I walked because there was no reason for stopping, because it was more intolerable to stay still, and because I wanted to reach the sea. I wanted to wade out into the water and perform some ritual act—like the Doge wedding Venice to the Adriatic, or William the Conqueror with his hands full of symbolic mud, or Cuchulain, or McDouall Stuart rushing into the Indian Ocean when he had crossed the continent, or Cortes greeting the Pacific—but was that Pisarro, or was it somebody else altogether. Drake perhaps? My mind caught painfully on the doubt like a plane running on a knot of hardwood. It upset me. I began rubbing my hand across my chin again, and listening to my footsteps. The things I had not been thinking came closer.

I was coming into the city along Anzac Parade. It was late and quiet. Occasionally a tram passed, an empty, illuminated box, leaping on the rails under a crackle of blue sparks. The trees were black, and their leaves made a little dry sound like ghostly butter pats. There were no soft, rounded, sounds in the night, only dry brittle ones, and the pavement was gritty under my feet. My lips tasted of dust as they always did. The torrid street lamps were like sores on the night.

Walking alone at night always stimulated my imagination and now I was excited as it with fever. But it was the city's fever, not mine. Images, like the empty, lit tram, ran through my mind and I was aware, with a febrile intensity, of my surroundings, immediate and remote.

It was the third waterless summer, and the heat had come down like a steel shutter over the city. The winters between had been as bad. Dry, with a parching, unslacked cold; westerly winds that drove and drove, bringing such clarity to the air, that a hill five miles away looked near enough to touch. The drought was in everything now, penetrating and changing life like blind roots at work upon a neglected pavement. The colours and quality of the world had been altered in the long months of desiccation. The pattern of existence was pulled away.

Around the city there was a great fan of desolation. The sun had beaten the Emu Plains to a black brown on which the isolated houses and the townships themselves drifted like flotsam on a dead sea. The mountains were not blue but purple, a waterless ridge of rocks and shadows with the vegetation, except in the deepest seams of the valleys, mummified and black. Beyond again the Bathurst Plains were like a petrified sea, and very quiet. Further west, in an eternity of their own, were the iron-hard, fissured Black Soil Plains. There was no green anywhere. The stock had been driven away to agistment over the border long ago. Or had died. There was nothing even for the crows, who last year had had their saturnalia.

The country with its endless, aching death pressed in on the city, the drought and the heat pressed on both. In the city and its environs its stamp was no less clear. The bush on the outskirts was more than half dead. Even the deep feeders, the black butts and the like, were dying. The life that was left was drawn in and hanked down, muted and secret. The scrub was shabby and colourless. Fire had licked through it, leaving patches of black and sharp red-brown. Where there were houses, wide fire breaks had been cut as the only protection. Water could no longer be relied on to combat the fires.
These breaks were raw scars, even on the devastated country. They looked like the trail of vengeance. Orchards were long since dead, and the trees fallen on the eroded ground. On the eastern slopes around Dural the orange trees were burnt black. The flats that used to be vegetable gardens were bare, the last dried stalks blown away. Even Chinamen could make nothing grow.

In the wealthy suburbs of the North Shore and Vaucluse a change had taken place too. It was as if the earth had been squeezed so that all the fine houses that had nestled so comfortably in the contours and in the greenery were forced up into the light. They bulged out, exposed, and the sun tore at them. The gardens that had embowered them were perished. Tinder dry, fire had been through many of them, scorching walls and blistering away any paint that remained. Most of these houses were empty or inhabited as if they were caves, by people who had come in from the stricken country. The owners had fled, not so much from present hardship, as from the nebulous threat of the future, the sense of being trapped in a doomed city. The shores of the harbour were lion-coloured or drab grey. Sandhills showed a vivid whiteness. Only the water was alive and brilliant. And it was salt.

In the crowded districts, there was less to perish, but light and air were equally abrasive, changing all surfaces, fading and nullifying all colour. There was no pleasure of touch left anywhere, for the dust was undefeatable. It pulled down pride and effort. The suburbs sagged under an intolerable burden.

I was perpetually aware of all this. It cumulated into a black wave which hung over me in threatening suspense. Nothing that I knew had escaped. From my windows I looked over the golf course and that had taken, because it was defenceless, the clearest print of all. Its silvery green hills were stripped to pale brown and tawny purple. The earth was like starved, sagging flesh on an iron skeleton. Here and there a fire had run for a few yards before it died for lack of tinder, and left a black smear with a little edging of white ash. I used to think that the desert of Arizona looked like that. Now I know that heat and drought can bring even the gentlest country to it.

There was a man walking in front of me that I hadn't noticed before. When he passed a lamp I saw that he was a different shape from the pedestrians you'd expect to see about there. He was a swaggie all right with his roll of old blue blanket across his shoulders, and his quart pot dangling from it. I overhauled him.

"Good-night, mate."

"'Night, mate," he answered, as a bushman answers the gate-crashing townsman. He was an old-timer, might have been a fossicker, short and spare, with a wealth of grey whiskers and clothes subdued to use and worn as only a bushman's can be.

"Come far?" I asked him.

"Middlin' far."

"Where's that?" I felt an insatiable curiosity.

"Back o' beyond."

I'd seen hundreds like him but here there was a sort of long range persistance that was impressive. His gaunt and bristling dog at heel was cut out of the same stuff. My imagination took a leap.

"Did you ever do a perish on the Diamantina?"

"Aye, there and more places besides."

"And now the track runs through the city?"

He didn't answer. So that was the way of it. I felt coldly sick. Looking back over my shoulder I saw that there were others, many of them, moving singly among
the trees, all with the same intent, converging, persis-
tance. It would be the same on all the other highways.
I took to the middle of the road and, almost, to my heels.
I reached Taylor Square ahead of them. The neon
signs were sizzling, and a few shop windows still bulged
with light on the indifferent night. There were hardly
any people about, but in the narrow, crowded streets at
the bottom of the hill there were plenty, sitting on door
steps or on chairs dragged out on to the pavement.
Children were playing languidly in the street because it
was too hot to go to bed. There was a queue at the pump,
with buckets and kerosene tins and even jugs.
There was still water in the pipes, brownish stuff with
a smell, but the pressure was so poor that it didn’t reach
the higher levels, so the pumps had been put in where
people could come and get it. The city hadn’t been used
to queues, and they were changing peoples’ outlook.
They made new channels for rumour, perhaps for thought.
So many things were different, and the men’s minds
with them. Unemployment was general either directly
from scarcity, or from its by-product of apathy. Idleness
was everywhere and the people were differently distrib-
uted. Whole districts were almost depopulated whilst
others were overcrowded to suffocation. Practically all
the food had to be brought in. The Government was
distributing it as a ration. There was enough, and yet
it didn’t shake the public appetite. There was a sense of
famine. Even those who were eating better than ever
before, felt it. The whole of our civilization was piled
up like a pyre waiting for the fire to consume it.
The city seethed with rumours and with the promul-
gators of fantastic schemes, but everyone was fatalistic about
the drought. They didn’t expect it to break, they even
took an inverted pride in it. It, at least, relieved them
of the responsibility of living their own lives. There
was always a crowd at the General Post Office reading the
bulletins that were posted hourly, but no one believed
the jargon of lows, depressions and tropical disturbances,
any more than they believed in the bona fides of the clouds
that often blanketed the sky—as on this night—with
their barren oppression. Yet nothing else mattered. All
interest in outside events had been discarded, as if it
were the most obvious of luxuries. It was obvious that
something must come sooner or later of this mass
tension, but no one knew what. It was like a long thunderstorm
that did not break. Apathy and exasperation were
racing one another.
I followed the tramline out of the hot and odorous
streets. The open space beside the Blind Institute and
the Domain beyond were crowded with people in search
of air. They were quiet, bivouaced for the night, but
never quite still. There was no grass to sit on, only
dusty earth. The Botanic Gardens were the same, ruined
between the drought and the trampling people. Authority
had long ago given up the thankless task of conserving
them.
I no longer wanted to get to the water. These febrile
cravings died easily. I was just drifting. Did it matter
what I did, or where I went with those old-timers closing
in? The narrow canyons of the city offered no relief.
There was nothing for the mind to feed on but nostalgia.
I remembered Macquarie Place, and had a vision of it
as it used to be, the three-cornered garden, the giant
Port Jackson figs, dark against the pale soaring buildings,
the zinnias, the cushiony buffalo grass, the statue, (I
forget its original), declaiming to the street, the anchor of
the Sirius on a pedestal, Macquarie’s obelisk in its bear
pit... In the early days the officers and the higher
officials lived round there. It was their compound where the children romped in safety, and in the evening the regimental band played under those same trees, lovers counted the southern stars between the leaves, and the gaiety of exiles flourished by candlelight. It was the outpost of something that had had to fall, and it might be again. It was a goal, a place with significance in a meaningless desert, a spot where we might turn at last and resist the invasion, the perishing men who came so quietly and surely through the dust. I hastened my steps like a hungry man who half remembers some forgotten fragment of food, and hurries back to ransack his belongings once more. Down I went through narrow, twisting streets, between buildings glowing with heat, but dead to light.

At first sight Macquarie Place did not seem to be greatly changed. The trees still stood, and the lights showed the dark labyrinth of their leaves scarcely breeched. It was, like all these places, crowded with people. I had the good fortune to find a seat on one of the benches. I was shaking with fatigue. All about me were points of light from cigarettes, and a murmur of talking. Those crowds had their fits of talking and their fits of silence. I turned to my neighbour and was surprised to see that he was apparently in fancy dress, white breeches, a tail coat, and a three-cornered hat. He was small and sharp, but fine too. Before I could speak to him he addressed me.

"This is nothing new, Sir, it happened before, and worse."

"Indeed?" said I, not feeling comfortable.

"Not so much the drought—though that was bad enough, even the parrots were dropping dead out of the trees at Rose Hill—but the scarcity. You have no conception, Sir, of what it was like then."

Was that long ago?" I asked, trembling.

"Some time ago. There was the same talk then of abandoning the settlement but I didn't listen to it. I hope no one listens now. Of course I've no authority these days. But if I could hang on surely you could. It was two and a half years before ships came from England that time. I'd grieve to see my work thrown away now."

I got up hurriedly. "Good-night, Captain," I said.

"Captain General." he corrected me.

A man buttonholed me. "I've been to the Observatory every day but no one will listen to me. In the Book of Revelations..."

I broke from him. I hoisted myself on to the pedestal and leaned against the anchor. That was something solid. Two men below me were quarrelling quietly. I tried to speak to them to tell them what would be happening to all of us soon. They both fell silent.

"That's right, mate," said a man beside me, whom I had not noticed. "What we want's solidarity."

I tried to see his face. "Are you real?" I asked. He laughed, and called down to a friend, "Here's a poor cove gone balmy."

There was a roar of laughter, and a screech came up.

"Don't laugh, you fools, repent."

I sat trembling with rage. Let it happen to them, whatever it was. I wouldn't warn them.

Two men were talking over my head.

"There's a change coming."

"I've heard that before."

"It's true this time."

"I don't hold with this metherology. It never did anything for us."

"I don't neither. I know this myself. Smell it, see? You listen, it'll begin anytime."
"I'll wait."
"Feel that?"
"Nope."

The country was coming to take its vengeance on the city. Climax. Apotheosis. Then nothing. Come quickly. Come quickly. All ugliness, all corruption will be burned away.
"Feel that?"
"Something fell on my bald pate."
"Rain."
"Go on."

LISTEN

Silence fell. There was a crepitation among the leaves. Everybody stood up, stock still. I slid from the pedestal and stood with them. I felt the drops on my face. I was furious, nothing could hold me.

"No," I shouted. It couldn't come now. It was too late. Our fate was on us. We were going up in fire, consummated. It was agony to turn back now with the end we had toiled so long to reach in sight.

There were people holding me. "It isn't true," I cried.
"It won't happen. No rain ever."

Someone forced me to my knees. There was a great silent ring of people around me. A match was struck and held in a cupped hand. I stared at the asphalt. Great black drops were falling on it, drying, disappearing, coming again, faster and faster, making a pattern like the leaves against the light, then coalescing and defacing itself. I stared and stared. Out on the roads, that pattern was tangling the feet of the perishing men, turning them back. Nothing would come of it now.

Nothing would save us. We must take up the burden of remaking our world.