

Chekhov's Mongoose

TOM SHAPCOTT (born 1935) is a well known Australian poet who has been published in a number of countries. Translations of major selections of his work have been published in Hungary, Romania and the Republic of Macedonia. He has published 15 collections of poems in Australia, as well as 6 novels and other prose works. He is the inaugural Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide, in South Australia.

Chekhov's Mongoose

TOM SHAPCOTT



PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 202, Applecross, Western Australia 6153
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO CB1 5JX United Kingdom

All rights reserved

© Tom Shapcott, 2000

The right of Tom Shapcott to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

First published 2000

Printed and bound in the United States of America by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 9.5 / 13

This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, 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.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-publication data

Shapcott, Thomas W. (Thomas William), 1935-
Chekhov's mongoose.

ISBN 0 646 39543 2

I. Title.

A821.3

SP

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

To Bruce and Brenda Beaver

Contents

I The Dreams

The old window	3
An old story	5
Phoenix	6
Aubade	7
Deposition of the dream	8
The letters	9
The old king after surgery	11
Smile	12
Small gothic appetites	13
The grey lady of wonaminta	14
Colonial	15
The painted shore	17

II Four sestinas

Chekhov's Mongoose	23
Sestina in the time of El Niño	25
Revival	27
Australian Horizons	29

III The visions

Letters from Gwen Harwood	33
The Dream of return	34
After twenty years	36
Stag in the upstairs parlour	38
Poem for John Olsen	39
Thirteen ways of remembering the river	42

IV	Travel	
	Belgrade, 1989	51
	Pristina, Kosovo	52
	Fishing Lake Ochrid	54
	Dried watermelon	55
	Samarkand by moonlight	56
	At Methoni	57
	Venice	58
	For Alexamnder Pushkin	60
V	At Fassifern	
	The ghost rock pool	63
	Cycle	65
	Growing pains	67
	The Fassifern	69
VI	For Dorothy my mother	
	Figs	73
	Then	74
	Old Tom song	75
	Three sonnets on death	76
	Tree	78
	Tenant	79
	Skin as the parchment	80
	Skin of the hand	81
	Writer in public	82
	Making the news	83
	For Dorothy my mother	86

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgements are due to the editors of the following publications in which some of the poems in this collection first appeared: *The Age*, *Antipodes*, *The Australian*, *The Australian's Review of Books*, *The Bunyip*, *Canberra Times*, *Eureka Street*, *Heat*, *Imago*, *Meanjin*, *Mind the Gap* (New York), *Overland*, *Poetry Review*, *Poetryetc* (internet), *Quadrant*, *Sidewalk*, *Southerly*, *Westerly*.

I The Dreams

The old window

His architect had played the post-modern game—
allusions everywhere but never serious,
illusions short-sheeted, as in the classic maze
(one-quarter size) that set off the Rotunda
(pure Raj, that) where the outdoor drinks'
casquet was the Party Piece. That first summer
he used the Orangerie the once,
for the Corporate Retreat (the name fooled nobody);
it was a pure assertion of his trendy nonchalance.
Later he hired out the space for wedding groups
(his maze was trampled by Mediterranean types).
The ground floor area also was public as an Insurance lobby
or the Piazza of one of the Accountancy agglomerates.
The Grand Staircase, a cheeky salute to the TITANIC,
invited theatrical gestures, and it got them.
Nobody would forget Amanda abandoning her seven veils
as she ascended to the upstairs bathroom
and her nip of Mother's Downfall. Or Geneviève
breasting the bannister in the altogether
too dégageé mink stole.

He had his parties,
everyone remembered. It was a fun place,
Raoul's Verseilles.

There was an attic
or at least a Mansard roof and small rooms.
Each window was different (that was the trick)
and he had insisted to the architect
that the furthest window must be the genuine thing,
a tiny multi-paned dormer ripped
from the chateau his grandmother once haunted
outside Lyons. It was only in the wettest day of winter
that he finally clambered up and regarded the memento.
Perhaps it had been enough to know it was there.
He had looked at it in Australia once before, out of storage,
and the slap of antipodean light, brash as an appraising squint
over the tanned bodies in Bondi out to the glittering surf
had reduced that sheltered window frame to an imperfect excuse

for clumsy glass and bubbly surfaces (which he once remembered as meaningful). He saw through it, it might be said.

But in winter glumness, with drops clustering like dismal starlings on the outer panes, he re-entered its world. He had not escaped her after all. His mother still trembled for him, and remained as powerless. His father slammed the door again and the same pane cracked. His grandmother was as imperious and demanded her price. And he was the still-young boy again. “Mon petit serviteur”, she had said, again and again. “Serviteur” as she instructed him, cruelly, in all the arts. The Mansard attic was his choice. Even then he only had to raise one finger and he knew she was lost. So he came home to this, because loss is power and power is lost, and because illusion can be allusion, after all, in the end.

An old story

Twenty-three years later he sat on his bed
in the dark in the same room.
Like iridescent dust, his hair
now covered his body—shoulder,
belly, and of course the luxuriant beard.
Only his skull was hairless, nothing
would alter that. For twenty-one
of those years he had looked at each mirror
and always the verdict: going going gone.
There was the cheval-glass
in Madame Véronique's salon—she
called it a salon—and the gold framed
Versailles monstrosity of his ambassadorial days,
that had been an indulgence. More important
was the small steel mirror—army issue—
it was still close to hand, had he needed it.
Like a blue army in the green heat
it had multiplied in his mind over the years
and always with the same curse:
twenty-three years will pass, and you will be
back to where you started.
Slowly he got up off the bed.
He reached for his razor.

Phoenix

The Phoenix was not where I thought it should be—
perched, say, on the rim of the volcano
warming its eggs like the Galapagos shag.
I had to be more brazen, for instance,
and insist I had more than mere information.
I had to flaunt everything like (to make a parallel)
some Mandril or one of the more conspicuous monkeys.

And not only that, there was the matter of etiquette:
if you thought the mating rituals of bowerbirds and the Huon
Pine
were overdone—all display and little return—
what could have possibly prepared you for this?
Or prepared me? I was the guineapig,
or the sacrificial lamb, or the shearer's dog.
Place yourself in my position:
I have travelled light, I have had the right vaccinations
and the best Skin Shields and my mobile
is state of the art
except that it might as well have been State of the Ark.

In these conditions, the Phoenix was,
as the saying is, risen. No gender games here.
Merely self expression. That was the rub.
Who can bargain with volcanoes?
How was I to know the Phoenix
was my own past come back to haunt?
What I tried to take was already taken.

Aubade

They were not young. Age had wrinkled
and crumpled those parts of the body that crumple,
it had narrowed their vision into a tunnel
where things at the edges are an effort
and are always somehow disturbing,
like a dogfight in a neighbouring yard
or noises that could be a branch cracking
or a fencepost (why?) thrown out of joint.
They had entered the time of other things
somehow happening elsewhere, of half-heard
exclamations and shouts and whispers.
They had become alone, even between themselves.
He would make coffee and call to her
expecting an answer though he knew her answer
was always yes. She would murmur
and protest at his clothes strewn over the bathroom floor
though had it ever been otherwise? They would get up
in the morning together, in the same order,
but as always there would be the moment, too,
when they would meet with a certain surprise,
out in the garden, she with a mattock in her hand
he dragging out the hose. They would pause, then,
and reach out, as if it were the first time,
touching each other with the very tips of their fingers.

Deposition of the dream

Why are dreams always so cruel?
Even in telling them, and laughing,
freshening them up so as to fool
the shiver out of them, we are saving
some part for our own torment, later.

“I had this dream”—and at once we back
away, if we are listeners. We’ve been caught
before, and not by you, or our own lack
of preparedness. You do not have to be taught
to flinch, it arrives sooner before later.

I had this dream and it was not cruel,
it was beautiful. The dream was of love
and protection, of us as we once were, full
of our very first sharing. Dove. Dove.
You get the glint in it? The knife comes later.

In my dream, she was worn and alone
and she clung to me (as she once had to cling)
so that I closed her eyes with kisses. Not one
sob went uncomforted. My arms were strong
as if this had been their condition forever.

Did those people die? Did they recover?
The deposition, once lodged, keeps the matter
open. Even to laugh is to finger
such dusty files you must sneeze, or utter
denials, complicity, a further

complication. Why do old deceptions return?
Is it true: to stay silent is better?
Life is not dry, it is no deposition.
Dreams are the comfort of sucking what’s bitter.
Once lodged, dream evidence files you forever.

The letters

“Dear Mater and Dad” he had written. Or to his brother, “Old Salt, how goes it back home?” He wrote with a blunt pencil by candle-light or in the Red Shield Hut well away from the Front. He tried not to get mud on the small pages, or fingerprints, or blood. He invented memories of Leave in the Old Dart full of meals eaten and jolly girls or sometimes the Cinema or that time in the Gods trying to hear a play (it was a Comedy but he missed so much). Three times that particular night returned but he never got it right—the damp and cold through his feet, the smell of steaming wool, the girl herself twisting her two hands ceaselessly—not once did his letters reinvent how it was, or even how he wished it to be. In the front line, though, what was important was the act of writing, of getting it down. ‘It’ was the affirmation in his head, the thing clung to, the action of language reduced to sign, as if signs were a certain recipe for memory and wisdom. None of the others in his tiny Signallers’ group wrote letters home. “Writing to yer Maw agen?” Once he got it down and sealed it off it went on a long journey that would alter everything.

When he finally got home, after the War, his Mater was grim-faced with cancer, his Dad old and that Old Salt his brother married and gone without even a whiff of the mustard smell of his own War which he couldn’t write about. He couldn’t accuse. Well, that was all right.

Before she died his Mater handed him the large bundle of letters. “They kept her alive”, his father said, it was the only time he mentioned her agony years. Alone, in his childhood sleep-out he opened the first one. It was another person, a child, and he saw through the lies and was ashamed. “Those letters proved to us that you still cared”

the Old Man said. “Though each one was a report from the dead but we couldn’t admit that. They took so long, and so much could have happened. We read them again and again.” And for the first time he saw how the lies and the cheerful reports hid nothing. He was filled with agony. And it was for himself.