

Hallucination before departure

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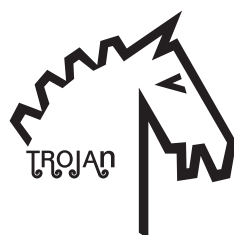
Hallucination before departure (2006)

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(Alan Marshall)

in a memoir by

Chester Eagle



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Copyright for this memoir is held by Chester Eagle. Alan Marshall's 'Hallucination before departure', incorporated in it, was written in 1980 and sent to George W. Bell in the same year.

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George was a friend of the writer Alan Marshall. George was a friend of mine. He often spoke of Alan, whom he referred to as 'Marshall'; it hinted at the way the man on crutches had turned himself into a figure, a voice, belonging to the people. I was teaching at the time I got to know George, and 'Marshall', and I invited Marshall to talk to my students. He had himself driven to the school, and he came into the hall with a mixture of celebrity, pretended modesty and a common touch that was natural. He spoke to the students as people rarely did, that is, without fear or the wish to push fear into their minds. I think he believed that as long as he was free he could liberate others. The students listened, they asked him things. I no longer remember what he told them, but they'd been reading *This is the Grass* and they had lots of questions to ask about the Melbourne of his youth, when he had been as they were - full of hopes and fears, doubts and flickers of determination which they might or might not be able to sustain. Alan enjoyed talking with the boys at the school. It seemed to me, listening, and watching, that I was in the presence of a true democrat who took it for granted that his experiences would be interesting to others because their ideas, the way they saw the world, were interesting to him.

I told him, as I took him out to his taxi, that his talk had been stimulating for the boys, but he took that for granted. He commented on their questions. His life, despite the crutches, appeared to be a seamless whole, with the events of the morning, his visit, as fresh, as important, as the events set down in his book. It seemed to me, as I watched his car take him up Saint George's Road towards Eltham, where he lived, that he'd altered my perspective on my own life, which had only recently been relocated from Gippsland, in the east of the state, to Melbourne.

In the east, I'd always felt I was an outsider, a visitor or observer, and it was in this frame of mind that I nurtured the idea that I too might be a writer one day, as Marshall was. In leaving Gippsland and coming to the metropolis, I'd given myself a challenge, because there were plenty of artists and writers in Melbourne and I had set out, secretly perhaps - I can no longer tell, today - to join their ranks.

I'd been on the fringe of artists and writers for some time. In my Gippsland years I'd invited a number of such people to come on mountain trips with me, long drives through forest and past lakes beside the sea. They'd commented on how many locals I knew, people waving from passing cars, or talking as they filled our car with petrol, happy to share gossip and stories with someone who lived among them but came from somewhere else.

I think I was already a writer in those early days, but couldn't quite believe it because I'd had no recognition. Coming back to Melbourne was like requiring myself to prove a point, to myself and to others. Here was Alan Marshall, who'd developed his identity as a writer and columnist over many years; the crutches, the infantile paralysis that had forced them on him at an early age, had been turned cleverly into an advantage, a point of recognition. Readers had trained themselves to think of him as the cripple who wrote, as if it was the legs and crutches that made him special, not the workings of his mind. Marshall wrote very simply so readers weren't distanced by his style. He put his words down in a way that made readers think they would say it the same way, if they'd noticed things as he did. Marshall's travels, his driving about, and his camping, sounded natural to people of his day: what was unusual about him was not his writing, but his courage; he'd never given in to his body's weakness, and that brought him to be admired. His crippled condition, his crutches, had given him a pathway to where he wanted to be.

It wasn't so easy when you were whole in body and mind. The literary world of Australia was tiny, only a handful of people got published, the rest were a struggling horde, hoping to be admitted by the powerful gatekeepers who selected books for publication, or for review in those newspa-

pers that took any notice. At the universities, literature with a capital L came from other places. Nobody studied our writers. There hadn't been many of them and their concerns weren't important. The main thing for the managers of our country was to keep everyone looking in the right direction, which was towards the flag! The Union Jack in the corner still had power in those days, although it was waning. Writers were supposed to be saying what the Empire wanted, although of course they weren't; most of the country's writers were saying things so personal, or so disloyal, that they couldn't be allowed to count. They were a tradition, however young, that traditionalists refused to recognise. I was aware of this but hadn't yet become aware that it was a situation that was ongoing, healthy in a subversive way, and probably inevitable. I wanted to be a writer but I hadn't worked out what they did.

George was a photographer who had been a painter, but had put that aside in favour of the camera. When he saw the places in Gippsland that I frequented, he told me I had to get a camera too. 'You see places and things that urban artists never know exist! You've got opportunities most of them don't even dream of!' I was impressed, and a little overwhelmed. Was it really so good, where I was?

I got a camera. It joined my typewriter as a tool of trade. I started to look at Gippsland in the ways that cameras looked. George tutored me sternly. 'I would say that that is a very good subject ruined by a bad way of taking it.' I listened, I learned. George believed in the approach to a subject which was self-denying, disciplined, the photographer subjecting himself to the nature of the thing being taken. 'Walk all around the thing before you take it. Look for the angle from which it's most itself. Nine times out of ten, it'll be front on, or side on. Don't try for clever angles. Let the thing express itself.' This advice suited me because, immodest as I was, I was aware that the world was a fascinating place, bigger and more interesting by far than I was. The world mattered. I happened to be passing through it, no more than that. It was my privilege to record what I saw.

I also wrote. I produced vast and complex dramas that tried to do too much. For the camera, George had a simple rule, repeated often enough, which said: 'Select and isolate.' This was more than I could do with my writing, which aspired to say everything, to put things down as they'd never been put down before. This, mistaken though it was, was also natural, so I shouldn't have despaired as much as I did when I was walking the paddocks and the back roads, late at night, trying to find a way through the problems I encountered with the pages, often blank, that I was trying to fill. Talented artists, artists who were great, seemed to know things, to have a certainty about what they were doing, which was eluding me. When would things become simple?

The paddocks to the west of my town were full of dead trees, redgums that had been ring-barked and left to die. They'd dropped their lesser branches over the years. Reduced, and simplified, they'd gone silver-grey with age and had sometimes rotted at their heart. Farmers wanting to clear their paddocks piled fallen branches at the bottom of these trees, started a fire, and hoped the flames would get into that central chimney. If they did, there was no stopping the blaze. It would roar night and day until the tree was no more. At night the flames, or sparks, would fly from the trunks of trees on fire, a joyfully destructive sight as one came home from some trip into the mountains. The dead trees had commanding shapes, and I loved to walk among them with my camera, remembering George's dictum: 'Walk around the thing. You're looking for the angle from which it's most itself. Don't try to do anything clever. Let it express itself.'

Young as I was, and self-obsessed, I knew that I had the right message in my mind. George's photos showed me that, and my own occasional good one when I managed to take it. I cannot be sure, now, whether or how much I realised that in walking around, camera in hand, I was trying to

find, not so much good subjects as the right attitude of mind. I needed humility and I was striding around in my search for it, full of the energy which comes from pride. Artists need to have pride in themselves, and they need humility every bit as much, and when these two opposites are in harmony there is a chance of something good getting done.

I took any number of photos of those trees, and all the other things I discovered in my Gippsland years. I moved to Melbourne. I stayed in touch with George, absorbing whatever I could. I invited Alan Marshall to talk to my students. I wrote to thank him for what he'd done. He wrote back:

I was most interested in the reaction of the boys which because they were sincere made their opinion valuable. I liked that comment "This book has the wonderful quality of ageing one's mind."

It was a quality I still needed myself. Ageing meant maturity, and maturity meant that the years of discovery were over because one had seen as much as one could take in, and the task now, then, was to understand, to reveal, to let that inner character shine through. When something was illuminated from within, that was when it was ready to be expressed because it could express itself. Illumination from within. Had I had it as a young man, walking the paddocks of my eastern town? I supposed it had been there at times, but I'd never been sure of it, and was therefore always in search of it, walking, camera in hand, notebook in pocket, hoping for illumination to declare itself by presenting me with a picture so good that it couldn't be denied, an idea so good that I could scribble down a few words and add them to the half-filled page in my typewriter, back at home. Each morning when I went out to drive to work I looked to the north-west to see the ring of mountains gazing down on my town ... or was the town gazing forever at them, standing out there where the snow fell and the fires blazed in summer when lightning or carelessness let them get away. Fire in the mountains could never be put out except by rain, so nature and its ways were as good a lesson in humility as any artist could ever have had. Something of that lesson penetrated my thinking, perhaps.

When I left the east of the state, I was ready for my next development. I met Alan Marshall, I kept seeing George, I made new friends. My life changed when my children were born. Any number of artists' works flowed through the city where I lived. Art had been an outsider language in the east of the state but in the metropolis it was natural enough. And yet, strangely, I found, as the years went on, that I was frequently looking back, as I am in this piece, to the years when I'd been struggling to find myself as a writer, and a young man with a camera he was learning to use. There were around me too many people, too many journalists and television stations, pretending to be artists when they hadn't the dedication, the absorption in the true search which made the arts what they were, there was a lack of purity, I often felt, which troubled me and sent me back to the origins of my desire to live and see as artists lived and saw.

George moved house a number of times in the years that followed my move, and each time his photos and his native artefacts moved with him. He put his camera aside, using it only rarely, and took out his brushes again. He had a studio built, and over time it began to fill with paintings. 'I thought I'd be able to paint with all the developments I'd incorporated in my work with the camera,' he said, 'but I found that my painting started at exactly the point where I left it years ago. When I picked up the brushes I was a young man again, and had to find my way forward.' He did quite a few paintings before he allowed any of his friends to buy one. 'I don't want to come to your house and see something on your wall that I should have burned!' Eventually he allowed me a painting. In the years that followed I bought more, following his work with fascination. George's

paintings revealed a man that hadn't been present in his photos. The camera had captured things that were already there, George showing through only in his choice of subject. His paintings were more personally, lyrically expressive. He was at odds with the art world around him in that his subjects were normally some moment in a story, or incident, which he found captivating. He searched for the moment when the forces in the tale were most visible; this was the moment that he represented, usually in a simple, bulky, even clumsy-looking, but always expressive shape. The artist whose work his paintings most closely resembled was the Frenchman Fernand Leger, and George cheerfully admitted the influence, but he had no need to fear such a statement because his own aesthetic was as personal as it was highly developed. Genial, even benign, for most of the time, he was, he always said of himself, a harsh critic of others. I never accepted his condemnation of himself as harsh; what led him to say this, I thought, was the fact that he rarely met anybody whose aesthetics were as developed and deeply thought through as his own, so that he felt that any judgement he made was likely to overpower the judgements of others. What he didn't notice – in my view – was that few people ever realised the superiority that he took to be natural, because they weren't sufficiently aesthetic in their outlook even to notice where his greatest strengths lay.

George, as I've said, moved house several times, and each time the paintings and the 'primitive' objects went with him. Sophistication in the arts never impressed him very much. So called native, or primitive, people were as likely to produce remarkable work as people from cultures that thought themselves superior. Having a high opinion of yourself was an artistic sin, although George took it for granted that any practitioner of the arts would have pride in his work and his methods of producing it. George was very amused by, but also quite accepting of the claim I reported to him of a man who carved faces and arms out of tree stumps in the far east of the state. This roadside artist had boasted that there were very few practitioners of his art who could use an axe to cut one side of the face so that it resembled the other side, whereas my man knew he could! This was exactly the sort of claim – naïve-sounding, but vitally important in the artist's eyes – that George thought it important to make.

Years passed. I became as confident in my own aesthetics as George had been, and George, I noticed, was painting less. When I visited him we drank tea but he didn't take me to his studio unless I asked. When we got there, he had no new paintings finished, only sketches, reworkings of earlier themes, or paintings from long ago which, he said, had been stirring in his brain. 'I might go back to this and do some new work.' George was slowing down. As time passed, my visits became sadder. He had less to say, seemed withdrawn, and wasn't doing any work. The studio was dusty. The only change from one visit to the next was a rearrangement of artefacts on the shelves against the glass that let sunlight in. It dawned on me that George had stopped painting. Would he start again? Would he go back to the camera? Neither. When I took him photos I'd taken recently, he flipped through them as if they were beach scenes, nodded, and put them down. George, who had always had so much to say, left the talking to his wife. The paintings on the walls were the ones that had been there for years. There was a monumental painting of a woman in water, her arm upraised as expressively as Hokusai's wave; this was George's response – or his response some years earlier – to a story about Japanese soldiers machine-gunning Australian nurses they'd captured during World War 2. It was as powerful as anything I'd ever seen, and it was, I came slowly and sadly to realise, something that he would never repeat, or achieve, again. George's wife used the word 'Alzheimer's' and it explained everything. George was dying, or, to put it better, he had already died, slowly, right before our eyes. The aesthetic plane on which he had had no superior was unreachable for him, now. He was benign, affable, good-natured enough to listen to anything you

cared to say, but he no longer responded. The great teacher had become an empty shell. I found myself going through the letters I'd had from him, down the years, and reading them to recover the man he'd been. There was one he'd sent me, in 1980; a few lines by way of explanation of what he enclosed, a piece of writing by the late Alan Marshall, almost certainly the last thing Marshall had written before he died. Marshall had been in and out of – mostly in – a nursing home at the time he wrote the piece. I think he sent it by way of showing that there was life in him yet. Not, alas, for much longer. Here's the piece. It's called 'Hallucination before departure.'

I experienced a great freedom as I ran along the flank of the hill. With every stride my arms reached for distance, pulling it towards me in festoons of green shadow. My head rose and fell with each stride.

He joined me as I reached the crest, moving in just behind me, his strides matching mine. We ran together as one. He looked at me and smiled. It was a smile that Pan would have given. It was a gateway to childhood; to what childhood was. It was clean and fragrant like the sea.

We were the same age ... about nine I would say. He was lithe like a reed and as he leant forward to an increase of speed he curved like a bow. His arms moved like crankshafts on the driving wheels of locomotives, moving with precision and delicacy. And I matched stride for stride, breasting the flowing distance that broke upon us in waves advancing to impede us.

How beautifully we ran! How precisely we socketed upon our hips as if we were both sitting in some carriage of faery bewitched by motion. We were posed with no strain of muscle to hold us erect or brace or sinew to anchor us. We had no conflict with our bodies; we moved to the bidding of our dream.

Behind me in the shadows from which I had emerged was the hospital bed upon which I had been lying a few minutes before. This slender boy had brought a key to the unimpeded movement I was now enjoying. It clicked a release in me and the next moment I was running.

I was hallucinating, so the doctor told me when explaining my sudden escape into a world that could only have existed for me in dreams.

'You have been crippled with polio since you were six,' he said. 'You must have a great spirit to have survived till you were seventy-eight.'

He studied the thermometer he had taken from my mouth.

'You see,' he continued, 'that is why you imagined you were running. You must have always longed to run. In these feverish fantasies you have had the opportunity to realise it.'

This is how he explained it, this is how he explained that I, who had never run before, experienced how it was to run, but he didn't explain why, at the same time I got as much enjoyment from watching myself running. I was an onlooker as well as a participant; my heart had eyes and I was drenched with a surplus of beauty. Sight and movement had shared their discovery, creating a new sense of awareness in me.

I always saw running as an effortless movement in which fatigue played no part. There was no shortage of breath, no stitch, no cramping of muscle, no exhaustion. It was effortless like the gliding of a bird and brought with it a sensation of flight.

I had been hallucinating a lot lately, the effect of the many drugs I was taking. I was also weakened by high temperatures that came with the nightly sweats that drained my strength to a point where I would soon be unable to cling to the wet, streaming rock in the crevices of which my fingers clutched a fragile grip. I knew that once I was torn loose I would go hurtling down into depths that were now hidden in mist, an airless place where I would gasp convulsively for the air I needed.

There was little I could do to prevent myself slipping to the cliff's edge and falling over into the concealing mist; I could just lie motionless repeating over and over in my mind, 'Hang on! Hang on!' while minutes passed ... hours ... days ... a lifetime ...

But when my will failed me and I released my grip, I did not always slip to terrifying annihilation. Sometimes I would shoot away from the cliff's edge and go soaring like an eagle. These were wonderful moments since each experience introduced me to a state I had never known before.

In these periods of revelation and enchantment I glided, I flew, I came down a steep ski run whooping with joy. The fact that all these experiences were new, experiences of which I had no memories whatsoever, did not take from them conviction they were real. They were dream experiences born of desire and a hunger to enjoy that, which in a short time, would be lost to me for ever.

The euphoria of running had never been mine and it seemed incredible to me that I should now be running side by side with a boy who exemplified the beauty of running divorced from all effort. It was running in the abstract and there were moments when I saw it as a painting, as curved lines of merging and converging white, vibrant yet still retaining a feeling of embracement. It was love I felt as I looked at this picture of my experience, love of sight and sound and fragrance – love of life itself, of Man.

It's been in my drawer for twenty-five years. I've never known what to do with it, so I've done nothing. Now, with my own life growing longer and the inevitable end approaching, I give it to the world.