



## CHINESE WHISPERS

That heat! That terrible heat. That  
coldness! That terrible coldness.

*William Carlos Williams*

### I

HE POKES A LION with his stick, and it runs away. His city is full of conserved beasts, originals but without aggressiveness. Usually. A pact with the mayor. He chooses not to introspect as he goes for his interview.

‘... someone to tie on the arms and legs,’ says Larry the manager.

‘Really, someone else does the tying, and it’s better not to anthropomorphise robots,’ he – the Engineer, the candidate, me – says.

Larry says, ‘Well, I guess it’s the movie, and the replicants that die.’

The aspirant, the Engineer, says, ‘Stuff that’s constructed doesn’t die. Your computer gets out of date, it doesn’t die. What is no longer there is the idea. Its soul, if you like. It’s quite indifferent to its physical shape and fate. It’s an idea, surpassed by another idea.’

Larry seems interested: ‘So the idea doesn’t die either? Doesn’t disappear.’

‘Of course not.’ The Engineer thinks Larry won’t enjoy taking coffee with him in the lounge. Larry asks, ‘Where do the ideas come from, if they don’t go anywhere?’

‘From us, of course. But I think you’re strolling up a blind alley.’

Outside they can hear the wild beasts gathered round the fountain, giving tongue. Maybe a murderous scuffle.

I am the Engineer. I don’t want the job. Are the robots part of our superorganism, or just appendages because we’re lazy? Are robots made in our image or quicker, nimbler, more complicated but quite, quite alien, like our bromided lions? And what if

robots reproduce themselves, ever more skilful and neat – sex and procreation's no great invention. And you're free to say, 'how wonderful' or 'how ridiculous'. No one's taking notice.

I get the job. I start to think of moving on.

Larry's wife has been waiting for us – and a bareknuckle evening. She and Larry must have found each other as two objects interlaced on a beach, washed up but hopeful – Larry wanting a feisty entertainer, and she a predictable patsy with a salary. She comes out swinging, 'Another roboteer! I guess this is the final blow to the workers, cut out their muscles, replace with plastic casings,' and there's Larry, 'We don't have workers, my dear, only women. And if we cut their pay, it's to get their menfolk off their asses and contribute ...'

She says ('by the way, this is my wife, Serena ...') 'You'll open up a bag of tricks, the little buggers, your machines, they don't have sex, don't drink, don't sleep, don't make a mess at home – they'll see you off, you men, and with the knowledge that they'll give you – more idleness, and longer useless lives.'

I say, 'Someone should write a history of sitting down,' but really I'm away, down by

those sticky rivers, the men all busy, painting themselves, propitiating gods, maybe plucking a banana. The women somewhere in those sheds, little monkey fingers making knowledge, deep in another culture – and I think, no, that won't do, must start again, and switch off for this evening.

I switch off – he switches off, the evening passes, there are knockdowns, but it's all routine, they'll haggle up to bed, forget me, the non-paying public, then will come another day, inconclusive as the last, but marching on behind no flags.

I repeat the Engineer's mantra, 'Robots can't read a book. Don't know what a problem is – can only scan and solve, they can't invent, think outside their own biscuit tin. So how could they have an idea?'

Serena's unimpressed. 'If you know what an idea is.'

'Yes I do.'

I go on, with my sense of duty, though it's the engineer in me that speaks: 'Robots can iron your pyjamas, sail your ship to Pluto, but it can't make your revolution.'

She says, 'But we don't want that either.'

Lamely, the Engineer says, 'Anyway, one species knows itself. Our dog will give us love, but stays a dog.' I think of our tame

lions, what can they give, what, except for tofu slabs, do they take away?

She says, ‘And if a robot gives me love, how do I react? You – you seem to me a robot, if you gave me love, what should I expect?’

Well, here we are, all personal, I say, ‘I think the best of it lies there – we’ve no idea, and so the question’s back to starters – the robot knows because it’s told, how to behave, but as for me – I can behave badly, even carelessly, and that’s what makes me engineer and master,’ and she sniffs and turns away.

She says, ‘Then I think us girls prefer a real robot to an absent male,’ and maybe for her it’s true.

We sit together on her divan, talking of this and that and neurobiology. Suddenly, with a gesture I can’t place at first, she takes off the top half of her clothes, with two handfuls. ‘What do you think of me?’ she says.

They were just right.

When the Engineer dresses again, thinking perhaps of redress, he asks, ‘Larry? Any problems there?’

‘Larry doesn’t know so many things, one more shouldn’t trouble him.’

‘You seemed so in synchrony.’

‘That’s an easy trick.’

I remember my first fantasy realised, my golden girl, down by the river, time unexpected, too unlikely even to be fantasised, then slowly buried under history, becoming merely memory, then fantasy. What became of us? Just archaeology.

And later, Serena says, ‘It was good, it didn’t matter,’ and I think, ‘It was so good, it must matter’, that’s what they say when things are bad.

Serena says, ‘Hey, you’re off somewhere, becoming engineer again,’ and I think of those little complex biscuit tins, all full of pseudo thoughts, philosophy transmuted into silicone, not that the material side concerns me, how they actually make the little buggers after I’ve designed them, and Serena says,

‘Up in the clouds, where thoughts can’t reach – you’re rather sweet when there’s nothing crossing that mind,’ and I think that when there’s nothing, nothing’s all there is, and that’s what we’re all trying to avoid, that moment when we enter infinity and it all stops – at least, for Serena, up there are clouds and blue.

I – he – presses on relentlessly, ‘We can’t supply them with God, sex, death or sunsets,’

and impatiently she adds,

‘Nor reason, love, birth or mountains,’ and she laughs, and maybe beneath that surface, itself not so bad, there is another something, good or bad.

She says, ‘What I don’t see, that puts me with the biscuit tins, is any whole, society, collection of human allsorts – something I’m like and could belong to. Just Larry, and now maybe Larry and you, for how long one doesn’t know. A year of Larry on the bottle and we’re off, in separate orbits, him to burn up quick and into space waste, me left to wonder what are you? Space dog, so bravely muzzle pointing tail streaming back, or maybe just another piece of beagle shit, spinning round and round ...’

I say, ‘No, I’m something live for sure. Some kind of animal. Careless to the fate of others of the species, and so perhaps not one of them. Do not deserve. Invent without a thought for all effects, without a suffering equal to the slightest of the misery of all my brothers. And my sisters too,’ and she sees me drifting away from what she wants – her lack, her longing, mild ache for companionship maybe. But not an ache for me. That’s yet to come and will make us hop, and poor old Larry too if we make him

lose his innocence, what will he take of us – and am I not too far ahead? Serena doesn't want an end game before it's started, wants a slow slow burn. A robot only has its options, like her, a finity of choices.

Of course, I knew I was frittering away my life – the lives of school friends surfaced, like timbers coming off a wreck, became public, or at least as currency – and money was there too, or status, photos of some bunch of guys, who'd won a cup or signed a peace or merged with some other bank. It all passed by me, and I was as proud and idle as a pyramid in the sand, waiting for robbers of my – maybe stolen – jewels.

And while he chatters on, Engineer Harley has a vision – one of the throwback visions, like a lizard's dreams of fire and brimstone – a past so horrible and immediate, its passage gives, if not rebirth, at least another chance. The parade of shabby dwarves, families of them, the women smaller, children smaller still, all looking straight ahead, avoiding jeers or exploitation, as useful freaks or sports of God. The beggars, and the ragged band, in single file, a chant from hell for who knows what confraternity or leperhouse. And then the feast – a whale, larger than the largest lifesize, patterned in what seemed

yellow plastic, or like liner luggage of the Thirties, and so the beast was fake, though starting now to reek, and out come yellow packages, out from its manufactured belly – baby tiger, baby whale. And then the crowd, from all around me, they've all brought some things to hack with, gobble down the risky flesh – advancing on it with a roar like turkeys in a storm, all busy with their mouths to satisfy or howl for some or more. A vision of the past that makes a mock of all the idylls of the riverbank, the sacred tombs are all a load of rot, the gods, the face paint, stories by the fire – all petty tricks to keep the early deaths at bay, a respite from the brother hacking at you, enemies at every tree, the sunny glades are full of killers.

And then he thinks, this fine young engineer, adultery proudly in his stride, his fear is time. Not ageing, as he's young, just time, dimension to be somehow filled, avoiding the unmeaning of its being simply past. It's time as meaning that assails him. Dimension that his robots cheerfully ignore – they do their job, if asked, and if their time runs out, then onward with another! They do not care, because they do not tell the time, their time. Though it's built in, and they are on the forward rush of obsolescence, maybe

it's time we can't convince them of, make them evaluate, and savour as it rushes past and reappears, the sea, the sea, always beginning over and the same.

I pull myself back, and Larry's talking of ideas, or his Idea. I say, 'You want me to make robot intellectuals, then? All sitting in a row on shelves, those biscuit tins all staring out the window, interviewing each other, reviewing each others' circuits, – then maybe smoke a pipe, screw a friend's wife, go to a movie?'

'Something like that,' he says, and seems a little disappointed.

'That's how it is,' I tell him, 'Ideas we recognise after the fact – otherwise it's just the brain doodling with itself, joining up the scraps, it's boring, dross. All out of focus, wrong and trivial, and then ...'

'That "then" is what I want,' he says.

'The then, or zen – depends on other people and their wants or fantasies. Those tins can't evaluate each other – and they have no needs, no fantasies.'

And Larry says, 'So, give them what they need to have. Factor it in.'

I say, although I'm keen, 'I doubt myself.'

'It doesn't look like it,' he says.

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