

# Carl Nixon – Quietly, In Your Sleep

In a city this size how many have died in the night? Do you every think about that upon your own half lidded waking? Think now. Spare a stray thought for the departed. If you close your eyes you may even be able to see them, those lost to the night. As darkness draws back from Mount Vic. unwraps possessive fingers entwined in Thorndon's green tangle. As she sighs away unrequited from the yet unlighted downtown towers and the lapping water by wharf and quay and ferry and scurries on mouse feet from the villaed suburbs, won't you ponder how many have died?

It must be a shock to the system, waking up dead. As a doorknob. Dead like a dead duck. A dead end. A dead loss. Dead eh. Bugger.

Take for example Mike. Trim bearded bespectacled round voweled patroller of parliament. Gives his age as 'over fifty'. Too young to wake up dead of a Monday. It was fatty foods that did for him. Even newly deceased he wonders about bacon, fried eggs on toast for breakfast. Sour cream. Toast with butter. He finds himself at the front door of his house in Karori. The cars and buses and trolley buses and taxis are starting to pump through the arterial roads. Out on the harbour Mike catches a glimpse of Soames Island mist veiled and vaulted. At the sight of the water he feels a sharp electric tug and sets off thoughtless to the whys and wherefores down Salamanca Road towards the sea.

Over in Mt Cook on Tasman Street Rob is also walking. From a pre-competition weight of 95 kgs at six foot two, Rob had cut down to 75. Skin like taut brown glad-wrap over pecs, abs, gluts, deltoids chiseled and crafted on the bench, the press, the free flying dumbbells. He has eaten only chicken and rice for a month watching the weight shed sliding down into the bathroom scales. Three days before the New Zealand BodyBuilding champs the dieterics do him in. And in the night a stroke strikes him down. Bugger it he thought, I'm dead. I'm going to miss the competition. Beside him Tracey slept on and dreamed of a man with a soft body who would share her KFC.

Maggie May trots down Adelaide Road stopping only to pee at the base of a pohutatakawa in the Basin Reserve. She feels the pull of an invisible lead leading her on down Cambridge Terrace to the smells of the harbour. Her arthritis no longer bothers her as she lopes grey muzzled and skinny flanked among the feet of the living and the dead who back up on Riddiford Road, pot holed and orange coned road worked, spill out of the hospital in numbers unmatched by any other part of this city. Maggie May trots on nimble as a puppy. Happy as a hound. No longer haunted by the short chain, the bare earth, the empty bowl. Although she has to admit they were nice enough at that last place. Nice enough as they soothed and smoothed matted fur with warm hands and slipped the needle into the folded skin in the smell filled rustling blanket of the night.

On Wallace Street and Wright on Bolton and Bowen. Down the Terrace and Featherston Street the newly dead come, light footed, without haste.

So where are they all going, the dead? Down to the ocean. The ocean, which laps and wraps itself around the capital L shaped capital.

This day Mike is the first to arrive. He stands on the edge of Frank Kitts Park on the edge of the water and the land.

The living alive and lively walk past oblivious. "Wait 'till it's your turn," thinks Mike but without any rancour. Still surprised to be here.

Still, it could be worse – well, maybe not.

There's a blue sky and a wind off the waveless water. Nice day for it anyway.

Others have joined Mike, are drifting into the park standing under the trees easing up against the sculpture. There's a couple arriving now, walked down together from the hospital in baggy PJs, and a bulging guy with a body like a condom stuffed with walnuts. A skinny black dog licks Mike's hand and he does not pull away.

And then out on the blue water as if it has slipped into existence through a zip in the fabric of the Monday a dinghy appears . A guy in singlet top is rowing, his back towards them. As he rows the dinghy he sings a timeless shanty that bucks and surges on the breeze.

and the the dinghy comes close aboard the quay and the rower turns, turning his face to them for the first time, weathered and worn as reef rocks rugged as a cray's carapace hair like frayed rope.

He clambers up over the rock breakwater onto the dry quick as a rat. "All aboard then. One at a time. No pushing."

"Where are we going?" Asks Mike

Tap tap tap. Flax and nylon-net scared finger on the side of his nose.

Mike hangs back as one by one the others clamber and shuffle into the dinghy.

"Been doing this long?"

"Been making this trip since this was just a beach at the edge of the bush. Seen them all here, mate. Chiefs and pononga, porters and princes. Katherine Mansfield came across with me. If you like that type of thing."

"I thought she died in France."

"Home is home. Some people just have further to walk than others. Right everyone on yet? No pissing about. Tide and tide."

Down in the dinghy with the briny slopping around in the bottom like brown beer sops. The dog loping around the small boat tongue out to the catskin breeze.

Now the shadows of the tall buildings are pushing out now towards the east. And then they're all aboard and he castes off the the head-fast and the small dinghy floats free of the quay.

A head count reveals 37 souls including three dogs, ten cats – boy racers have taken a

terrible toll in the diesel drenched night – Mike and Rob and Maggie May and all the rest of the rest of the rest. The SIDs baby carried by the law student, Sunday night's suicide. The grandmother with the bypass and the ex-wife bye-passed years ago.

"How can a dingy hold this many" asks Mike.

The boatman chuckles. "This is nothing. Shoulda seen the day the Penguin hit Thom's Rock. Had to make two trips for that lot."

And as Wellington recedes behind them wont you spare a thought for the dead turning their faces for one last long longing look back at the place of their living, the city of their lives,. A early evening mist has rolled in about a league in front of the bow. The old boatman rows for it rollocks creaking and oars drip and lift and dip and drip and lift in the blue harbour water. as he pulls us all forward into the uncertain future.