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Summer on The Swan River, 1953

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WA Museum

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Summer on The Swan River, 1953

Lawrence A. Smith (Western Australian Museum)

I'm sitting on the deck of a sprawling riverside home
bolstered by a limestone cliff and terraced gardens.
Four grassed levels, lowest the breakwater, wriggling its toes in the water.
Vista over Melville Water views to Blackwall Reach and Point Walter.
Always something to watch from my armchair front verandah,
kids doing "bombies" off the reach, stick-men digging bait on the spit,
people, dolphins, shags, fishing.

I watch "Islander" slide by, Rottnest bound,
scalloped canvass awning rippling in a pesky easterly breeze;
old "Zephyr" just behind, puffing, *her* goal, Garden Island.
From the spit, a dog-startled Pelican levitates, elevates,
climbs the easterly breeze, assumes its imperious air
while I heave flabbergasted fish up to "our" jetty with splintered planks.
Flappy, slippery, blue gills dilated, gasping for water.

Every day explore the boat shed.
Peeling paint, jumbled rope, block and tackle, gaffs, lumps of cork,
mouldy canvas, smell of seagull shit hanging like icing from the rafters.
Slosh, slap gurgle, I practise single rollick sculling from the dinghy's transom.
From the window of the boatshed a view of Greenplace: my vision of Arcadia.
Mystic columned house half hidden by weeping willows.
Stern order: *don't talk to anyone there.*

When the tide is low we putter down to the sugar works and plumb mussels with
our feet, a bucket of fruit, to take home and pickle for that special treat.
In the cool of the evening we troll for Tailor and after sundown,
from the verandah, watch prawners on the spit at Point Walter, the

processional pairs of synchronised tilly lamps occasionally interrupted by a muffled kerfuffle as a light vanishes and inaudible expletives reach our ears. We suspect they now have a prawnless bucket.

What an idyll.

I've studied clouds, terns sitting on the wind, eyes down, alert,
pods of dolphins, backs arcing waves,
found and cleaned tiny fossil shells
from the cliff behind the house
and wondered why the shag takes so long to dry its wings.