

THE SERPENT'S TEETH
TWO PLAYS

DANIEL KEENE



Currency Press, Sydney



Contents

THE SERPENT'S TEETH

Citizens	1
Soldiers	27

CITIZENS

*... truly what is my faith
except a stubborn voice
casting out its shining length to where I walk alone
sick and afraid and unable to accept defeat
singing as I was born to*

from *Ode to Walt Whitman*
by Alison Croggon

CHARACTERS

RASID

TARIQ

HAYAH

BASIM

HABIB

SAFA

QASIM

KAMIL

YUSUF

INAS

SAMIRAH

AZIZ

LAYLA

ONE

Noon.

Pale earth and stone.

Rubble.

A high concrete wall.

A dusty path at the base of the wall.

Vast, clear sky.

Stillness.

Silence.

An old man (RASID) enters.

He pushes a wheelbarrow.

Standing in the wheelbarrow, its roots wrapped in damp hessian, a young olive tree.

A young boy of about ten (TARIQ) walks beside RASID.

RASID stops and lowers the wheelbarrow about half way across the stage.

RASID: We'll stop. We have time. Is there any water left?

TARIQ takes a large plastic bottle of water from the wheelbarrow and hands it to RASID, who drinks. TARIQ watches him.

RASID steps from between the shafts of the wheelbarrow and sits on a rock by the side of the path. He hands the bottle to TARIQ.

You should drink as well. Just a little. We have a long way to go. There'll be plenty of water at the grove. And something to eat, I'm sure. They'll know how far we've come.

TARIQ only takes a sip from the bottle. He puts it back in the wheelbarrow.

I'll rest a while. We don't have to rush. We have to get back by nightfall. But there's time for a little rest.

TARIQ stands between the shafts and tries to lift the wheelbarrow.

No... it's too heavy for you... be careful...

TARIQ struggles to keep the wheelbarrow balanced; it's on the point of tipping over. RASID quickly gets to his feet and rights the wheelbarrow.

Put it down! It's too heavy for you!

TARIQ drops the wheelbarrow and quickly steps away from it.

The tree weighs twice as much as you... the earth around the roots is damp... that's what makes it so heavy.

TARIQ stands staring at his feet. RASID approaches him and puts his arm around his shoulder.

It's alright, Tariq, the tree isn't hurt.

TARIQ doesn't move or respond.

It's a fine tree, isn't it? I made sure to choose a very good one. Next year it will bear fruit. Maybe not much. But in a few years... well, if it's cared for properly... imagine the new olives hanging among the leaves.

TARIQ glances briefly at the tree.

Don't worry, Tariq, one day you'll be strong enough to lift a tree like this... when I'm too weak to lift one. But we have to get some meat on your bones! Look how skinny you are! You're like a blade of tall grass.

He pats TARIQ's cheek.

Get me some more water. I've got such a thirst today...

TARIQ fetches the water and gives it to RASID, who sits down again. TARIQ sits beside him. RASID drinks, then hands the bottle to TARIQ.

Maybe we should have started out earlier. I didn't wake up until the sun was high. If we'd left while it was still dark we'd be almost there now. I sleep too much these days. I fall asleep in the middle of the afternoon. Why do I need so much sleep? I hardly work any more. Your father and mother do almost everything. I've been put

out to pasture! Your mother was so against this whole... expedition. But Tariq will come with me, I told her. I'll have my best helper. Drink, Tariq, drink a little more. Your mother's a good woman, only she worries too much. But who can blame her? The way things are these days... what is there to do but worry? Put a little water on your face, Tariq, make a little cup with your hand. It's alright, we have enough.

TARIQ splashes his face with a little water.

One day we'll go to the sea. I'll teach you how to swim.

TARIQ points at the wall.

Yes, I know. The sea is on the other side. We'll have to find another sea... or go the long way around that... thing.

TARIQ points off into the distance.

Yes, I know. It's very long. But it must end somewhere.

TARIQ hands the bottle back to RASID, who also splashes his face.

That's good, that's very good. When I was your age my family lived not far from the sea. I'd swim almost every day. I'd run away from school to go swimming. I was no good at school, it made me miserable, but in the sea... I felt so happy. Once, Tariq, once there were no happier times. There was no need to look back, to remember. The happy time was the one you were living in. No time before had been better and the future... well, who thought about the future? Now everyone looks into their past to find their happiness and no-one dares to imagine the future... but once, it's true, there were no happier times.

RASID takes a small drink from the bottle and hands it back to TARIQ.

Let's get moving, before I talk any more. Sleep and talk, that's all I'm good for.

TARIQ puts the bottle in the wheelbarrow. RASID stands between the shafts and lifts.

SOLDIERS

A REQUIEM

*Their souls became cold
and their wings fell slack.*

Sappho

*Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more.
Never, never, never, never, never!*

Shakespeare
King Lear, Act 5, Scene 3

CHARACTERS

TOM LEWIS, 60

JIM LEWIS, his son, 27

SAM LEWIS, his son, 25

JACK LEWIS, his grandson, 10

BILL LEWIS, his brother, 65

Tom is waiting for the return of the body of his eldest son, Steve, who was 32 when he died. Jack is Steve's son. Steve's wife, Sarah, has refused to be present at the return of her husband's body.

ROBERT HOLMAN, 45

MARTIN HOLMAN, his nephew, 23

Robert is waiting for the return of the body of his son, David, who was 21 when he died.

EVE MELLICK, 35

HELEN SIMON, 30

Eve is waiting for the body of her brother, Peter, who was 28 when he died; Helen was Peter's long-term partner.

CATHERINE PAVIC, 50

Catherine is waiting for the return of the body of her son, Rik, who was 23 when he died.

JOHN BLACK, 45

ALICE BLACK, 35, his sister

EMILY BLACK, his sister-in-law, 25

John is waiting for the return of the body of his brother, Alan (Emily's husband), who was 30 when he died.

COSTUMES

The men, including Jack Lewis, wear dark suits and ties; the women wear dark, sober dresses.

Catherine Pavic wears a long black shawl.

Emily Black and Robert Holman wear dark sunglasses.

The cavernous interior of a military aircraft hangar.

Mid afternoon.

We see the hangar's interior at a diagonal: on the left, at an acute angle, we can see part of the huge open doorway of the hangar. Outside, the grey tarmac shimmers beneath a sky of brilliant blue.

The back of the stage is dominated by the high, steel wall of the hangar; in the centre of this wall is a set of double doors; there is a window in the top half of each door.

A number of wooden packing cases of various sizes and several oil drums are lined up against the wall.

The rest of the stage is empty.

Sunlight slants in from the hangar's door, creating a large, bright patch of light on the floor.

Silence.

After a pause, BILL's face appears at one of the doors, peering into the hangar. He enters. As he quietly closes the door behind him, he checks to see that no-one has followed him. He looks around the hangar, making his way to a low packing crate on which he sits. He puts his hands on his knees and sits staring at them. He sits perfectly still. After a long pause, he hunches his shoulders and slowly bends forward. He makes no sound at first, but gradually a sound begins to escape him: he is wracked with uncontrollable sobs. He covers his face with his hands.

JACK appears at the hangar doorway. He carries a toy aeroplane. Seeing BILL, he pauses, then takes a few cautious steps towards him. BILL is unaware of JACK's presence. JACK stops, still some way from BILL. He stands watching him for a long moment, then suddenly turns and quickly leaves the hangar.

BILL's sobbing begins to subside. He takes a deep breath, takes a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his face. He stands up, straightens his clothes, runs his hand through his hair, puts the handkerchief back in his pocket. He walks back towards the double doors, looks out through

the window, takes another deep breath and leaves, closing the door quietly behind him.

Silence.

After a pause, TOM enters through the hangar doorway, mopping his forehead with a white handkerchief. JACK holds TOM's other hand. Jack's toy aeroplane is tucked under his arm. As they enter JACK looks around the hangar, searching for BILL.

TOM: I just need to get out of the sun for a while, Jack. And away from all those bloody uniforms. I've never seen so many medals. They'd weigh a man down, wouldn't they? Pretty, though, very pretty, the coloured ribbons and everything shining. We'll sit down here for a minute.

They sit on one of the crates.

You don't want to be a soldier, do you, Jack?

JACK *shrugs*.

I know your mum... your mum doesn't want you to be. Your dad wasn't sure. He liked the life, but he wasn't sure it was the kind of thing for you. But you'll make up your own mind, one day.

Pause.

You haven't said much today.

JACK *shakes his head*.

That's alright, if you don't feel like talking you don't have to.

JACK: Nope.

Pause.

TOM: When your dad was your age he was a real blabbermouth. You couldn't shut him up. Yak, yak, yak. Half the time I didn't know what he was talking about. He talked about everything under the sun. He was a great collector of facts. He remembered things. Usually they were completely unimportant things. He knew the average length of a magpie's beak and the weight of a twenty-cent piece. But do you think he could remember his seven times tables?

JACK *shakes his head.*

Of course he couldn't.

Pause.

You'll have to be brave today, Jack.

JACK *nods.*

We'll all have to be as brave as we can. Like your father was.

Pause.

He was a good son. He told me that you were too. He was very proud of you, like I was of him.

He draws JACK close to his side.

JACK *buries his face in TOM's shoulder; TOM wraps his arms around him.*

Fade to darkness.

In the darkness:

EVE: I'm not quite ready yet... to be with all those people.

HELEN: That's okay.

EVE: I've been dreading today, I really have.

HELEN: I've tried not to think about it.

Lights rise on EVE and HELEN.

EVE: Yes, you can think about things too much sometimes.

Pause.

Do you think... I mean... will I be allowed to see Peter's body?

HELEN: I don't know, Eve.

EVE: I mean, I'm his sister and I can ask... to see him, can't I?

Pause.

HELEN: I don't know what there is to see.

Long pause.

EVE: All the funeral arrangements are made.

HELEN: I know.