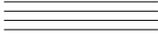


T A M Á M S H U D ; O R ,  
S E C R E T S I N T H E S A N D



A U S T I N A L L E N

*Australia's most famous cold case is the mystery of "Somerton Man," found dead on Somerton Beach, Adelaide, in 1948. Coroners could not identify the toxin that killed him, police could not prove or rule out foul play, and cryptographers could not solve the code that surfaced in connection with the case. The man's name and origins remain unknown.*

"WRGOABABD / ~~MLHAG~~ / WTBIMPANETP / MLIABOAIQC / ITTMTSAMSTGAB"

I. *The Write-Up*

It's done. The tide is calm. The coast is clear  
for miles around the man the dawn finds here,  
back to a wall, feet pointing toward the sea.  
The first inquiring fly crawls in his ear.

\* \* \*

Items in his possession: used bus ticket,  
unused rail ticket, matches, cigarette packet  
(labeled a different brand than what's inside),  
chewing gum, comb – and in a hidden pocket,

found four months afterward, a sort of note  
torn from a book. The words the poet wrote  
to close *The Rubáiyát*: a Persian phrase  
ineptly typing fingers soon misquote,

for some newspaper write-up, as *Taman  
Shud*. The word's *Tamám*. Errors will spawn  
errors: the standard label for the case  
becomes *Taman Shud* and the case goes on.

No solid leads. Some theories disproved,  
 but none confirmed. No name, no one he loved  
 or hated, no official cause of death.  
 No wallet. Labels on his clothes removed.

\*   \*   \*

November thirtieth, 1948:  
 a man runs toward his train, which doesn't wait.  
 He checks his bag and takes a bus instead,  
 finds the address, knocks on the door – too late.

She's gone. He shivers, wanders toward the sand.  
 En route he marks the slim book in his hand  
 with her unlisted number and a code,  
 carries it past the glare of parked cars, and,  
 spying a rolled-down window, stops to throw it  
 onto the seat. Someone will find it, show it  
 to the police – not right away, of course. . .  
 The book's *The Rubáiyát*, but he's no poet.

The code – well, it's a sort of inside joke.  
 Down at the shore he strolls, a fortyish bloke,  
 hair graying. Buys a pasty. Hurls some stones.  
 Leans on the seawall and lights up a smoke.

The poison, mingling with the cigarette's  
 familiar poisons, fills his lungs. He lets  
 himself relax, experiencing – what?  
 A touch of dizziness, but no regrets.

No one he knows will genuinely grieve.  
 He carries, like a last trick up his sleeve,  
 the torn-out fragment of *The Rubáiyát*  
 in his fob pocket. He does not believe

in prayer – prays anyway, to all the gods.  
 A man in his profession plays the odds.  
 He's heard of Pascal's wager, bets on Yes,  
 but knows that No awaits him when he nods.

## II. *The Agent*

No one can place him, so he's quickly cast  
 as national myth, a creature of this vast  
 unlikely island-country-continent  
 proud of its oddball fauna, outlaw past,

and shining harbors: Sydney, Melbourne, Perth.  
 For any misfit dreaming of rebirth  
 into a pleasant anonymity  
 or interested in falling off the earth,

Australia holds a certain fascination . . .  
 The bag the man left at the railway station  
 contains mislabeled clothes, some tools, a knife.  
 Theorists whisper *spy* – but for which nation?

The Cold War's under way. The town lies near  
 a missile test site, built the previous year.  
 When rumor has it that the world might end,  
 even the world's edge feels the thrill of fear.

Anyone, everyone might be a spy –  
 your pleasant-looking neighbors, you and I,  
 chain-smoking strangers who give up the ghost  
 at night, on lonely shores, and who knows why?

\*   \*   \*

He has time to consider what he's done.  
 This, then – this beach, this wall at Somerton –  
 this was the plan? Will she be satisfied?  
 Down from the foothills in the straggling sun  
 a perfume drifts: astringent, eucalyptic.  
 And was it such a pleasure, being cryptic?  
 Everyone knows the world ends when you go  
 (that's why the old grow so apocalyptic) –

why not scream out at last? Why all the lying,  
 hedging, and hinting? Why the harebrained spying,  
 ciphering, scheming, right until the end?  
 And why this shadiest evasion, dying?

Couldn't they both have wound up like those saps  
 who draw elaborately misleading maps  
 around their buried hearts; dig moats, lay traps;  
 then fall precisely in each other's laps?

Maybe he ought to grab a stick and write  
 all of their secrets in the sand, for spite . . .  
 No. No regrets, no rage. He owes himself.  
 Besides, his arm's numb and there's not much light.

Slowly they vaporize: home country, name,  
 affairs, affiliations, motives, blame . . .  
 And if it's true about her infant son,  
 will *he* appreciate the hunt – the game?

\*   \*   \*

. . . Or was it murder? Plot the stratagem –  
 dream up a theory till you're there with them  
 behind the brass rail of a seaside bar,  
 behind his eyes as they trail up her hem,  
 inside his head as it swells up with booze.  
 Argue about whose country's worse than whose;  
 feel your limbs start to ache – the walls, her words  
 close in: “The kind of war where both sides lose” –

then watch her go, this bombshell local nurse  
 turned mild-eyed agent of the universe  
 who pays the tab and leaves you sorting out  
 what's guile, what's innocence, and which is worse . . .

And when, at last, polite detectives ring  
 her number, call her in for questioning,  
 wheel out the body and peel back the sheet,  
 she stares, turns pale – and doesn't know a thing.

III. *My Life Is All But Over, And I Am Quite Content*

The plot spins outward . . . theories spawn and thrive  
far longer than the dead man was alive.

The *Rubáiyát* she gave a soldier friend –  
the one found on a corpse in '45,

the brother of a barrister – the trails  
diverging, fading out – false tips, tall tales –  
pins spreading like a pox across the map –  
aircraft from Russia, trains from New South Wales –

how deep does this thing go? And as one delves,  
will one find subterranean hives of elves,  
long-vanished continents, the face of God,  
but never solve this man? Is he ourselves?

Is this a station gate through which we pass  
like tourists, separately and yet en masse –  
a guise we're all someday assigned to wear,  
like “wave” or “grain of sand” or “blade of grass”?

Will we restage his triumph: don the mask,  
drop the prop cigarette, lie back and bask  
in silence . . . Or was this his act alone?  
Is it a kind of sabotage to ask?

Time warp, black hole – whatever trick he played,  
whichever flaw he crawled through to evade  
the whole regime – outwit the scheme of things –  
should we withdraw and let him lounge in shade,

in sand, in mystery, cool grains of which  
swirl through his final scene, invade and itch  
the secret regions of the gathering crowd  
that frowns, “Who *is* he – poor son of a bitch”?

IV. *World's End*

He never planned to stir up this much fuss.  
 He took a solitary trip by bus,  
 swallowed or smoked a toxin from a plant,  
 followed a route available to us.

The case goes on and will be laid to rest.  
 Nothing was ever proven or confessed,  
 yet there he lies, a few feet underfoot.  
 Reality goes nowhere and knows best

and, badgered long enough, stammers a clue.  
 "A hair perhaps divides the false and true" –  
 seize that hair! Tweeze it, freeze it in the lab,  
 demand it tell you on whose head it grew –

haul in the bones – probe with unflinching touch –  
 pluck something – one grain – from the hand's stiff clutch –  
 decrypt the grin. Snoop! Pry! Has any true  
 spy ever died because he knew too much?

\* \* \*

The poison's slow. He tries to smile. *Tamám*  
*Shud*: "It is done." At least he'll dodge the Bomb,  
 the worst of love . . . his stomach feels like hell  
 and all along the shore the earth breathes calm.

He knows, he knows – her son, her soldier friend,  
 her fiancé . . . that's why he had to send  
 so chaste and intimate a code. His life's  
 a scratched-out error, but this careful end

will be the one clear fact for which it vouches.  
 Against the wall at Somerton he slouches.  
 Across the continent fantastic beasts  
 tuck the most marvelous secrets in their pouches –

he knows – he senses, like a lifelong ranger,  
 some transformation in the land – some danger  
 lacing the wind . . . he opens his eyes wide  
 and greets the ocean like a total stranger.