.  
A sniper's full-stop.  
A punched period.  
On a hated helmet,  
Blowing a gouache  
Of brain, bone, hair,  
And thoughts of home,  
On a frozen factory wall.  
Or a death by brick dust  
Steel and nitre  
Of a silent shell.

It is so Shakespearean,  
This story of Stalingrad,  
Of ruined families,  
And women who waited,  
In their hearts' tundra  
This desolation of two tyrants;  
Hitler's Ozemandias.