



GRAHAM TUGWELL

SOME OF THEM MAKE THE SCARE-AWAY SHAPE

Some of them never make it out.
And those that do.
Some only by the knife or rope.
And those that fail, or those that can't.
Some scatter to the end of the world.
And those that still won't break away—those who feel the need to warn—
Some stay.
Some of them make the Scare-Away Shape.

It rises on the roundabout, thirty or forty feet at least, a rounded, spiked uncertain shape, made pale benign by distance. It steps up off the horizon sudden; it can be sighted for a mile around and from even further down the slanted galleries of approaching roads.

Cars and busses spill towards it, wheel around its base, their windows filled with eyes turned upwards, windows clouded by open mouths.

Who started it? they say, Who first piled wood upon stone?

No matter.

The Scare-Away Shape has always been here.

It is an ongoing thing, endlessly becoming.

Forever built and rebuilt.

Some days it could almost be a fly.

Some days a horse.

Some days it looks like a long, long dog, curled in upon itself.

Some days it looks like nothing at all.

Each builder is building to a different plan, a different pattern.

They're building what each remembers, what they saw in the days before.

But always is it built with the one message in mind:

Stay away.

Turn back.

Terrible things have come into the world.

A failure made in glass and wood and tile, abandoned tyres and tar-soaked rags and all those flying buttresses of corrugated tin, they could be wings or feelers or something dangling down a spine.

Something epiglottal.

No matter.

It is gone when the next high wind blows.

The whole side tears itself away and must be built again.

Look: today, from this angle, it is a woman, on her back with legs apart and something blunt and mouthless crowning—there is her head thrown back over traffic, cables and tubes her curtain of hair, emptying stomach a vaulted apse of brass and settled granite.

Two-toned timber for her gritted teeth.

High on a scurf of scaffolding they're working on her bended knees, shaping the left until it's the mirror image of the right. Wood and plastic soften and shape under the plane, under the file.

The plan and pattern slips.

By nightfall she has gained a set of hooves.

They've given the birthing thing a beak.

Morning discovers the horse, swallowing the bird.

Terrible things have come into the world.

In brushy field and straggling hedge, in a ring around the roundabout, there are stands of tents in twos and threes, there are quilts and blankets pegged wide-legged over washing lines, there are plastic pockets and packaging, lining hollows clawed from clay. Inside all these are quilts and sleeping bags, holding water better than they hold warmth.

A parody of a town.

Clothing and refuse amongst the leaves and traipsed into the mucky ground, there are stained pots and pans and pieces of plate in piles.

A plastic bucket half-filled with filth a pace away between the trees.

A picture, bleached from sun and curled from damp, held to the side of a tent with a peg—two men laughing in a memory.

From a branch hangs a mirror on a string, beneath a cup with balding toothbrush.

A pale and dismal fire trickles an unwavering line of smoke; settling a border in air.

Between here and everywhere else.

And for the people who try to make a home of here there is nothing but the work.
There is nothing but the warning.

Out they come from hedge and bush; flagging down cars, stepping in the way of
busses, chasing the few passers-by, hooking a finger into collar, grabbing a sleeve and
holding on, holding on as if to life.

Pointing, jabbing a finger into the distance, down the avenue of road.

"The town," they say and scream: "Don't go into the town."

Spittle between clenched teeth.

Pin-prick pupils.

"Don't go into the town!"

But when asked, when challenged, they are unable to answer why, never able to
answer why—

They brought the feeling with them, not the sense; it's something words can't fit
around. They've left too much of themselves behind.

The fact of it; the meaning is gone.

The explanation is elsewhere.

Somewhere at the end of all those avenues of road.

But still they hold on until their knuckles become marble. "It's close," they say,
tightening their hold, moving their mouth closer to whisper, "Watch the trees... you can
tell by the colour..."

"The further in," they say, "The whiter."

"At the centre, even at the height of summer."

"Every colour of white— the colour of bone, of milk, of chalk, of teeth—"

"And at the centre of them..."

"At the centre—"

That hunted look.

"Please."

"You have to listen to us."

"Don't go into the town."

The old man works for weeks upon the sign:

APPLES ARE THE GRAPES OF DAY

But stop to ask what those words mean and he will look at you.

"Apples," he will say, and point, "are the grapes of day."

And he will nod.

And he will smile.

And a fingernail will run under the words.

"See?"

He will hunch again.

Turning back to shape the letters.

Serif.

Sans-serif.

Serif.

Until there's barely any wood left to cut.

People travel out of their way to see the Scare-Away Shape.

"Different every time," they say.

"It's like—ah."

"One of those magic eye pictures."

"Ah."

They park their cars nearby and watch it being made, peering up at the builders swarming over flank and thorax, teams of them, gaunt faced, dirty-limbed, dressed in ripped and filthy clothing. Thin, they can barely carry the material and must rest for minutes on the verge before rising to lug and lift again.

They fight, listlessly flailing, over who gets to have their load lessened by the single wonky trolley.

Loud-shirted tourists gaze up through sunshades as the lower beak is bolted on, as, from a hundred struts and overhangs a hundred signs are strung:

APPLES ARE THE GRAPES OF DAY

APPLES ARE THE GRAPES OF DAY

"Gee," they breathe.

"Gee."

"Buddy, can I ask you?"

"Ah?"

"What is it?"

"What is it supposed to be?"

"Is it like a religious thing?"

"Like, a Celtic thing?"

Heads shake no.

No, nothing that safe and stable.

Fingers point towards the town.

(Always, poised to point towards the town.)

And the visitors take photographs.

"Budge in a little there," says the loud-shirt framing the shot.

And they shuffle, sheepish into a pleasing arrangement, stood before the shape they spend their lives failing to make.

"And point towards the town," is a voice from behind the camera.

They point in pose.

Click.

"That's swell."

"Honey, look."

She looks, and she's peroxide and a smack of gum, saying

"Oh, that's super."

Click.

And when one of them runs at the tourists, screaming

"No!"

"You should be scared! You should be scared!"

"You're missing the point!"

But they just take a photo of him as well.

Click.

"Lovely," they say, "Take care now," and they get in their car and they drive away.

Down the road.

Into the town.

Saying:

"Look at the trees, hun."

"Look at the color of the trees."

"Gee."

One of them introduces himself as Proinsias McGuinness.

You think you will have to buy his words with cigarettes

But he is eager to talk to you.

You sit on the curb and watch the Shape remake itself.

"Back there," he says, and he points that old familiar point, "I was a joke... I was a..."

His hand waves in the air, trying to find the right word. He screws up his face with the pain of it.

"Character? Is that the right word?"

He holds onto the front of your shirt.

"The right word? It is isn't it?"

And you nod your head, nod your head until he lets go.

"They had a nickname for me," he gently says.

(But he won't tell you, even when you ask a second time)

"I could only act in certain ways."

"I was a bully."

He spits the word.

"And I was always on the outside of things. Waiting, on the edge of happening. Watching other people be more than me."

He lifts a hand to scratch a butchered ear, working with fingertips the red fringe where a ring or stud was pulled away.

"It was no life," he says softly, "And in the end I had enough."

Eyes on you.

"I had a knife."

"But they took that away from me before I could..."

"Because they wouldn't..."

"They wouldn't let me keep my butterflies."

He laughs once, unmirthful bark.

"It wasn't right for the part."

And you ask because you want to know.

Who are they?

Who are the people he's talking about?

He looks for a moment hunted.

Then sudden flaps his arms and screams:

"KEE-HAW!"

And holds his face in crossing hands, holds his face and laughs, his swollen pink eyes bleeding tears.

And that is how you leave him.

In remnants of a tracksuit.
Crouched upon the curb.
Repeating, softly, to himself.
“Kee-haw...”
“Kee-haw...”

A fight has broken out amongst the builders.
Their disagreement over what they’re building has boiled over. It happens every now
and then, when they have the strength to spare.
They come to blows.
A hammer to the mouth leaves one man sprawling.
His teeth are scrabbled for in the muck; they could be useful.
Decorations.
And with that it is decided.
For today, at least, the Scare-Away Shape will be a fly.
Those who disagree sit in sullenness about pale warmthless fires, passing a tin of
passable tea, and watch as hooks are thrown high on the structure to pull down hoof and
feather.
Tumble a tide of splinters and brick on the roadside.
It is picked through lovingly; what can be salvaged is salvaged.
They build their fly—
They give it bright eyes of glass and iron.
They give it pendulous halteres of tile.
They give it the legs of a daddy-long-legs.
And no matter what words they decide to write in the gap between abdomen and
thorax, they come out the same way as always:
APPLES ARE THE GRAPES OF DAY

Go amongst the builders and listen to their voices, crowding now to be heard.
And they try to put words around it, mouths agape in goldfish gulp
“Behind us.”
And they point.
(Always pointing, so sick of the sight of those fingertips)
“Back in the town we had lives.”

"There was something like a life back there."

"But they wore masks..."

"It happened to the children first..."

And all the builders agree something was at work.

But some of them say it was in the hills.

Others say the reservoir.

And fingers point out to the bog.

And to the woods.

And some even say it's everywhere.

It's in the water.

It starts and ends in water.

Ask: Where is it?

What's the name of the town?

They can name all the surrounding places

Ratoath, Navan, Trim, Dunboyne...

But they can't say the name of the place itself— simply, the syllables refuse to line up.

They can't name the place.

Escaping it, it has escaped them in turn.

So instead they sketch:

Pen point almost piercing

"Here are the graveyards, old and new."

"Here are the schools."

"The roads go this way—"

"Here."

"And here."

"And here are the hills and this across here, all of this is bogland."

"And here is the crannóg."

"See?"

"See?"

But something has been done to them.

Something has been taken away, cleaned out and replaced with nonsense.

All they've done is draw a tiny little circle in the centre of the page.

"See?"

The pen point goes through.

“This is as far as I’ve gotten,” says a dark girl.

“I wouldn’t let the town contain me.”

“I wanted to see the world.”

“And now I’ve seen too much of it.”

“Seen far too much forever.”

She looks at you.

There is nothing to her; a slip of white, long black hair and eyes rimmed in moons of grey. So easily broken.

“Will you bring us food?”

She takes your arm.

“Will you bring us clothes?”

And you say to her you will try.

She nods her head softly, she’s heard it before.

She leaves you without looking back, stopping to crouch amidst lumber, looking for planks they can use.

This is what it is today:

By slanted casements of angular chalk bressummer caveats line the gap between rib and oxter, a jamboree of cornices and coping, while further up plastic elbows of glittering pink forget themselves in brackets of suede.

Down the wattles of the throat, a frenzied flushwork of copper piping, arcing outwards cinching in, ending in pilasters framing fabric fetlocks and hooves of compacted straw.

The thing; rimmed in alabaster maquettes of itself.

They’ve built up the crotch, alternating layers of slate and brass; they’ve made for it a tiny pinafore of thatch, scant modesty lent to its parting bulge.

Slants of gravel delimit the horse’s head, jaws ending in a mortar mix of curdling lime, in jointed slabs and slats of slurry laminated, while shells of polyurethane are eyelids and an upper lip held up and out by rods of polished pernambuco.

It is a thing in lust, in pain.

Beneath two slender oaken cooling towers, in artless arcs an exoskeleton of glass holds up the intersection of boy and horse and fly.

That is what it is today.

Tomorrow it will be nothing like that.

A storm comes across by way of Trim, thunderous, bulbous in the dark; a bulge of sky is coming down, making the world entire bend and break away.

The Shape has been made a dog-faced crane, spreading wings that catch the wind; it stands on legs of soldered brass, thin and hollow things, so ready to seize a chance to break—

With a roar of dying masonry, of metal bent in bad distress, the Shape gives way and staggers down the roadway and finally, finally—

In a noise that shatters all creation.

It comes down upon the campsite.

In blankets of choking dark there is pandemonium.

Thunder and torment.

The sound of voices.

The soft settling crash as people are pulled out from underneath.

A desperate fifteen minutes follows.

Cries: “Is anyone hurt?”

“Is anyone hurt?”

The girl in black is badly shook but otherwise unhurt.

McGuinness has lost a fingertip.

And the old man stumbles through wreckage:

“My signs. Oh god no. My signs.”

He staggers on, calling for his crafted babies.

But they are safe, all the builders are safe, and the night is filled with the laughter of relief.

They pull as many blankets and tents from the rubble as they can find and try to get some sleep. Those without must curl on dusted, gritted grass.

It is not until the first light of morning that they find the blind boy in the wreckage, bent and twisted where he had knelt to pray. One of those who’d left their names back in the town; they’d fed him even though he could not build.

And looking down at him they think;

What a warning he will make.

Up he goes on poles and sticks, a garland of cambersennies around his neck, cheek pierced with a peg of lead.

He dangles broken in the breeze.

Today he rises from the rear.
Today he sits in the horse's mouth.
Today he is Buddha-bent in the lap of a dog.
In a month he's come to pieces.
Parts of him are everywhere.
Their usefulness outlasts his own.

And from time to time the people of the town come down, trooping up the avenues of road. The foremost are ranked in denim and black and wearing masks and wielding sticks.

Crying to each other "Kee-haw!"
Bringing fire and their children with them.
The builders flee.

The townspeople tear down the Shape with hooks and ropes and burn the wood and break the stones, scattering the flies and horses and smashing to splinters APPLES ARE THE GRAPES OF DAY.

Some of the townspeople have brought hampers and make a day of it, feasting in the fields while the work of months goes up in flames behind them.

A band may set up in the shade and play, and children may dance, and couples waltz, depending on the weather, on whether the roads can be closed off.

It goes on for an entire day and the townsfolk are watched from field and hedge by the ones who managed to leave.

They look at the food.
And the clothing.
The bright and happy faces.
Memories may stir and die.
And the townspeople watch the builders in return.
A child may wave at a missing uncle.
A mother may smile at her second-favourite son.

But save for the breaking of the Shape there is never any violence and when the work is over, the townspeople return home, singing and laughing and holding perhaps, a beautiful piece of wreckage.

A wooden crown.
A scarlet stone.

A lovely handmade sign bearing that constant inscription APPLES ARE THE GRAPES OF DAY.

Only when the townspeople are gone do the builders emerge, the remains of the Shape tidied, gathered away to be sorted, the roads cleared lane by lane. By dawn again the sound of hammering and sawing and from wreck and ruin the Scare-Away Shape being made again.

Coming up against the sky.

Saying to all:

Stay away.

Turn back.

Now it looks like a man with a face of a bird.

Now it looks like a man melting into a horse.

Now a woodlouse; anything red the ruby in its belly.

Yesterday it was—

Today it is—

Tomorrow it will be—

Always changing.

Always the same.

Terrible things have come into the world.