

Story for performance #983
webcast from Sydney at 07:34PM, 28 Feb 08



Source: AFP, 'Turkey should end Kurdish incursion quickly, US says', *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 28/02/08.

Tags: death, animals, countryside, war
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A pair of lips floated over the battlefield like a big pink bird.

They pursed. They grimaced. They parted, pulled in a breath through to the sky behind, met again.

They pressed together, wrinkling up and whitening, and then down they dove. Like a dove.

The landscape was carpeted with bodies. They made up an exactly matching one-to-one scale map of the contours and undulations that lay beneath all those uniforms and weapons and letters home and energy bars and flesh. And this map fitted perfectly to the land beneath, like a mould.

The lips flew in low, banking and rolling, pulling up to get an image of the frozen-sea khaki waves of the dead, down for a close-up of an in-turned eye, a curve of cloth, a poppy badge of blood.

Something moved. The lips swooped in—where was it? Where? There!—and hovered above the gently heaving back of a man from one of the armies, or perhaps the other. Yes, alive. Definitely alive. And dragging himself in small shuddering increments over his enemies and buddies. His face was down, bumping and resting against armpits and boots and last month's haircuts as his journey progressed.

Somebody waved. A beetle, riding on the man's back like a remora on a Great White, like a Brahmin on an elephant. There was a piece of white chalk in one of its tiny chitinous fists, and this was the arm that it waved at the lips.

'Ee-loo!' the beetle called, 'You in bettle? I beetle!'

'Yes, yes, I see that, beetle. You're a beetle. No, I wasn't in the battle.'

'Ope.' Its antennae drooped. 'Ope. So you not survive, noop.'

'Well, I...'

But the beetle had turned its shiny black back to the lips. It was struggling with the chalk, drawing on the rough wool coat. Allowing for the folds and weft of the material, the lips could discern a horizontal line, then a shorter vertical dropped from the leftmost edge. From the end of the vertical, a curve, also dropping, belled in towards the right.

'Ah! Five!'

'Eps, ive,' said the beetle brightly, turning back to face the floating lips. 'Ive lyve.'

The lips sprang into a perfect circle. Blue sky behind. 'Five! Oh, no. And how many dead?'

'Mmp. Oant know—ewt owsans?'

'But you must count the dead. You must! To honour them!'

The beetle waggled his head.

'I measure quick.'

...

The lips flew fast away, scouting for more movement. They *would* find an unnumbered warm one, and go and get that bean counter, that insectivorous bureaucrat, and bring it over to number, and they'd find another and another and...

What was that? Over there! A flutter! An eyelid? A handkerchief over a mouth? Fly, fly!

The lips zoomed in towards a complicated structure, an arresting assemblage of limb and bone and metal. Nothing living there, surely. There! There it was again, next to that woman's stiff and splashed-red hand, palm-down upon a shoulder. Which of these—*who* of these—did the hand belong to? And the movement? Ah, a moth, a brown moth, well-dressed in a lab coat. The lips scooted in and observed. The moth took a

teeny-weeny tape measure out of the coat pocket, landed on the knuckle of the ring finger, and trip-trapped along the finger to the nail.

With its long, spiral shaped tongue sliding in and out of its mouthparts in concentration, the moth extended the tape and began to take readings around the base of the woman's hand's finger's nail. It started to murmur to itself as another pair of legs removed a notebook and a pencil from the other pocket, flipped the cover and started writing:

'Two-by-seven-dimple-three-tenths-bump-bump-polish-remnant-decline-to-four. Fair-to-middling.'

With a couple of elegant flaps, it had moved to the middle finger. The procedure was repeated, at the base of the nail, remarked upon and written down, and then, flap-flap, onto the pointer. The lips could see that the moth was working as efficiently and as fast as it could.

'A-hem. Excuse me?'

'Hold-on-I'm-busy-wait-2.34-seconds-nine-by-three-then-infection-then-seven eighths. Recommended.'

Flap-flap. Thumbnail. Tape and pencil poised, it swivelled its head towards the lips.

'Yes?'

'Um, I met a beetle before, he was numbering...'

'Brian.'

'Well, yes, Brian, and I was wondering what *your* job...'

'I'm inventory. I measure quick.'

...

Those lips! Those lips!

Those flying, flaming, burning red lips!

Flying fast, flying far, flying blind!

Finally they stop, quivering and sucking in air to the blue sky above and gusting it forward to the never-ending corpse pastures below. They flutter down, exhausted, to rest upon a pair of naked buttocks, refrigerated-chicken-cold.

And who is this, coming up over the bum's horizon towards the lips? A mighty millipede, as long as the lips are wide! A monstrous millipede, alongside whose armoured flanks the reflection of the lips bumps along each jointed section. The creature removes a stopwatch from its vest and forms itself into a curve so that the lips can see themselves entire.

'My darling loves!' it says, 'how fast you are! Sixty-seven kays per aitch. Whereas,' it sighs, 'the subjects, very slow. Number five. Seventeen mill per aitch. Peff!'

'Don't tell me,' wearily say the lips, 'you measure quick.'

'I measure quick. But, quick not everything. A good day!'

'A good day! A good day! This is a charnel factory! A Todd-country from the nightmares of a Sweeney! The dead outnumber the living one thousand to one!'

'A good day for us.'

The small air is filled with a million billion chitterings of joy. Mandibles champ and mouthparts twiddle. Non-existent serviettes are tucked in.

'Two four six eight.'

'Bog in.'

'Don't wait.'

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Bernard Caleo.