

# Writers Prize 2015

## Finalist Essays

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Prize for  
Literature  
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## A message from the Executive Director of the Melbourne Prize Trust

The Writers Prize 2015 is a new award offered this year to continue the tenth anniversary celebrations of the annual Melbourne Prize. It is offered together with the Melbourne Prize for Literature 2015, Best Writing Award 2015 and the Civic Choice Award 2015, which combined, is one of the most valuable literary awards in Australia.

This eBook, which has been produced with the generous support of Griffith Review, presents the top five essays in the Writers Prize, which are new works by published Victorian authors. The five have been selected by this year's judges: Mark Rubbo OAM of Readings, Wheeler Centre Director Michael Williams, Melbourne Writers Festival CEO Lisa Dempster and writer Craig Sherborn.

The Writers Prize is valued at \$20,000 and is supported by the Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund, in association with the Malcolm Robertson Foundation. The five finalists received \$2,000 each.



Please visit [www.melbourneprize.org](http://www.melbourneprize.org) for further information, and for the final announcement of the winners of the Melbourne Prize for Literature and Awards.

To showcase the Melbourne Prize for Literature 2015, and to continue public engagement with Victoria's abundant literary talent, the twenty finalists across all categories are exhibited at Federation Square between 9 and 23 November.

The public will have an opportunity to vote for the finalists in each category, including the Writers Prize, to win the \$6,000 Civic Choice Award. This can be done both online at [www.melbourneprize.org](http://www.melbourneprize.org) and in the free exhibition catalogue. Those who vote in the Civic Choice Award, supported by Readings and Hardie Grant Books, will go into the running to win an overnight stay at Sofitel Melbourne On Collins.

The Melbourne Prize for Literature and Awards support Melbourne's status as an international UNESCO City of Literature. The designation recognises the importance of literature to the city and the State, and the central role that writers have played, and continue to play, in the cultural life of our community.

With the support of all our partners and patrons this year, the Melbourne Prize Trust is delighted to provide opportunities for writers to demonstrate the importance of literature in a vibrant and creative community. We are proud to have the Victorian Government as a partner through its City of Literature initiative and the support of the City of Melbourne 2015 Arts Grants Program.

We would like to thank the literary sector and the many organisations, publications and websites that are immensely supportive in raising awareness of our program.

The Melbourne Prize Trust, established in 2004, is a not-for-profit cultural organisation providing financial support, career development and exhibition opportunities for Victorian writers, musicians and sculptors, via the annual Melbourne Prize.

Providing significant opportunities for three important cultural sectors, the annual Melbourne Prize runs in a three-year cycle, which includes the Melbourne Prize for Urban Sculpture (2014), the Melbourne Prize for Literature (2015) and the Melbourne Prize for Music (2016).

We would like to thank Griffith Review for their generous support of this eBook.

**Simon Warrender**  
**Executive Director & Founder**  
**Melbourne Prize Trust**

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# Places without poetry

Robyn Annear

IT IS A fact that among those people of European ancestry, one in six considers coriander to taste like soap. Roughly the same percentage will tell you that jazz sounds like shit. If genomics can explain a distaste for coriander, why not for syncopation?

To the jazz averse, Bennetts Lane has never been anything special, just one of 217 rights-of-way that atomise the city grid, and a dead end at that. The closure in June of its eponymous jazz club has consigned the lane to anonymity. But wait. Bennetts Lane still harbours a rarity: power pole 75843, one of the few wooden poles left in the Melbourne CBD. Another, its immediate neighbour, 85676, is encased in metal to head-height, while 75843 is bare wood, crying out for the laying on of hands.

Albert Camus, when first in Paris, felt oppressed by the weight of that city's literary and historical associations. 'What the heart craves, at certain moments,' he wrote, 'is places without poetry.'<sup>1</sup> Why, even in Melbourne the press of cultural appropriation – laneways, literature – can seem stifling to a sensitive soul. The kind of non-haunted spot craved by Camus is not far, however. An absurdist need only snuff out their Gauloises and top up their Myki: buses for Doncaster Shoppingtown (Route 201) can be hailed in Lonsdale Street, a two-minute slouch from Bennetts Lane.

That wooden pole is a descendant, if not an actual relic, of the branchy telegraph poles that thicketed one side of every Melbourne street for long enough that ‘telegraph pole’ became the generic name for any post holding wires aloft. By the time Frank Wilmot wrote his modernist ode, ‘To a Telegraph Pole’, in the late ’20s, the poles carried mostly telephone lines and, in the CBD, even those were being routed underground. Telegraph poles, then, were painted white, the better to see and skirt them in the comparatively unlit city at night.

‘To a Telegraph Pole’ begins with the evocation of a brash and unmistakable Melbourne setting (‘The lanes are full of young men swallowing beer... The swelling and failing moan of the street trams’) before a shift into hardwood innuendo cues the dissolve:

I saw you in your slender whiteness there;  
 I put my hand upon your painted side;  
 You quivered in a sudden mountain air  
 And I was back to where your friends abide.  
 The brown ferns sway,  
 And your long rustling fingers of soft green  
 Plash in the light and give the light away  
 Perfumed and tinted to small things I’ve seen  
 That seldom touch pure day.

Frank Wilmot wrote as ‘Furnley Maurice’, a pen-name he’d created in 1905 by splicing *Ferntree Gully* and *Beaumaris*, the mountain and coastal limits of his hometown. The fern gullies of the Dandenongs and Yarra Ranges had long been a favourite resort of the Melbourne intelligentsia, not just as an antidote to city living but as shrines to the sublime. Already, more than twenty years before he communed in verse with a telegraph pole, ‘these splendid hills’ were a part of who Wilmot was, who he’d made himself.

But before he was Furnley Maurice, Frank Wilmot wrote as himself. He sent his first poem to the *Bulletin* when he was eleven. It was rejected, as was his every submission to that journal until he donned his pseudonym. Furnley Maurice owed his advent to the *Bulletin*’s implacable rejections. That

journal's editor, AG Stephens, had a hate on Wilmot for giving a book of his a bad review, back when Wilmot was practically a child. Wilmot was sixteen when his first published poem appeared in *Tocsin*, a weekly leftist paper. That same year, 1897, he was a regular contributor to the literary journal *Lux*, of which his elder sister, Ada, was joint editor; a year later, the pair issued a journal of their own, the short-lived *Iago*. When he turned twenty, Wilmot bought a treadle printing press from a friend, for the sum of £1, on which he produced the *Microbe* out of a shed in his East Brunswick backyard. It ran for eight issues and its title page read:

The Microbe: A Journalette.  
 Which is Issued for Amusement and Sold for Threepence.  
 Contributions are solicited on all literary and interesting subjects.  
 There is no danger of any contributor being paid.

Wilmot's own Microbe Press published his first book of poems, *Some Verses*, in 1903. Among the faults enumerated by an anonymous reviewer in the Melbourne *Argus* were 'crudeness', 'puerility', 'halting rhythms' and 'grotesque strivings after originality'. A stanza from the poem 'Annunciation' puts a match to a chain of paper dolls and sets them dancing as they burn:

A girl has glanced and a girl has smiled,  
 And a girl has spoken low;  
 And dreams are rioting, and wild  
 The sluggard moments grow.

As much as to say: *Behold! the transformative power of a furtive erection*. The *Argus* critic singled out the refrain of 'Annunciation' ('Something is coming over me') as capturing 'that curious naiveté which is [Wilmot's] strong point', adding:

Had we dictatorial powers, we should condemn Mr Wilmot to five years of silence, in which to learn the proper handling of his tools. For this is a work of distinct promise; the author has a metrical inventiveness...and we think he has ideas.

True enough, Wilmot held his own, idea-wise, in the company of thinkers and radicals like Bernard O'Dowd, Vance and Nettie Palmer, Robert Croll and Louis Esson. When the war came, he would stand against conscription and vociferate in verse, 'How can we hate forever, having proved / All men are bright and brave and somewhere loved?' He was fined for refusing, as an anti-vaccinationist, to submit his children to the needle. Most often though, and certainly in public, Wilmot, when asked to share his views, would reply with a self-deprecating chuckle. (Everyone remarked on that chuckle, taking it as a sign of insightfulness and humility. From photographs, however, it's clear that Wilmot had an uncommonly small mouth, so anything more than a chuckle – a grin or a belly laugh – may have been out of the question.)

Of the everyday injustices and indignities that he witnessed in Melbourne during the Depression, and which found their way into his poems, he said, 'It sets you thinking, and it does not matter a damn what your politics may be.' Wilmot's politics were to the left, but of the *isms*, it was humanism that fitted him best. He grew up in Collingwood, Fitzroy, and Brunswick. His father was an ironmonger with a shop of his own, but had started his working life as an office boy at the printing firm of Clarson, Massina & Co. in the city. Clarson, Massina published the *Australian Journal* in which, at that time, Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* was making its first appearance in weekly instalments.<sup>2</sup> Clarke was no respecter of deadlines, and the task of extracting that week's chapter from its author as the *Journal* went to press sometimes fell to young Henry Wilmot. Once, in the public library reading room, the boy had to wait while Clarke, the sub-librarian there, pulled a book from the shelf and hastily cribbed a passage depicting a ship in raging seas to complete his manuscript.

Though Henry Wilmot later took up his father's trade of ironmongering (the selling of iron goods and general hardware), his interest in the printed word and the ideas behind it never dimmed. He was an early local exponent of socialism and a follower of William Morris and the cult of the artisan. Frank Wilmot's lifelong romance with the craft of printing, like his sharp eye for social inequities, came straight from his father. And the words, too. Frank, the precocious poet and, with his sister Ada, a publisher while still in his teens. Back when Frank was a lad, his father had instigated the Simpsons Road

Mutual Improvement Society,<sup>3</sup> presiding over public lectures and debates on topics such as ‘Republicanism v. Monarchy’ and ‘Is the Education Act a godless one?’ (A lecture on glass staining, finishing ahead of time, was followed by an impromptu debate on the subject of cremation.) An evening ‘conversazione’ held under the society’s auspices in the winter of 1886 featured, among other ‘delectations’, songs, recitations, mimicry and ventriloquism, demonstrations of electrical machines and telegraphic apparati, plus ‘the resuscitation of that very old but intellectual amusement’ *bouts-rimés* (literally, rhyming ends), or the rhyming game. Henry Wilmot explained the rules: contestants were to devise poems of eight lines using the rhyme scheme ‘bell, me, sell, see, far, mine, star, shine’.

The Simpsons Road Mutual Improvement Society became the Simpsons Road Debating Society and wound up, all in short order. But Henry Wilmot’s didactical bent would not have ended there, not when there were five waxing intellects under his own roof. In the age – post-Darwin but before TV – evenings at home tended to be devoted to either drinking or self-improvement, natural selection by gaslight. You can see how a steeping in domestic contests of *bouts-rimés* might incline an eleven year old to versify. Not that Frank Wilmot, as a maturing poet, was bound to the rhymed couplet and a locomotive metre; he was among the first in this country to experiment with free verse. Usually though, no matter how staggered his lines and tempo, they held to rhyme like a compass. And sometimes, as in an exultant couplet from his 1934 verse-cycle ‘Melbourne and Memory’, there were echoes of cadences that must have gone bone-deep as Wilmot jiggled on his father’s knee.

City that fosters our desires, that saw our dreams begun,  
 There is a sun beyond your spires that’s like no other sun...  
*(I know a funny little man, as quiet as a mouse,*  
*Who does the mischief that is done in everybody’s house...*  
*‘Mr Nobody’, anonymous, c.1870)*

On top of his father’s influence (and, for all we know, his mother, regarding whom the biographical record is mute), Frank Wilmot’s long-time place

of employment must have done its share in shaping the man and poet and Melburnian he became. For thirty-five years – from one Great Depression to the next – he worked at Cole’s Book Arcade in the city, the self-proclaimed biggest bookshop in the world. And it wasn’t just a bookshop, but a menagerie, fernery, bandstand, tearoom, china shop, polytechnic, amusement park, lending library, printing works, arcade (linking Bourke and Collins streets), and, above all, the Lear-esque embodiment of one man’s mind.

EW Cole was that man. Self-taught, self-made and immune to embarrassment, Cole was the original proponent of lifelong learning and a proselytiser for many causes, among them spiritualism, the vital force of humour, mechanised flight, the equality of all men (and monkeys, too), and the federation, not just of Australia’s colonies, but of the whole world.

Advance knowledge. Let prejudice perish. Let justice and charity encircle the earth and extend to the men of every creed.

That was Cole’s gospel in a nutshell. His bookshop, from its earliest incarnation as a barrow stall at the Eastern Market, bore the bold-lettered placard: ‘READ THE BOOKS. NO ONE ASKED TO BUY.’ Cole’s bookselling business shifted down Bourke Street by increments. In 1873, the first Book Arcade opened ten doors west of the market. A decade later came the Cole’s Book Arcade of Melbourne legend, its front entrance, spanned by a gigantic painted rainbow, situated midway along the block that would become the mall. The band played, the monkeys capered, seats liberally deployed among the shelves invited readers to linger; and still nobody was asked to buy.

Frank Wilmot was thirteen when he left North Fitzroy State School to start work at the Book Arcade. His father and Cole, both men of ideas, would doubtless have been acquainted in the big country town that Melbourne still was. Beginning as a shop boy, Wilmot rose to be manager, for many years, of Cole’s New Books department (No. 4 desk) and eventually of the whole concern. Manager of the Novels desk (or fiction department) for a similarly long stretch was Wilmot’s friend and sometime publisher, handsome Syd Endacott. The Book Arcade in its heyday – say, for fifteen years either side of Federation – had more than fifty employees, and in 1910 two of them,

Frank Wilmot and Ida Meeking, were married. The proprietor's own happy union had resulted from a full-column advertisement ('A GOOD WIFE WANTED – TWENTY POUNDS REWARD') on the front page of the *Herald*, and Mrs Cole positively cultivated romances among the staff of the Book Arcade.

It was at the New Books desk that Vance Palmer met Wilmot during the war years: 'a slim, youngish man, diffident but alert'. If the Book Arcade was the centre of Melbourne (and it was), then Wilmot was the centre of the Book Arcade. It was on account of his 'wide and profound knowledge of books', said Palmer, that Cole's became a beacon for readers and writers who, snookered by the double-reverse psychology of 'No one asked to buy' along with Wilmot's lack of salesmanship, invariably left with a parcel of books. Wilmot himself acknowledged that his 'following' was good for business – 'just like the monkeys', he said. He was an earnest promoter of his favourite writers, like George Meredith, whose rapid posthumous slide into oblivion in the wider world never seemed to harm his sales at the Book Arcade.<sup>4</sup>

The shy, serious man behind the New Books desk may have seemed an odd fit with the Arcade's gaudier attractions; but the contradictions of Cole's Book Arcade – the noble purpose and the knick-knacks, the glitter and the shade, the solitary seeker and the masses – mirrored those of the city that housed it and shaped Wilmot's poetic imagination.

In 1934, his 'Ode to Melbourne and Memory' cycle won Wilmot (writing as Furnley Maurice) the £50 first prize in Melbourne's centenary poem competition. Included in his *Melbourne Odes*, in which the winning poem appeared (its title shortened to 'Melbourne and Memory') was 'The Victoria Markets Recollected in Tranquillity'. Only – and here's the skeleton key – Wilmot had written years earlier:

Modern life has so many images and experiences that it is impossible to recollect in tranquillity. Tranquillity has nothing to do with them, they are conceived and function in fever, without that fever they are in themselves meaningless, and it would be of no advantage to recollect things in tranquillity if by that all their meaning is lost.

*Tranquillity has nothing to do with them, they are conceived and function in a fever.* Thus spake (or writ) a man whose life as a bookseller was soundtracked by the plink of the Book Arcade band and the cackling of a mechanical hen, and as a Melburnian by ‘The juggernauting trams and the prolonged/Crash of the Cafeterias at noon’.<sup>5</sup> What’s more, he was a man for whom meaning trumped tranquillity or, as the critic (and a friend of Wilmot’s) Harry Green put it, ‘he found it hard to appreciate poetry as an art rather than as a reflection of and commentary upon life’.

Wilmot’s determination that the process of composition ought not to congeal the feverish images of life as it is made him firmly refuse to revise his work. ‘[H]e belongs to the “Phoebus’ Car-out-of-control” school of poets,’ wrote one critic, ‘In other words, he wrote too much too fast.’ What Wilmot the poet *was* widely admired for was his gift for ‘occasional striking and beautiful phrases and imagery’. Note that *occasional*; even his warmest supporters rued his inattention to structure and the flaccidness of ‘the liaison passages, the connective tissue’ between those ‘flashes of magic’.

To anti-modernists, the very titles of some of the poems in *Melbourne Odes* were proof of their author’s ‘wilfulness and caprice’. ‘Upon a Row of Old Boots and Shoes in a Pawnbroker’s Window’ and ‘On a Grey-haired Old Lady Knitting at an Orchestral Concert in the Melbourne Town Hall. Prices Two and One Plus Tax’ were specimens, said a critic in the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*, of ‘the wearisome catalogues which entangle the exponents of free verse’.

When ‘Melbourne and Memory’ was published in full in the *Melbourne Herald* in August 1934, there followed a chorus of readers’ letters critical of the centenary poem. They too dwelt on the modernist aspects of Wilmot’s verse: its ragged rhyme and metre, its ‘ugly’ images. And they objected to the liberties he took with language, like the verbification of *juggernaut*, and the use of proprietary brand names, as in:

Roll on, proud thoroughfares! Roll on, O Cadillac and Chevrolet!  
Roll over a city that is gone...

A poem – let alone a commemorative ode – was no place for automobile advertising!

Besides disapproval, there was a strain of disparagement in the public reaction to 'Melbourne and Memory'. '[A]lthough I am not myself a poet,' wrote one *Herald* correspondent, 'the success of Mr Furnley Maurice's work makes me regret that I did not enter for the competition.' And in the city council chamber, the Lord Mayor, Sir Harold Gengoult Smith, was challenged by a colleague to 'explain' the centenary poem. Sir Harold prided himself on being a man of culture but 'I did not read it completely', he demurred. The poem ran to nineteen stanzas, ninety-six lines; what was that, compared to the verbiage of a typical council agenda?

While the poetry prize was overseen by the city council that led the centenary celebrations, it was the Lord Mayor's sister, Louise Dyer, a Paris-based patron of the arts, who put up the prize money. Vying for the purse were 179 poems, and the three judges (among them Nettie Palmer) declared the winning entry 'a poem of beauty and permanence'. Yet, though Britain's Poet Laureate John Masefield was in Melbourne for the centenary, he was not called upon to present Wilmot with his prize. In fact, no ceremony was held; the £50 cheque arrived in the post.

Now, for all that Wilmot's output to date – twelve volumes of verse, besides poems published in journals and anthologies – had been widely and critically reviewed, he was unaccustomed to this kind of notice. And he did not take it well. 'The public interest in poetry is negligible,' he bitterly observed, 'until somebody finds something to dislike and attack.' His *Melbourne Odes* was published at the end of 1934, with a preface (the likes of which, he declared, 'would be unnecessary in any other part of the English-speaking world') in which its author staged a spirited defence:

In these verses... I have followed a natural tendency to draw imaginative significance from everyday things. One result is that objection has been taken to the use of 'unpoetic' words and material. Yet the verses can claim no particularly difficult originality on that account. They are in no way revolutionary, and folk who consider them to be so show a lack of knowledge of the development of modern verse... But Australians have always been backward in ideas about verse.

(Don't hold back, Frank; say what you really think.)

What would Byron have done with Bourke Street? He would probably have avoided trivialities and attended to the eternal; probably – but who can tell what is eternal and what transitory...?

What it came down to, he said, was this: 'If everyday life and language have no place in poetry, then poetry has no right to exist,' a proposition to which Wilmot was not about to acquiesce. Fred Macartney, himself a poet and an authority on Australian literature, conceded in a public lecture that 'very few people are interested in poetry at all these days, and those who are interested are not interested in Australian poets'; notwithstanding, he declared Furnley Maurice 'the most important poet in Australia'.

Even among those who approved the choice of 'Melbourne and Memory' as centenary poem, some expressed surprise that the prize hadn't gone to a more celebratory work. For besides its modernist stylings, Wilmot's poem cast the fêted city in a harsh, sardonic light. (By contrast, the winner of the centenary song contest, announced the same week, was praised as 'very melodic and singable, and with a patriotic flavour'.)

'Melbourne and Memory' and its mother volume are full of images of the city in the grip of change – and not for the better. In *The Gully and Other Verses*, published five years earlier, Wilmot had lamented the despoliation of the hallowed mountain-ash forests, east of Melbourne. (Lying, he assured that telegraph pole: 'you, I swear, / Were never dragged across these splendid hills'.) In *Melbourne Odes*, it was the city being gutted by philistinism and greed. Wilmot, as someone said, 'built a living Melbourne of the mind'; in 'Melbourne and Memory' his nemeses were those knocking down the city that he loved.

The perilous cranes, the crashing walls, mad drills that wrench  
our nerves apart,

Barter their trucks of rubble spawls for a changed town and a  
changing heart.

And:

...Whelan wrecked the years of strange content  
When old Miss Burton's bluestone cottage went.

Ah, Whelan. That would be Whelan the Wrecker. One of the criticisms lobbed at Wilmot's prize-winning poem had been that it gave 'unlooked-for publicity' to the ubiquitous Melbourne demolition firm. And it wasn't the first time. He had earlier given Whelan's a serve in the clangorous-city preamble of 'To a Telegraph Pole:

The wrecker signs flash out their blazoned shams,  
Leading to doom who trust.  
and reprised at the poem's close:

The will-o'-the-wisps glimmer their blazoned shams  
To ruin folk who trust.

Those 'wrecker signs' and 'will-o'-the-wisps' were the placards posted on demolition sites to publicise the obvious: that **WHELAN THE WRECKER IS HERE**. Since 1921, when Whelan's gloating slogan was coined on the site for the Capitol Theatre, their signs had become an unwelcome fixture of Wilmot's Melbourne. *Particularly* unwelcome in one instance.

EW Cole died in 1918; eleven years later, Frank Wilmot was manager when the Book Arcade closed down. 'To the staff of Cole's Book Arcade,' said the *Argus* in its eulogy of the Melbourne landmark, 'Thursday was one of the saddest days of their lives.' The Bourke and Collins street properties were sold and, before long, Whelan the Wrecker moved in. Down came the rainbow archway, the ornate balconies, the walls stamped with 'improving' maxims; up came the slate-flagged floor of the monkey-house and the hoard of dud coins under the cashier's desk. Wilmot bought the stock of Cole's lending library and set up in business on his own – just as the Depression hit. All that saved him from pawning his own shoes was the offer of a job, in 1932, as manager of Melbourne University Press and its book room.

It was the perfect job for Wilmot, combining his accustomed roles as bookseller, printer, critic, anthologist and literary insider. Besides his duties as publisher, he worked at the counter in the book room, and his fondness for the smell of ink meant that he spent more time at the printers than was strictly required. However slapdash his own creative process, he was a meticulous reader of proofs. The university press was a modest outfit, with Wilmot its modest, if passionate, manager. A reader assessing a manuscript was asked: 'Is it so good that it is our duty to lose money by publishing it?'

Here he was then, at the university, even delivering lectures in Australian literature. Yet the evidence was that Wilmot's own inclinations, his inclinations as a poet, kept on the same lines as had found expression in 'Tomes', published in his last year at the Book Arcade:

I love the urchin thought that breaks  
 The rank of the scholar-guard...  
 For the things that impress me most of all  
 Are the things that no words touch;  
 ...the lost, the forgotten, the left-unsaid...

Frank Wilmot died suddenly in 1942, after a life steeped in books, in print, in words left unsaid.

In paying tribute to their friend, Vance Palmer and others on the Melbourne literary scene couldn't resist attributing the 'inner conflict' of Wilmot's verse to his being (like them) of the rusty hinge intelligentsia that suckled on the nation-making utopianism of the 1890s, only to be cast into disillusionment by the Great War and the flourishing, impoverishing cosmopolitanism that followed. 'More than most people he was affected, in mind and spirit, by the Depression,' wrote Palmer, in a book-length portrait commissioned by the Frank Wilmot Memorial Committee. 'It was the end of the old dream of a happy continent whose destiny lay in its own hands.'

A photo from as early as 1928 shows a crowd outside a soup kitchen in Bennetts Lane. Men in fedoras, a boy in a cap and abbreviated suit. Just out of frame, right and left, would have stood (or so I like to imagine) those self-same

telegraph poles. Waiting for a feed, you could have rested a hand on the flank of either one and sworn, as Wilmot did, that:

...you are joyous, beautiful, unbowed...  
I know you never fell.

It may have been consoling, but that wouldn't have made it true.

LIKE THE TAPPING of a rubber tree, the whole of the foregoing issued from a wooden pole in a Melbourne lane. For an historical hack like me, it's easy, once started, to keep on telling. My attention skitters in a kind of digressive Tourette's from telegraph pole to cobbled close to tram-tracked thoroughfare to any place outfitted with a bookshelf.

For me, sitting down to write, there's always a risk of succumbing to explanitude – telling everything I know, because I can: *de omni re scibili et quibusdam aliis* (about every knowable thing, and even certain other things). I blame it on the explaining gene, which cleaves to the one that hates jazz and coriander. I try to keep myself alert and nimble, sidestepping the *longueurs* and the saying of things for saying's sake; but inevitably I lapse.

Facts are narcotic, don't you find? Sometimes it seems as if there's no place, no one and not a moment in time whose antecedents disclaim attribution. No wonder Camus yearned for 'places without poetry'.

In directing seekers of the prosaic to a Doncaster bus, I was only half-joking. Doncaster is where I grew up and I've been known to damn it as a place with no history – as if that were a bad thing. Of course Doncaster has its share of history, but successive waves of brick-and-asphalt suburbanisation have stamped it all but flat and forgotten. Growing up there left me free to wonder. Without markers of memory, everything seemed as new made and unstoried as I was. (And I was a child; that helped.) Each new wave of development erased the last, untroubled by sentiment or history. In the '60s, we uprooted the orchards; since the '90s, just about every house in our old neighbourhood has been pulled down and built over three times as big. Even the school, new in the '60s, has gone. And the trees: a majestic liquid amber on our front lawn that I'd known from a twig, pine trees in a neighbour's yard.

All gone. Only the thermometer shape of our old street – a court – and, on what was our nature strip, the red-topped fire hydrant bollard that played a mute third in games of elastics.

Shoppingtown opened in, I think, 1967; since then it has metastasised. Where there's a car park now, there used to be paddocks. Once or twice, we gathered mushrooms there. The Shoppingtown corner, at Doncaster and Manningham roads, was called White's Corner after the family who'd run a general store there for years. I used to think the name came from the building itself, built of stone painted white. It had been a hotel to begin with, serving the local orchardists as well as day trippers who came by train to Box Hill, and then by tram (Melbourne's first), to climb the lookout tower. It was twelve miles to Melbourne and about the same distance to the Dandenongs, and the view was said to be 'very fine'.

Eight or nine years ago, sick of being tyrannised by facts, I wrote a novel called *Time of Grace*. I set it in Melbourne in 1893 (because that was the year of the Sands & McDougall directory that I owned), but with a philatelic/time-travel twist that linked it to London during the eleven days sacrificed to calendar reform in 1752. *Time of Grace* turned out a sadder story than I'd meant it to be – sadder in more ways than one. It was due to be published in 2008, was even announced in the new year books forecast, but didn't make it to term.<sup>6</sup> It just wasn't good enough and, like Frank Wilmot, I have no stomach for revision.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps two-thirds of the way through *Time of Grace*, I sent my post-office detective to investigate a postal felony out at Doncaster. I forget now exactly what happened there (did the publican's wife make a pass at him?), only that it was a wasted trip: crook fled, evidence lost. I do recall, though, the sensation of the tram swaying between ranks of apple trees and over open country, the tower drawing closer.

There's a view of the Doncaster tower in 1907, seen from the opposite direction – from Ivanhoe, with the valley of the Yarra intervening. An etching by John Shirlow, it caught the eminence on the horizon not long before it was condemned and demolished.<sup>8</sup> Shirlow's work, much like Frank Wilmot's, was praised more for its spirit than its execution. The two men were near contemporaries and their circles of acquaintance overlapped; they'd have

known one another, for sure. Both had inky fingers and were best known for their Melbourne studies.

In numerous works Shirlow took as his subject a narrow slice of laneway sunk in shadow (he was a very inky etcher indeed) with a church steeple soaring redemptively beyond. An example from 1921 shows a cobbled Bennetts Lane, complete with street urchins, loomed over by the Wesley Church. Perhaps Shirlow mislabelled the location in his sketchbook, because the etching, in the National Gallery of Victoria's collection, is titled *Brogan's Lane*. But there's no mistaking its subject: an almost identical view can still be had from Bennetts Lane today – the church's rear wall and garden, its slate roof and spire – though jostling office towers make for a more morally ambiguous skyline.

In making his sketch of Bennetts Lane, Shirlow had his back to the telegraph poles. But poles bristling with sprigs and conductors were a regular feature of his turn-of-the-century streetscapes. A view of the Supreme Court in 1908 caught a bowler-hatted loungeer whispering condolences to just such a pole in Lonsdale Street.

He exaggerated inclines, did Shirlow. The slope of Lonsdale Street running down to King is nothing like as steep as he makes it appear. Likewise his vertiginous view of Bourke Street, looking east from Queen. But both views hint at the hill they share in common, the one that peaks at William Street, its ridge extending from Little Bourke north to Flagstaff Gardens. Lil Vivo, the tragic typist in *Time of Grace*, worked in a fifth-storey office near the summit of the William Street hill and a west-facing window made her the nearest thing Melbourne had in 1893 to a long-range weather forecaster.

I've been known to say that my sense of Melbourne is textured as much by absences as presences – the things that are actually there. With time, those absences have come to embrace not only the disappeared but the never-were, including the milieu and inventions of my own novel, the stillborn nature of which makes its fictions doubly phantasmal. And my sense of the place, when I'm in it, makes no distinction between the pillar box that Lil frequented and the spot where Redmond Barry's cottage stood. Both invest the William Street hill with an enigmatic interest. But, if I'm honest, the pillar

box registers a sweeter charm for being immune from verification. No fact; no fact to check or hold fast to.

A long-dead Melburnian, Alfred Kenyon (engineer, public servant, numismatist, ethnographer, historian – a fellow, in other words, with a head full of stuff) advocated the cultivation of ‘a place to consign unwanted memories to oblivion’. He called that place a *forgettery*. It’s a nice idea, but – I’ve tried it<sup>9</sup> – it doesn’t work. You can’t choose what to forget, or even what to know. Nearly always *it* finds you and digs in, like a tick, until it’s ready to let you go. If a place seems overcrowded with associations and cultural references, it’s not the place that’s to blame, but the knowing.

‘A writer does not always know what he or she knows, and writing is a way of finding out.’ I wonder if Alan Bennett knew that he knew *that* before he came to write it? But he’s right: for those whose brains are wired that way, things emerge – connections, mainly – through the act of writing that no amount of contemplation can evoke. (I nearly said ‘*idle* contemplation’; but no, even vigorous contemplation won’t do the trick as well as writing does.) Certainly, writing is no way of forgetting; besides synthesising what you know, it stamps it deeper into the soft brass of memory.

...*but the knowing*. On Little Bourke, a short way east of the William Street summit, for decades stood the city fire tower, commanding a near-panoramic view of low-rise Melbourne and its suburbs – all but West Melbourne, which the Supreme Court library dome obscured. This was no insignificant blind spot. West Melbourne was the city’s original industrial quarter and was packed with workers’ housing. Electorally and public-order wise, the suburb was long considered a trouble spot, ungovernable, seething with radicalism and unrest. No doubt there were those who regarded its blotting out by the Supreme Court in allegorical terms, and who’d have been happy to see – or rather, not to see – West Melbourne burn.

Redmond Barry’s old cottage, set well back from Bourke Street, was practically at the foot of the fire tower. Barry had built it, or had it built, around 1840 when the young barrister was still new to Melbourne. It was his home for just a few years, during some of which time it housed a small library of books, an outpost of the fledgling Mechanics’ Institute, which Barry made available to deserving artisans and working men. Later, as the chief originator

and, for many years, guiding spirit of the Melbourne Public Library (now the State Library of Victoria), it was Barry who insisted that the reading room be open to any person aged fourteen years or over – not twenty-one, as was the usual qualification – ‘even though he be coatless...if only his hands are clean’.

He wasn't kidding. Washstands equipped with soap and hand towels were installed at the reading room entrance. Presumably the towels were secured by a chain, but library attendants were instructed to keep a close eye on the soap, which was issued sparingly in pieces snipped off a large block. Even so, from time to time there'd be a rash of thefts. Soap, it turns out, was a most pilferable Victorian commodity. One dirty Melbourne winter, the reading room soap disappeared with such frequency that a piece was specially marked, then traced to the pocket of a man named Robert Nelson as he left the library. Despite his insistence that he must have pocketed it inadvertently, Nelson – who was deaf and afflicted with St Vitus' Dance – was denounced as ‘a low, mean, contemptible thief’ and sent to prison for two weeks. Another time, a single piece of soap was lifted from the washstand four times within an hour. In sentencing the culprits, the magistrate threatened to make them eat the soap, but had to be content with gaoling them.

Neither of those episodes occurred during the tenure of Marcus Clarke as sub-librarian. Given his bohemian credentials, you'd like to suppose that, under his superintendence, the whereabouts of the reading room soap was of little moment. Clarke owed his appointment at the public library – which enabled him, more nearly than his writing ever could, to support his family *and* his style of living – to Sir Redmond Barry. While Barry well knew the make of man he was hiring, he was nevertheless compelled on occasion to reprove his protégé for his aberrations. A public servant who wrote like *that* about bishops and government ministers would hardly bring favour upon himself or his patron. And a librarian who came to work in a hat like *that* (a scruffy cabbage-tree) could hardly enforce a clean-hands policy.

A hat that, on a librarian, was unwarrantable would have sat just fine with Clarke's previous situation as a chronicler of Melbourne lowlife. From the 1860s onwards (or even earlier, if you think of Dickens) the slum exposé was an urban journalistic tradition. Under the guidance and protection of a police detective or municipal inspector of nuisances, a journalist would

venture into his city's dankest, most crime-ridden quarters and report, to the thrill of breakfasting readers, the abominations he witnessed there. 'Alsatia<sup>10</sup> exists in Melbourne,' Clarke wrote in 1869, in a classic of the sensation genre; 'The record of our experiences in exploring its mysteries may be repulsive, but it is true.'

The place is an *Epi-scie* – a Jacressade,<sup>11</sup> a foul gutter, through which flows all the hideous criminality of the city... Life there is like a hideous nightmare... It is a phantasmagoria of horrors, ever changing and shifting... Groups of women, mostly old and hideous, were standing at doorways, and saluted us with torrents of blasphemy and obscenity... The gutters were choked with filth, the walls blackened with slime... Children, whose faces more resembled those of monkeys than human beings, scrambled about in every variety of foulness. Infants, whose emaciated bodies were covered with running and evil-smelling sores, rolled among the heaps of rags and dirt that fronted the dwellings, while their mothers smoked, drank and cursed on the doorsteps.

And on and on Clarke went, trading thickly in allusions alternately anthropological and biblical, the prurience and moral thunder resolving in a balky condemnation of arm's-length landlords.

*The place*, in this instance, was Synagogue Lane, one of the narrow throughways from Bourke to Little Bourke on that same eastern brow of the William Street hill. It was named for the synagogue that fronted Bourke Street; though, as Clarke pointed out, the lane itself wasn't characterised by Jewish inhabitants. Few of the Melbourne streets and laneways that found themselves the focus of police attention, slum exposés and the dolour of clergymen would survive the 1880s with their shameful names unchanged. Red-lit Romeo Lane and Juliet Terrace were the most infamous of the launderings, though their new names – Crossley and Liverpool streets – resulted in no immediate reputational uptick. Rendering the street name forgettable seems to have been key to the operation, so that Synagogue Lane became Bourke Lane and, when that failed in its cleansing effect, ended up as Little Queen Street.

An ancestor of mine, John Cromack – three greats of a grandfather – was for twenty years a Melbourne city missionary. In the Lord's name, he knocked on doors every day along laneways and the tangles of nameless 'off-places' to which they led. When he was still new to the job, he wrote in his journal:

I was surprised at the private and out of the way places in which many people live. Places beyond places, and one court running into another, and lots of families living where no one would think.

To most of those he encountered on his rounds, Cromack could offer nothing more than exhortations to prayer and churchgoing. 'Said what seemed best,' was his usual notation – that and, 'Gave suitable tracts'. If he felt he'd made an impression on his listeners, his notes would be more voluble: 'Had a great deal of talk with fallen females, about their way of life and their duty to themselves, to society and to God.' I can't help but wonder how a Victorian clergyman reconciled the things Cromack saw and heard. And how much, if any of it, he told his wife.

Visited in Jones Place. This is full of all sorts of people, except good people.

Visited Brogan Lane &c. This is a beastly place... Met with nothing good.

[In Prince Patrick Place] Met with many of the fallen and foolish.

Visited in Crossley Street. This is what used to be Romeo Lane. It is still full of evil and evil only.

For all that Cromack's vocation framed his outlook, he seemed to recognise irony when he saw it:

In one off-place is a small row of brick houses of only one room. It is called Paradise Row. It is ever full of the lowest sort of people.

Surprisingly, the inhabitants of those cursed 'back slums' invited the missionary in, more often than not, and politely bore his windy platitudes.

At Dr Singleton's mission hall in Little Bourke Street, he ran a Bible class for boys who hazarded their souls by knocking about the streets. (Among them in 1879 was a 'fine healthy' orphan boy, about eight years old, by the name of Marcus Clarke.) Each week's class wound up with Cromack urging his charges 'to go straight home, not to fall out, nor interfere with the doors, knockers, or bells of people'. This, in a neighbourhood 'whose morals', in the words of another clergyman, 'approximate[d] to those of Sodom and Gomorrah'.

The mission hall was built fair in the heart of Bilking Square, an address that appeared on no map, nor in any directory or rates book, but was seared nonetheless in Melbourne's public consciousness. The so-called square was one of those 'off-places' Cromack wrote about, set back from Little Bourke just east of Stephen<sup>12</sup> Street. It was bounded on two sides by rights-of-way, Albert Place and Greville Place – toney appellations, but deceiving. The name of Bilking Square itself was bruited almost daily in the press, as the scene of some fresh crime or depravity; yet eyewitness accounts of the place are so scarce as to add to the impression of a hellish Brigadoon. Only one account, from the *Age's* man on the slum beat in 1873, conveys anything like its measure:

The explorer of these regions comes upon a barren space somewhat above the level of the street, and giving the idea of a gigantic dust heap, which long exposure to rain and sun has given a certain degree of consistency... After traversing this open space the pedestrian comes upon a mass of devious rights-of-way, in which are innumerable dwellings, mostly diminutive in size, and built of wood, and finds upon instituting inquiries that he has reached the haven of Bilking Square. Why this place should have obtained the name of square it is impossible to determine, unless the tenants look upon the piece of waste land already mentioned as a sort of private recreation ground.

At one corner of the 'square' stood a two-storey building of brick and stone, with three external doors and many windows ('convenient for exits and entrances'), which figured in the city's annals of crime as a veritable school of bilking.

The scurrilous verb, *to bilk*, meant broadly to cheat, deceive or defraud. Its understood meaning in the Little Bourke Street context, however, was to entice a drunken customer into a prostitute's den and fleece him of money and possessions. The 'innumerable dwellings' of Bilking Square – there were roughly eighteen of them – were all owned by a Mrs Jane Mills, the former 'Big Jane' Donnelly of police court notoriety. It was generally known (if not actually stated) that Mills had not, upon marrying, abandoned her dual trades of fence and keeper of a house of ill-fame, but had expanded them to a tidy empire. One gathers that, insofar as the bilking academy on the 'square' had a headmistress, she was it.

As the property-owning wife of a grocer, Mills appeared in court more often as 'prosecutrix' than defendant, usually having accused her tenants of stealing bedclothes or furniture or, once, of pillaging her drawers while she was sleeping:

Mr Cookman [barrister for the defence] subjected the prosecutrix to a sharp cross-examination relative to her mode of life, and as to whether she was carried home in a state of intoxication on Saturday. She denied the latter impeachment, and declared herself to be a married woman.

Mills made sure to hire a good barrister herself in future and, though she was several times charged with receiving stolen (bilked) goods, she always eluded conviction. She never lost her taste for trading insults with the police, but she knew and held to her rights and was a sharp businesswoman, besides. That journalist who 'explored' Bilking Square in 1873 found Mills mending the front door of one of her cottages and noted, 'She prefers repairing her property herself to paying men to do the work.'

It's strange to realise that the nests of squalid cottages and tenements visited by missionaries, condemned by journalists and profited from by the likes of Mrs Mills were at that time – in the 1870s and '80s – considered ancient by Melbourne standards. Take this account of Brogans Lane,<sup>13</sup> from 1873:

In front of some of these hovels a few remaining bits of paling that must have been painted green in the dark ages of Australia still stand as a memento... The green paint is scarcely discernible under multi-farious coatings of dirt, and the frequent demands for dry wood to boil battered kettles have left but the merest skeleton of what was once a fence.

And it wasn't just the fences. Many of the dwellings themselves 'from their appearance, may never have been repaired or renovated since they were built'. Nor were they, in any case, built to last, having been knocked up cheaply by speculators in the first blaze of the gold rushes, when the authorities, in their haste to see the city's swelling population housed, all but gave up on building regulations.

Just twenty years after such neighbourhoods were created, a mature willow wept over scenes of old-world decrepitude in a court off Romeo Lane. And in Juliet Terrace the ghost of a murdered man haunted an 'old' two-storey house. 'But I take care never to hear the ghost walk,' confided a young woman who lived there, 'for I go to bed inebriated every night.'

The spoils of bilking (which was by no means confined to Bilking Square) were almost always immediately spent on booze. Jugs, kettles, pots, any vessel to hand would be taken empty to the nearest hotel and brought back full for a spree. And the nearest hotel was never far: in the short distance from Spring to Stephen Street, there were six – pretty typical for a Melbourne city block. Not until Victorian women got the vote in 1908 would the project of 'licence reduction' (that is, cutting the number of hotels) be taken seriously. In the meantime, for households without a piano or religion, hard drinking was the readiest diversion on offer.

Family and neighbourhood violence was endemic in the back streets of the city: street brawls, blows traded on doorsteps and no end of brutality dished out indoors. And, notwithstanding the Rev. Cromack's claims for the power of prayer, women trapped in the laneways and off-places of Little Bourke Street east generally found in dissipation their likeliest means of escape. Death on a sofa was an oft-reported exit. Susan Barker, 'a woman of the town', was aged just twenty, but:

...had drunk a good deal of rum for some years past, and ate very little. At five o'clock, when all the others were recovering from the debauch, the police came in to look for an offender, and found the deceased dying, on a sofa.

Plain alcoholic poisoning was ruled the cause of death in that case, while Priscilla Coles was found to have died on a sofa of 'sanguineous apoplexy'. At her inquest in 1870:

Mary Williams stated that she kept a house of ill-fame in Juliet Terrace, and had been drunk for the last three weeks. So many women came to her house that she could not recollect them...

Maria Johnston, living in Juliet Terrace, stated that...deceased went into Williams's house and shortly after came out with a decanter empty, and going into Bourke Street returned with it nearly full of spirits, and went into Williams's house again.

Both the house in Juliet Terrace and the sofa Coles died on were the property of 'Big Jane' Mills.

JUST AS COMMON as accounts of sofa deaths were reports of Melburnians turning out in their tens of thousands to witness the laying of the foundation stone of some public building or another. The two occurrences underscore one fact: there was no TV. How was a person without means or much hope to fill their days and nights, if not with public spectacle (howsoever mundane) and the stupefactive promise of strong drink?

Daylight draws the *dérivée* to Bourke Street, or 'Big Bourke Street' as John Shirlow distinguished his San Franciscan view from its other end. Across the road from Juliet Terrace and uphill past Langs Lane (125 footfalls, by my count), Dwight's Second Hand Book Depot stood for 16 years from 1855. In the '60s of that century it was the resort not just of Marcus Clarke and his boho circle, but of Melbourne book lovers of all stamps: 'a motley crew, but united in the bonds of bookdom'. A good proportion of the stock in the 'low-roofed, book-stuffed recesses' of Dwight's shop came from the liquidated

colonial libraries of well-read sojourners returning home once the heat had gone out of the gold rushes.

Among his fondest customers was RH Horne, the celebrated poet, friend to the famous, and one time contributor to Dickens' *Household Words*. Horne's epic, *Orion*, had been a literary sensation of the 1840s; but though it ran to ten editions, it hadn't made him rich. In 1852 he joined the gold rush to Victoria, where top-shelf testimonials secured him such positions as commander of the gold escort, mining warden, magistrate and commissioner of the Yan Yean water supply, in none of which he much excelled. Horne, in his spare time, dabbled in viticulture, taught swimming, played guitar in the orchestra at the Duke of Edinburgh Theatre, and read enormously. In 1869, Dwight's took on a large consignment of books that had belonged to the lately repatriated Horne. A journalist on the *Melbourne Age*, on his way to work, spied in Dwight's 'fourpenny box' on the footpath a copy of George Meredith's *Modern Love*, inscribed by the author to Horne, his friend and mentor.<sup>14</sup> When the unlucky scribe returned in his lunch-hour with four pence, though, the book was gone.

I knew nothing of Meredith's Melbourne connection and his fleeting autographic presence in a Bourke Street bargain bin when, in my first flirtation with fiction (circa 1998), I wrote a short reverie in which I imagined catching sight of George Meredith on Princes Bridge. I liked Meredith's novels, I liked his poems, I liked his noble profile. In his prime he was quicksilver, mind and body, and a mighty pedestrian, tramping for miles through the Surrey countryside. True, he'd been dead now for eighty-nine years, but I didn't want to talk to him, just observe him in motion. If I couldn't do that with fiction, well, what was it good for?

Perhaps ten years earlier, I'd gone walking in the Dandenongs and, for a rest, had perched on a sapling fallen across the track, reading *Evan Harrington*. Meredith, as I recall, had an 'amorously minded' maid say of Evan that 'he was the only gentleman who gave you an idea of how he would look when he was kissing you'. I was struck, there among the ferns, at such an expression having been put in a woman's mouth (even a maid's) in 1861, and couldn't help wondering where Meredith had overheard it. He moved with a pretty racy crowd just then, posing on a bed with his shirt undone for a painting,

*The Death of Chatterton*, by a minor Pre-Raphaelite with whom his wife ran off before the paint was dry. Meredith's riposte was *Modern Love*, a sequence of fifty sonnets raking through the ruins of his marriage:

Then each applied to each that fatal knife,  
 Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.  
 Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul  
 When hot for certainties in this our life!

MY STORY ABOUT Meredith in Melbourne I narrated in the person of my Aunty Eva (actually my great-aunt), who for thirty-five years ran the Presbyterian book room in Collins Street. She'd have recognised Meredith, I figured. I had him look about, bewildered (implying that he was victim of a time-slip), before boarding a Glen Iris tram. If I'd known then of Frank Wilmot and his passion for Meredith, I might have engineered a meeting between them. Wilmot and Aunty Eva, I dare say, met in real life sometime in the '30s and compared their respective book rooms. Eva had a small mouth, too, but was never much of a chuckler.

After Henry Dwight died, EW Cole took over his shop and stock, making it the second-hand branch of his original book arcade. Among his (and Dwight's) regular customers was Dr Louis L Smith, whose consulting rooms, hospital and museum of anatomy were on Bourke Street close by, and who had to pass the bookshop on his way to parliament where he sat for four terms as a member of the lower house. Like Cole, the flashy Smith was a great populariser and a compulsive advertiser. Melbourne's medical establishment may have dismissed him as a quack, but his was the city's busiest and most lucrative practice. Smith specialised in the treatment of venereal disease and, early on, he acquired a reputation (never proved, but enduring) as an abortionist, which did his practice no harm. His rooms offered a discreet rear entrance for patients who were bashful; alternatively, they could, like those living at a distance, obtain diagnoses by mail. Smith's anatomical museum in Bourke Street's theatre district, though billed as educational, was a quasi freak show and, in the Polytechnic Hall, his public lectures on medical topics tended towards the sensational. *Dr LL Smith's Medical Almanac*, published annually

by Clarson, Massina & Co., promoted home cures and prevention, as well as his own line of tonics and unguents – not forgetting pills guaranteed to ‘restore regularity’ in females. His writings also appeared in the *Australian Journal*, back-to-back with Marcus Clarke’s, and in pamphlets with titles ranging from *How to Get Thin* and *How to Get Fat* to *The Secrets and Ceremonies of Freemasonry Exposed*.

Smith’s career as a politician was distinguished chiefly by the punch he delivered to a government minister’s head in the parliamentary dining room. He lost more elections than he won, and his wins owed more to ‘force of personality’ than to anything in the shape of political finesse or credentials. Smith dressed suavely, wore a big diamond ring, collected art, conversed with wit and brilliance; he was ‘a thorough bohemian’, albeit a wealthy one.

In 1934, that poem of Frank Wilmot’s, ‘Melbourne and Memory’, would owe its £50 prize to Smith’s likewise wealthy daughter, Louise (Dyer), and would confound his son, the Lord Mayor, Sir Harold. Defending his poem against philistinism, Wilmot posed the question, ‘What would Byron have done with Bourke Street?’ I think I know.

The beginning of the end of Lord Byron’s short-lived marriage to Annabella Milbanke – if you discount the gunplay of their wedding night – was signalled by fourteen lines of verse produced by the pair, taking turns, in an idle game of *bouts-rimés*. To the line-ends *moon* and *soon*, Lady Byron supplied *The Lord defend us from a Honey Moon*, while her husband countered, *Our cares commence our comforts end so soon*. Had Byron, like Meredith in my story, found himself set down in a Melbourne street eighty-nine years after his death (that would make it 1913), his more than usually disordered mind would likely have groped for the simplest of poetic devices. And in Bourke Street, he’d have found it.

For Bourke Street, back then, was itself a *bouts-rimé*, the (almost) rhyming ends supplied by Langs Lane at the east and Lang Lane at the west. In 1920, a visit by the Duke of Windsor (the future Edward VIII) would cause the Grand Hotel on Spring Street to be rechristened the Windsor, with the lane behind it, hitherto Langs, becoming Windsor Place.

‘Who can tell,’ Wilmot wrote, ‘what is eternal and what transitory?’

Indeed, who *could* have told, in 1913, which lane was doomed to change – Lang or Langs – and how much else besides?

Camus' philosophical standpoint – that too much information on the one hand, a fathomless unknown on the other, render futile (hence, absurd) humans' search for meaning – predisposed him to chafe at the territorial emanations assailing him as a newcomer to Paris. Those seeking meaning, it's true, too often settle for cliché. Camus would have none of it, discerning in the universe's 'benign indifference' towards humankind a brother image of his own towards it.

The tourist, the drifter, the flâneur, the shopper between shops, the alfresco city worker – all, in their way, are meaning-seekers. And what a place has to say about itself counts (except to Camus-ards) towards meaning. More and more, the meanings of places comes aggressively prepackaged and branded. Paris, for sure, and Melbourne too: laneways, anyone?

No question, Melbourne's laneways really are integral to the city's identity – always have been. But when civic identity is delegated (or relegated) to branding campaigns and interpretive signage, we risk making an orphan of it. Ostensibly it belongs to everybody, yet nobody owns it. Iain Sinclair, the London-based psychogeographer, was making much the same point about the outsourcing of public memory when he wrote that 'Memorials are a way of forgetting'.

This essay's length has let me vacillate, to my own satisfaction if to no great effect, between half-agreeing with Camus and adding to the noise, between cursing facts and fetishising them, between setting a narrative compass-bearing and going in circles. It has expended thirty-eight semicolons and sixty-two pairs of parentheses from my lifetime quotas of each. And it has allowed me to salute and serenade a bunch of dead men I wish I'd known. To a person at my time of life, that practically counts as infidelity.

Now suppose that, to make it ten thousand, I needed just ten words more.

There are no places without poetry. No, not even Doncaster.

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## Notes

- 1 My sole authority for the quote is AJ Liebling, writing a 'colour' piece for *The New Yorker* in 1946; but it sure *sounds* like Camus.
- 2 In its serialised form, Clarke's great novel of convict life was published as *His Natural Life* between 1870 and 1872.
- 3 Simpsons Road was the name that Victoria Street originally went by where it kept East Collingwood (Abbotsford) and Richmond apart.
- 4 Wilmot, in an essay, anti-blurped Meredith as 'a man who did not belong to his time, perhaps not to any time'. His and Ida's first boy was given 'Meredith' for a middle name.
- 5 Probably the two best lines from 'Melbourne and Memory'.
- 6 *Time of Grace* has a half-life at [robynannear.com](http://robynannear.com)
- 7 Wilmot tried his hand at fiction, too. In 1913, he submitted to a publisher 35,000 words of a novel titled *A Shred of the Mystery*. But they weren't keen, so he gave it up.
- 8 The timbers from the two-hundred-foot tower, those that weren't rotten, were re-used for fruit crates.
- 9 See *Mrs Bradley's Melbourne (or, Melbourne Off the Top of My Head)* at [robynannear.com](http://robynannear.com)
- 10 *Alsatia* was the cant name for London's Whitefriars district, which set the gold standard for a slough of infamy and lawlessness.
- 11 A nod to Victor Hugo.
- 12 Renamed Exhibition Street in one of the city council's dubious attempts at expiation.
- 13 Now Corrs Lane.
- 14 Horne had edited Meredith's earliest poems for *Household Words*, and Meredith so admired the older poet that his first book (*Poems*, 1851) took as its epigraph ten declamatory lines from Horne's *Orion*.

# The unconscious of the city

Nick Gadd

## What is a City?

MANY METAPHORS HAVE been employed in attempts to imagine the idea of a city.

In *The Republic*, Plato compared his city-state to a ship, which can only be set sailing in the right direction by a wise navigator – a philosopher. In the 1820s, the essayist and traveller William Cobbett described London as a ‘great wen’ – a kind of ugly, infected lump on the skin of England. In contrast Lewis Mumford, the American historian and sociologist of cities, evoked the image of sexual climax when describing the experience of being in Manhattan as a young man in 1917: ‘In that sudden revelation of power and beauty I trod the narrow, resilient boards of the footway with a new confidence... The wonder of that moment was like the wonder of an orgasm in the body of one’s beloved.’ More recently, in the legendary track ‘The Message’ (1982) Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five put it like this:

It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder  
how I keep from going under.

All these comparisons work up to a point, and anyone who has spent time in cities will recognise elements of truth about them, but each metaphor focuses

on only one aspect of a city – its ugliness, its excitement, its savagery – when something more nuanced is needed.

One of the most subtle and impassioned writers on cities is the Californian essayist and activist Rebecca Solnit. In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* she drew this comparison:

A city is built to resemble a conscious mind, a network that can calculate, administer, manufacture.

If we consider the city as a conscious mind, we think of public buildings and freeways, bridges and city links, towers and malls, cultural centres and sports stadia, residential and retail hubs, ‘iconic’ and ‘signature’ buildings. We think of front-page headlines and parliamentary speeches, statements and manifestos, campaigns and billboards, strategies, policies, visions and plans; blockbuster exhibitions and grand finals, festivals and parades, statues and memorials; editorials, conferences, economic statistics, indices of liveability. The city acknowledges all these: it trumpets them. They are its public face. These are the aspects controlled – or supposed to be – by Plato’s wise navigator-philosopher.

But Solnit goes on to flip her metaphor around. Since Freud, we have known that behind every conscious mind there is an unconscious, harder to detect and rarely acknowledged. If a city has a conscious mind, then it must also have an unconscious. Reflecting on the buildings abandoned when industrialised cities collapse, Solnit writes:

Ruins become the unconscious of a city, its memory, unknown, darkness, lost lands, and in this truly bring it to life.

What might the unconscious mind of the city consist of? What are its dreams and nightmares, its memories, traumas and desires? What has it suppressed, never to be mentioned in polite company? Where and how are these things revealed?

I would expand Solnit’s metaphor: ruins are only one element of the city’s unconscious. If we are to truly know a city, we have to explore beneath the surface. Ruins are certainly part of that investigation; but more clues can be found when we decode the messages on obscure walls and abandoned

premises; decipher fading traces and dreamlike images; dig below ground level to reveal what is concealed underneath. We have to interrogate what English writer Robert Macfarlane has called the ‘hidden histories and encrypted events of the city’.

One word for this approach is psychogeography. The term was defined by the French theorist Guy Debord in the 1950s as the study of the ‘specific effects of the geographical environment...on the emotions and behaviour of individuals’. The research methodology advocated by Debord was *la dérive* (drifting) through the streets of Paris. Debord wrote:

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.

Debord’s manifesto has been the starting point for a range of artistic and literary practices, such as Dutch artist Wilfried Hou Je Bek’s cultural happenings based on random observations in city streets, and writer Iain Sinclair’s idiosyncratic passages through, across and around London in search of secret narratives and forgotten mythologies. Today there are websites devoted to projects of psychogeography and urban exploration in cities around the world. What they have in common is an attempt to see through the city’s public face and to investigate its unconscious. Cities thus become places not of plans and manifestoes, skyscrapers and freeways, but of desires, memories and dreams.

The novel *Invisible Cities* by the Italian fabulist Italo Calvino contains a succession of narratives, under headings such as ‘Cities & Desire’ ‘Cities & Memory’ ‘Cities & Names’ ‘Cities & the Dead’. In these short pieces the great explorer Marco Polo describes to Kublai Khan fifty-five exotic cities of Khan’s empire that the emperor has never seen. Calvino’s narrator explains that a city can be understood only by someone who takes the trouble to carefully observe its details:

The city does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

Something as infinitely complex as a city can never be encapsulated in a single metaphor. But if we are attentive to small details, we can uncover facets of its identity. A sign, a stone, a word or image, a photograph or a single architectural detail can be the beginning of a story that guides us back into the city's past. The scratches and traces still visible on the city's surface can be the key to its unconscious mind.

### **Walking a City**

A YEAR OR SO ago, triggered by an ill-defined restlessness, I started walking around Melbourne. I began with short walks at random in suburbs I didn't know, taking the train to an unfamiliar station and exploring, making notes as I went on odd things that I observed – bits of old signage, unusual shops, abandoned premises. Gradually, a larger idea took hold: I would circumnavigate the entire city in a rough, zigzagging circle on foot, beginning in Williamstown, making my way up through Spotswood, Newport, Yarraville and Footscray; heading through the north-western suburbs of Avondale Heights, Essendon and Moonee Ponds, before turning south-east towards Kensington, Flemington, Carlton, Fitzroy and Collingwood; then continuing along an irregular course that would ultimately take me through Richmond to the south-eastern suburbs of Prahran, St Kilda, South Melbourne and Port Melbourne, from where a ferry would return me to my starting point. The entire journey would consist of almost one hundred walks through some forty suburbs, each walk picking up from the point where the previous one left off.

My idea was appropriated from Iain Sinclair's book *London Orbital*, which describes a walk along the course of the M25, the motorway that encircles London. I had no desire to emulate Sinclair by walking along freeways; but

like him I wanted to experience my city at close quarters, and explore aspects of it I never knew existed. As I walked, I drew maps and took photographs, haunted local history societies and libraries; lacking expert knowledge of anything, I picked up odd bits of information magpie-like, unsystematically. I deviated frequently from my proposed clockwise course, letting chance take me down quiet suburban streets and bluestone laneways, into derelict factories and brand new housing estates, through crowded shopping centres, empty churches and unpopulated edgelands.

As I walked, my antennae on the alert, I found myself drawn, time and again, to similar phenomena: faded signage on old brick walls; dead neon; post-industrial sites, derelict or transformed; oddly beautiful street art in unexpected corners. I wanted to know the stories behind abandoned pubs, cinemas and pool saloons; the resonances that lingered in areas of wilderness; what had become of once-booming industries; the meanings of the curious icons and symbols I stumbled upon.

Are these the way into the unconscious of the city? Do they reveal the city's dreams and desires, memories and nightmares? As I wandered slowly through suburban landscapes, so familiar that we pass among them every day without notice or comment, they became invested with strangeness, like an unknown land. I sensed ghosts in brick walls, heard voices in ruined buildings, felt the tremors of past lives. The city shed its familiarity and became a place of weirdness and wonder.

## City of Ruins

SOME OF THE best places to find ruins are not in the centre of the city, but at its margins. It was here, at what were then the city fringes, that governments encouraged companies to build during the postwar manufacturing boom of the 1950s.

I used to drive regularly past one notable example, a factory beside Ballarat Road in Braybrook, as it gradually succumbed to dilapidation. It was like a modern art sculpture, albeit in terrible shape – a long, low, horizontal structure, all squares and rectangles and triangles, its windows smashed, with little remaining but the aluminium frame. I passed this neglected building

every day for years, with no idea of its significance. Yet in architectural terms, the place was a masterpiece: it was as if there was a roadside Rothko among the second-hand car yards and cheap finance places, gradually falling to bits.

The building's creator was Frederick Romberg, a German architect who had left Germany in the 1930s when his connection with leftist political groups got him on the wrong side of the Nazis. He came to Australia in 1938 with no intention of ever returning to Europe: a political refugee. Unlike some in similar positions, then and now, he was welcomed: and what he gained he returned with interest. Romberg had studied at a prestigious university in Switzerland, and knew masters such as Gropius and Le Corbusier: he was one of those who would drag Australian architecture into the modern era.

After the war he went into partnership with Roy Grounds and Robin Boyd – who excoriated Australia's lack of design and architectural sense in his book *The Australian Ugliness*. While Romberg was a partner in the firm known as 'Gromboyd' it designed three factories: Turner Industries, Ringwood; Tip Top Paints, Port Melbourne; and the ETA peanut butter factory in Braybrook.

The 1950s was a time of economic optimism, when governments offered incentives to manufacturers to build on newly available land in the outer suburbs. It was also an era of high migration, with the federal government recognising the need to attract migrants to increase the workforce. ETA moved from South Melbourne to Braybrook and hired Romberg to design their new factory, which was opened by the premier, Henry Bolte, in 1962. What they got was an exceptional building, inspired by European modernism.

The factory was basically rectangular, with a striking long glass wall facing Ballarat Road. The aluminium facade had windows with bands of black and clear glass, and diagonal gold braces forming arrows that pointed towards the huge red letters 'ETA', which typography expert Stephen Banham refers to as one of the first uses of supergraphics in Melbourne. There was a garden designed by prominent landscape architect John Stevens, and even a sculpture by Teisutis Zikaras – artworks being a rarity on Australian industrial sites.

The ETA factory was the only Australian building to appear in an international publication of the world's best buildings that year. For locals though,

the architectural significance was less important than the fact that ETA provided jobs, and treats such as the spectacular annual Christmas illuminations which drew big crowds and are affectionately remembered.

The manufacturing boom now seems as distant as the gold rush: since the 1980s we have been accustomed to turn on the TV every night to news of another company closure, and 'more manufacturing jobs set to go'. Around the suburban fringes, where the new factories were built, many stand derelict, have been converted to other uses or demolished. To wander among these relics is to be taken back to a particular moment in our economic history. The utopian visions of architectural modernism and the nation-building visions of government seem equally remote.

Among these ruins stands the ETA factory. At some point the manufacture of ETA peanut butter moved offshore, and by the early 2000s the factory had fallen into disrepair. For fifteen years or so it was passed between developers who carried out various bits of demolition but no restoration.

More recently, it has experienced a revival of sorts. The site was sold on once again in 2011. Heritage Victoria issued a permit that required restoration of parts of the structure. The developer retained what little was left of the original frame, and replaced other materials to match the original. What we have today is a remnant of the original building, without the striking gold braces and the red ETA supergraphic. There is talk of restoring the gardens and reinstating the sculpture. It's much smaller, but does give a faint sense of what the original was like.

Walking into the place, I felt a strange sense of dislocation: Romberg's modernist factory has become a 24-hour gym called Zap. On the same site where production-line workers once performed repetitive tasks for eight hours a day, the children or grandchildren of those workers pump iron and stride on walking machines, their task now to manufacture the perfect body.

## City of Signs

IT CAN HAPPEN at any moment as you walk through the suburbs, but especially in the older post-industrial suburbs like Kensington, Footscray,

North Melbourne, Fitzroy and Collingwood. Glancing up above street level, past whatever cafes, bars or nail salons now occupy the site, you see faded paint on the bricks.

Sometimes the words are easy to make out: a name like VELVET or ALE, HOTEL or TEA. Occasionally there is a telephone number – perhaps only four or five digits, accompanied by unfamiliar prefixes like ‘FF’ or ‘MX’. You might decipher complete phrases: ‘Sherry, sweet or dry’, ‘Grey’s is great!’, ‘Better tea, better gifts’, ‘Will clean metal’ or ‘Newman’s have removed’. At other times the letters have faded to something resembling a part-completed crossword puzzle, with words obliterated or cut off by an adjacent building. There may be an image: a bulging-thighed footballer mid-kick, a laughing monk, a shepherdess, a teapot or bottle, a pointing finger. Twice – in North Melbourne and Carlton – I’ve made out the faint silhouette of a simian figure, dressed in a suit: vestigial advertising for Monkey Brand soap. Suburban walls are the backdrop for these enigmatic characters, actors in dramas now unknown to us.

Fading ads, or ghost-signs, occur in their hundreds around Melbourne. They were painted anywhere up to a century ago, occasionally even more, to advertise products and businesses that no longer exist. I’m drawn to them the way a birdwatcher is drawn to birds, from the most ordinary – the single word ‘Plumber’ or ‘Butcher’ fading on the wall of a suburban shopping strip – to the more exotic species, such as the goggle-eyed cartoon cat, once advertising a brand of light globes, that still grins high up on Elizabeth Street. Though they are made of paint and bricks, it seems to me that they are as intangible as memories or dreams.

Ghost-signs often appear on construction sites, as an old building is demolished to make way for something new. When the condemned building comes down it reveals old signage on an adjacent wall, perhaps advertising some long-gone printer, saw-maker or surgical bootmaker; a billiard hall, dry cleaner or hotel. The sign may survive for a few days, or even weeks, before it too is demolished – or, in some cases, obscured again, to be revealed – maybe – in another fifty years.

Ecks lemonade, Wertheim sewing machines, Greys cigarettes, Champion footwear, Younghusband wool store, Preservene soap, Guests biscuits and

cakes, Sturtevant pneumatic tubes and cash carriers, James Flood limousines, the Melbourne Steamship Company, Electric Candles, Monopole Cigars, Dainty Maid custard powder – these vanished products and companies linger on the walls of old milk bars and pubs, factories and warehouses. You find them down narrow laneways, behind gates, sometimes obscured by trees or other buildings. Occasionally a building's owner will recognise their value and retain them as a self-consciously 'historic' feature, but most often they survive through being ignored. A tree, a billboard or a bit of cheap render may hide and preserve them for decades.

The nostalgia industry is thriving these days, but to me the value of ghost-signs transcends the fad of the retro. They light up a corner of the past for us. As the world becomes more and more the same everywhere, as everyone drinks the same beers, wears the same jeans, drives the same cars, ghost-signs remind us of brands and businesses that were proudly local. These names helped to make us who we are, and point us back to social realities that underpin the city we live in today. Look carefully at a ghost-sign, start to explore the story behind it, and aspects of the city's memory come tentatively back into the daylight.

It is not just products and businesses that are memorialised. Whole social movements can be encapsulated in a few faded letters on a wall. The word 'Rechabites' for example, seen on halls around the city and suburbs, is a vestige of the Independent Order of Rechabites, once a key player, along with allies such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union, in one of the most powerful social movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Temperance campaigners were convinced of the evils of alcohol and fought a sustained battle to have it either prohibited or, at least, have its service hours reduced. (The 'coffee palaces' built around the city, some of which still stand in suburbs such as Yarraville and St Kilda, were another legacy of the movement.) In 1916, during World War I, riots by drunken soldiers provided the impetus the movement needed to succeed in having drinking hours cut back, with the laws changed to force pubs to close at 6 pm. 'The later the hour of drinking, the greater the evil done,' boomed the Congregational minister Joseph Kirby, who presumably had not anticipated how pissed people could get by 6 pm when they really turned their minds to it.

Early closing resulted in the infamous ‘six o’clock swill’, which saw punters sculling as much grog as possible before chucking-out time. Six o’clock closing was supposed to be a temporary, wartime measure, but continued until 1966, although it resulted in no detectable reduction in consumption – instead, people just became drunk faster. The Rechabites, now practically unknown, had an influence on Melbourne’s social life that endured more than half a century. Little of them remains beyond a few ghost-signs, which today’s Melburnian may glance at with momentary curiosity as she hurries to one of thousands of late-night bars.

### **City of Quacks**

WHAT IS THE appeal of ghost-signs? Partly it’s that they point to things we have lost. Viewed from another angle, though, they are symbols of survival. These painted advertisements were intended to be temporary in most cases, yet they have outlived the products or businesses they promoted, lingering on into a much later era, proudly anachronistic.

For me, though, the crucial element of their fascination is their unknowability. It may be possible to find out some things about these signs; other parts of their story are lost forever, and this is where a space opens up for the imagination.

In early 2013, walking through the centre of the city, I glanced up at a construction site on the corner of Russell and Lonsdale streets. The previous building – a former hotel built in the late nineteenth century – had been demolished, and the new construction was not far advanced. On the adjacent wall of a humble two-storey building next door, I saw the words, in thick black capitals on a white background: ‘Consult celebrated specialist Dr King, MRCS. Consultation free.’

For reasons I don’t fully understand, I became obsessed with this long-lost doctor. Thank God for Trove, the online resource of the National Library of Australia. Buried among the classified ads in local papers from suburban Melbourne and regional Victoria, I found an advertisement:

**Public notice!!!**

The Australian Medical Institute has engaged the eminent specialist Dr King, MRCS Etc as its chief medical officer. Dr King has enjoyed an exceptionally large practice as a specialist. He is a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, and legally qualified registered general practitioner in Victoria.

The above named institute has also succeeded in obtaining the valuable services of a highly accomplished MEDICAL CLAIRVOYANT whose power in diagnosing disease and discovering the exact state of a patient is truly wonderful... No questions need be asked, all that is required is a letter written by the person, or a lock of hair, neither of which must be touched by others than the one sending; this is all that is required to assure a most concise and complete diagnosis of the patient's condition. Fee for such diagnosis 10s 6d. Treatment and diagnosis £1. Call on our address Dr J King, 42 Russell St, corner of Flinders Lane, Melbourne.'

*Kerang Times*, 14 March 1890

Was this the same Dr King? The date of the advertisement (consistent with the age of the demolished building) and the wording of the ad made it seem likely, but how could I be sure? Anyway, what would a medical clairvoyant be up to in Victorian Melbourne?

Graeme Davison's classic work, *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne*, includes a chapter on the medical profession during that remarkable decade, the 1880s. As the city boomed, its population doubling in a mere ten years, it attracted vast numbers of chancers, fortune hunters, eccentrics and quacks. No law prevented unqualified laymen from calling themselves doctors, a fact much raged against by doctors' associations. The free market carried all before it. As a result, alternative practitioners thrived.

Dr King placed another newspaper advertisement a few months later, in which defensiveness and hubris are equally matched:

Remember Dr King is a Qualified and Registered Physician, and not a Quack. He is a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, and

duly authorised to practise as a specialist in the British provinces. Dr King warns the reader against the bare-face imposters, so called specialists etc, who having only a money end in view, thrive on the credulity of this community by their fraudulent announcements. He guarantees to cure every case undertaken.'

*Emerald Hill Record*, 20 December 1890

The 1880s was a time of boundless optimism and seemingly endless growth in Melbourne – everyone wanted to make money, and as long as you were successful, no one asked too many questions. Like San Francisco, another world city that experienced first a gold rush, then a boom, Melbourne was the kind of place where you could reinvent yourself. As Rebecca Solnit wrote of San Francisco, '[it] presented many opportunities to become what is commonly called a self-made man...an opportunity to make oneself up, as a fiction, a character, a hero, unburdened by the past.'

I imagine Dr King as just such a man. He is a shadowy figure, hard to pin down, leaving behind him nothing but some vainglorious advertising copy, and a large sign on Russell Street. Where did he come from? Where did he disappear, after the bust that came in the early 1890s? The tone of his second advertisement suggests that he had been stung by controversy or criticism. Had he been challenged by more legitimate medical men, or disgruntled patients? In my mind, Dr King MRCS is representative of all the silver-tongued entrepreneurs, dodgy doctors and get-rich-quick types who have blazed briefly across the city before plummeting into oblivion.

### **City of Beasts**

ON THE WALLS of Victorian shops around the inner suburbs, faded ghost-signs can be seen for two classic Melbourne products, Velvet Soap and Electrine candles. They were among the most popular products of J. Kitchen & Sons, a Melbourne manufacturer from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Over the decades, millions of Melburnians bought their products; thousands were employed in their factories. Even then, perhaps few of those who used the products understood their connection to a very different world.

Kitchen & Sons was a manufacturer of tallow goods. The production of tallow was a primitive and noxious process that involved boiling down leftover animal carcasses to extract the fat. This created such offensive smells that Kitchens was evicted from its first premises, in South Melbourne, and moved its boiling-down operations to the western suburbs in 1870. It was a strategic move, right into the heart of the livestock industry.

Cattle and sheep are pretty much unknown in the streets of Melbourne today, but for more than a century they were at the heart of the city's economy. Millions of beasts were driven to the Newmarket sale yards to be auctioned and slaughtered at the abattoirs of Footscray and North Melbourne. Newmarket was Australia's largest livestock centre, and one of the largest in the world. Stock prices were broadcast from Newmarket the way the All Ords are now.

These days most city dwellers come no closer to a farm animal than the meat counter in their local supermarket, but older residents of Newmarket still remember the bellowing and bleating of the beasts, the banter of auctioneers, the ruckus as animals were driven through the streets, breaking loose and rampaging through back gardens; the fights that erupted at local pubs catering for the drovers. One guy I encountered in Newmarket reminisced about taking a shortcut home after a night on the turps as a young man and inadvertently leaping into a bullpen. Another long-standing resident told me about 'Cockbill', a notorious, nightmarish figure in his blood-caked apron and gauntlets, shooting and cutting the throats of injured beasts in the streets until the gutters ran with blood.

Livestock provided employment not just for drovers, agents and auctioneers but for thousands of workers in abattoirs and butchers, and many more in related industries. Walk around Kensington and you can't miss the huge Younghusband stores beside the railway lines, still inscribed with the words 'Skins – Hides – Fur – Tallow store – Woollen Mill – Stock produce' (though these days the premises is a 'creative designer precinct' occupied by edgy arts organisations and an industrial nostalgia shop). Besides all that, there were the dozens of boarding houses, hotels, pubs and cafes that catered for the industry.

And right there, in the heart of all this, was Kitchen & Sons, boiling down the carcasses for soap and candles to be used by countless families across

the city. This primitive process – like the making of fertilisers from crushed bones – was the origin of the chemical industry that was to spread across the western suburbs. Kitchen & Sons employed some 1,400 people and would become one of Australia's most successful manufacturers.

These days, the once-household name is no more – the company finally disappeared in 1962. Likewise, livestock is hardly seen in Melbourne, and the Newmarket sale yards – closed in the 1980s – have become a school and residential area. You can walk up the hill from the Maribyrnong River to Kensington along the bluestone cobbles where they once drove millions of beasts; but now, instead of the bellowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep, around you is a tranquil, leafy suburban housing estate. The tens of thousands of jobs in the sale yards, abattoirs, tanneries and woolstores have mostly gone, too. But ghost-signs for butchers and wool, tallow and hides, Velvet Soap and Electrinc candles survive, evocative of massive transitions in the city's economy and society, faint memories of its not-so-distant history.

### **City of Secrets**

THE WORDS AND images left by sign writers are not, of course, the only thing to be seen on Melbourne's walls. Over the past decade or so the city has become an informal gallery space for swarms of street artists.

So prevalent is Melbourne street art, so ubiquitous in the city's branding of itself, that it is in danger of losing any claim to alternative status. In the more hipsterish parts of town, a laneway without street art is as rare as a barista without a beard. Puzzled tourists and wedding parties throng a few ballyhooed locations. Celebrities are pictured in front of garbage bins festooned with tags. Even Geoffrey Edelsten, the Dr King of our time, posed for his latest set of wedding photos with Gabi Grecko in Hosier Lane. The graffiti-covered laneway has emerged from the counter-culture to become as much a Melbourne cliché as the Flinders Street clocks.

Away from the city centre, out in the suburbs, are sites less visited, where unofficial art retains its power to surprise, move, baffle, even shock. It might be the huge paste-up of two lovers flying across the back of an abandoned Footscray cinema by prolific artist Baby Guerrilla; the bag-toting,

runner-wearing female silhouette slouching along a street in Yarraville, an informal *in memoriam* for a local character; a disgruntled, monster-headed angel perched above a grating in Fitzroy. Planners like to say that street art regenerates inner city areas and the like; for me, though, its beauty is that it expresses other elements of the unconscious of the city: its fantasies and dreams.

And sometimes, perhaps, its nightmares. Not far from my house in the inner west is an old textile mill, once a thriving business, now a derelict shell. Like the ETA factory, the place has stood abandoned for a decade or so, while the owner – a multimillionaire who collects vintage number plates – tries to find a developer to take it off his hands. For the moment it is an intermediate space, poised between its industrial past and post-industrial future. It belongs to the weeds, the rabbits and foxes, and to secretive characters who come and go at odd hours, and are sometimes seen circling around fires that break out in the middle of the night, melting away when the fire trucks arrive.

There are two main elements: a low-slung red-brick sawtooth factory, and a tall boiler house. Once the factory reverberated with the roar of dozens of machines, but now it's an empty, cavernous space, bathed in soft aquarium light through green plastic sheeting. Broken windows look onto bright blue sky and let in slanting slices of sunlight. The place has an unreal atmosphere, like something seen in a dream.

It's easy to enter. I step cautiously, feet crunching on glass, kicking empty cans. There's a frantic flapping as pigeons take off, indignant at the intrusion. There are no visible humans around, but tags and artworks are everywhere: the usual stuff, names in lurid capitals, and a few more unexpected pieces. A Jeff Koons-ish flying pony with the caption 'taste the rainbow'. A paste-up bird, ironically juxtaposed with mounds of real pigeon shit on the floor. The blackened husk of a couple of burned-out cars, resting on metal wheel rims and full of ash, given an informal respray job with the paint from a million canisters. Put them in a contemporary gallery and they could make a powerful statement about the end of the era of fossil fuels.

The boiler house is a brick cathedral spire. From the top, a conveyor belt descends like a fairground ride to a smaller building. It's a claustrophobic space from which you can see all the way up. You could climb the whole way to the

top, if you were young and reckless. I content myself with looking around the small brick building. And I notice something strange.

The walls of this tiny building have been painted with anachronistic figures. There's a knight thrusting a bloodied sword through an opponent; baying dogs, horses, a man holding up a decapitated head. It has the crude look of medieval art, not much proportion or perspective – but someone has taken the trouble to make these walls their gallery, though the work is unlikely to have much of an audience. Venturing further in I see totemic faces glaring from higher up. On one wall is an oddly pagan figure: a kneeling, naked woman with antlers. What are these weird images doing in a modern city?

I don't know what to make of them, so out of place are they on the brick walls. They have no connection with the history of the building, but they don't belong in the modern world either, the brand-new apartments and retail hub that will surely spring up on this site eventually. For a moment I'm taken out of my own time, back to some pre-industrial era. These images seem to spring from somewhere darker in the city's unconscious, evoking a place of ritual and sacrifice, of slaughter and blood. And though it's a bright sunny day, something makes me shiver and want to get out.

### **City of the Dead**

POCKETS OF WILDNESS and strangeness occur in various parts of the city; places where those who came before us have left traces that are no less real for being intangible. In his definition of psychogeography, Debord referred to 'the specific effects of the geographical environment...on the emotions and behaviour of individuals'. There are places where you feel the atmosphere shift, as markedly as a sudden drop in temperature.

Royal Park – that elevated area to the north of Melbourne – is part wilderness, part golf course, home of the zoo, the state netball centre and the children's hospital. The one thing that Royal Park is *not*, it seems to me, is a park. Parks can be essential elements in their city's identity: Hyde Park in London, Central Park in New York, the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris. In Melbourne, the Botanical Gardens play that kind of role: much loved, much frequented. But Royal Park? Who goes there, and why?

The land is of spiritual importance to the Wurundjeri people, for whom there is no doubt as to its value and meaning; in the minds of the Europeans, though, the place has suffered a prolonged identity crisis. The park was set aside by Governor LaTrobe in the 1840s as a space reserved for the public, while most of the city was sold off in a real estate frenzy. Since then, the public has never quite been sure what to do with it. Early on, the Trustees wanted to make it a place for ‘our most umbrageous eucalypts and acacias’, but look around today and you see only a few splendid gums, not great forests of them. Much of the park is bare and unshaded rather than umbrageous. There have been sporadic plantings over the years, often unsuccessful; a 1984 master plan condemned the park’s ‘horticultural clutter’, its mingling of natives with exotics, and the buildings plonked down seemingly at random. Over the years the park has been used for grazing, car parking, a military camp, emergency housing and sport, among a host of contradictory purposes.

On a quiet autumn Saturday, I walked up the path that leads from Flemington Road past the children’s hospital to an elevated circular expanse of grass. There were few people there, although the circuit was being used by occasional joggers, cyclists and dog walkers. Nothing about the grassy circle drew me in to explore it further, except perhaps the impressive panorama of the city – which only made me think I would rather be there, among people, than here. The atmosphere felt strange, if not unwelcoming. What happened here?

The park’s history is littered with episodes of trauma that seem, somehow, to have imprinted themselves on the land. During World War II, American troops were stationed at a base named Camp Pell; the park was crisscrossed by roads with names like Bronx and Frisco. It’s strange to think of young men from Idaho and Michigan and Texas and California dropped into this alien place, en route for theatres of war, many of them – no doubt – never to see their homes again.

One of the soldiers, a private named Eddie Leonski from New Jersey, was a serial killer. He roamed the city during the ‘brownout’ – when Melbourne’s lights were dimmed as a precaution against air raids – in search of women, three of whom he strangled before he was caught, court-martialled and hanged at Pentridge in 1942. The murders, and Leonski, who cheerfully

confessed to his crimes, shocked and fascinated Melbourne. One of the killer's nicknames was 'the Singing Strangler' because he was fascinated by women's voices and reportedly said 'I killed them to get at their voices'. Albert Tucker made the murders the subject of his 1943 painting *Memory of Leonski*, the first in his series of *Images of Modern Evil*, thus granting Leonski a lasting place in Australian culture.

After the war, the camp was used as emergency accommodation to contain the overflow from the city's housing shortage: it was only supposed to be temporary, but families lived for ten years in rusty army huts without proper amenities, on ground that turned to mud at the first drop of rain. 'Camp Hell' was often portrayed as a slum rife with immorality and disease: the *Argus* thundered against it as 'an evil and intolerable plague spot', and ultimately the government agreed, closing the camp down in time for the Melbourne Olympics of 1956. While the families who lived here for that difficult decade managed as best they could, and some of those who spent their childhood in Camp Pell say it was not nearly as black as it was painted, the fact remains that few would have *chosen* it; like the American troops, they were there because they had no choice, because circumstances had put them there. Does that sense of compulsion, of life lived under the shadow of external threat, communicate itself to the visitor today?

Perhaps the most intriguing story about Camp Pell is that a warren of tunnels was built by the US Army beneath the park, to be used as a storage place for weapons and vehicles. Some suggest that when the Americans left they simply sealed the tunnels and left everything behind, where it remains to this day. It's even believed that General MacArthur's underground bunker is still there, full of top-secret documents; and it's rumoured that tunnels connected the Camp Pell base to the Royal Melbourne Hospital. It's true that the hospital was used to treat troops wounded in the Pacific; and there are indeed tunnels connecting several Melbourne hospitals, though they don't necessarily date from World War II.

If there are tunnels under Royal Park, who built them, why, and what is concealed inside? Reliable answers and archival evidence are hard to come by, which does not prevent teams of amateur archeologists from going out in search of Melbourne's secret labyrinths. But perhaps the tunnels are no

more than an urban legend. The story sits well, though, with a location like this, used for so many contradictory purposes, where much has happened and been forgotten or swept away. A nature reserve, a camp, a slum – this is a place that does not know what it is. Like the ill-fated explorers Burke and Wills, who set out on their doomed journey across the continent from Royal Park – a crude cairn marks the spot – it leaves us hopelessly lost. Even today, most of those who come to Royal Park, perhaps to visit the zoo, or play at the state netball centre, arrive and depart in cars without paying any attention to the park itself.

And those who pause there, often feel – as I did – a sense of unease, a kind of unsettling vibration at a frequency too low to consciously detect. Although little tangible remains of the park's conflicted history – a couple of sentry boxes and a hut survive from the days of Camp Pell – the stories of the place have a continued presence. They are part of the unconscious of the city; traumas that the city would rather repress. For all you try to close them out, it's hard to stand in Royal Park and not think of those who once inhabited it, the angry, the maligned, the doomed and forlorn; hard not to imagine that you might see the figure of Private Leonski flitting through the trees at dusk, in search of a woman with a beautiful voice.

### **City of Poison (1)**

Mr. H. Herrenschmidt has just completed the erection at Yarraville of new and some-what extensive smelting works, in which the process of smelting will be carried on on a new principle which has been discovered by Mr. Herrenschmidt himself, and patented... The metals most in use exist in nature generally with sulphur and arsenic, besides quartz and other earthy matter. The great difficulty to be overcome by the metallurgists consists in removing these, and thus getting the metal in a pure state, and it is the separation, especially of sulphur, which has hitherto caused the great expense attending smelting processes...

The *Argus*, 20 June 1876

IF GENERAL MACARTHUR and his troops did indeed leave tunnels, vehicles and weapons in the ground beneath the city, they are not all that lies there. Many suburbs have been contaminated by toxic reminders of industrial activities. In the unconscious of the city, they are like traumatic memories, which have been – quite literally – buried.

There is a wonderful website called *1945.Melbourne* which enables the user to compare aerial photographs of the city in 1945 with the city today. You can drag the cursor across the screen and watch your view of the city change, as seventy years pass in an instant. Go one way and unbuilt land is filled with houses, freeways sprout like tendrils, new docks take bites out of the coastline, sections of river are filled in. Go the other, and you wipe out whole suburbs at the swipe of a mouse; stadiums disappear, towers and bridges evaporate. Compulsively you jump to and fro between 1945 and 2015, unsure what is stranger: that so much is different, or that so much is recognisable.

Examine the 1945 view of my home suburb of Yarraville and the adjacent inner western suburbs, and you notice irregularly-shaped grey, black and white blotches that pepper the land like smaller cousins of Cobbett's 'great wen'. These were the quarries dug out in the mid-to-late nineteenth century as a source of bluestone, one of the first of the region's industries. The public legacy of the quarries consists of many bluestone edifices around Melbourne, from churches to parliaments to prisons, private cottages and shops, as well as countless streets and the stock routes to the sale yards. Less well known – part of the city's unconscious – are the abandoned quarries that were left behind when the industry declined. They remained as part of the landscape for many years after they were exhausted.

By the late nineteenth century the inner west was noted for its foundries, smelting works, acid works and many other forms of dirty, heavy industry. These industries disposed of their waste products without hindrance into the water and air, as well as into large holes conveniently left by the quarrymen.

Not far from my home are two small and unassuming squares of land with a secret history. They border Williamstown Road, not far from the Yarraville Oval. One block is occupied by a supermarket and car park, the other by a recently sown patch of grass and a playground, with a narrow strip of houses at the eastern edge. However, zoom in on the location on

1945. *Melbourne* and a different picture emerges. Seventy years ago these sites, viewed from above, resembled two halves of a ragged apple, one black, one white. What you are looking at is two former quarries.

From the 1920s to 1958, one of these sites was part occupied by Leggo's, a successful manufacturer of herbicides and pesticides that claimed to be the largest producer of arsenic in the southern hemisphere. Quantities of arsenic and other contaminants were dumped into the quarry on its doorstep. Leggo's wasn't the only company following these waste disposal practices: a sugar refinery in nearby Whitehall Street disposed of its sludge in the other half of the quarry. After Leggo's closed and was demolished the area was developed for residential use, and at some point after that the quarries were filled in and covered over.

One half of the site stood empty for several decades until a developer applied to build a supermarket there in the 1990s. The Environment Protection Authority conducted an audit, revealing that the site was heavily polluted with a range of wastes associated with the production of pesticides, especially arsenic. The solution – or 'remediation' as the EPA calls it – was to cap the site with compacted clay. The groundwater was found to be contaminated, but the auditor concluded that it did not pose a risk unless it was extracted for use, or discharged to surface water; he asserted that it was 'unlikely' to reach the nearby creek for fifty years. I am unsure whether this is an accurate scientific estimate or a wild guess, but it sounds both comfortingly remote and a suspiciously round number.

These days, thousands of people come and go from the supermarket with little idea that they are buying their cornflakes on top of an arsenic-laced quarry. There's not much to give the game away, unless you happen to notice that the supermarket and car park are, oddly, about a metre higher than the surrounding streets. But humans tend not to notice anything below ground level. As the English nature writer Helen Macdonald wrote in her memoir *H is for Hawk*:

We are very bad at scale. The things that live in the soil are too small to care about; climate change too large to imagine. We are bad at time, too. We cannot remember what lived here before we did; we

cannot love what is not. Nor can we imagine what will be different when we are dead.

When I walk along the street that runs beside the arsenic site, I reflect on our culture's strange short-termism, and our belief that everything will be OK as long as we cover it up and forget about it. It seems like a metaphor for so much of our history.

### **City of Poison (2)**

THE YARRAVILLE ARSENIC site is an environmental trauma that slumbers uneasily in the city's unconscious, to reappear, perhaps, on some future date. Around the Melbourne suburbs there are other sites, vastly larger and even more contaminated, where we have not even attempted to hide what went on. Instead these sites have been fenced off, and signs erected reading 'Keep Out'.

I saw one such site on a hot afternoon as I walked eastwards from the suburb of Avondale Heights in Melbourne's north-west. I reached the Steele Creek Reserve, which has been revegetated with native species by a local friends' group. At one point the reserve is elevated, and from there I had a good view across the Maribyrnong River, looking towards the city ten kilometres distant. Closer, just across the river and immediately below me, I saw an area of deserted land, dotted with several dozen low red-brick buildings, and a couple of chimneys. It's bordered by the river on three sides, and Cordite Street – the name is not coincidental – to the south. The place was silent, deserted, drowsing in the heat, with reasonably thick vegetation established in red earth, among the abandoned, graffitied and apparently derelict buildings.

My curiosity aroused, I tried to get a closer look from several angles, but was deterred by high barbed-wire fences and anti-trespassing signage: 'This site was a former EXPLOSIVES FACTORY and contains hazardous materials.' However, a housing estate has been built very close to the east border of the site, and one of the new houses was open for inspection. I received a glossy brochure from the estate agent, professed my desire to buy in the area,

and went up to the second floor, from where the bedroom balcony gave me a view into the forbidden site.

This land, which covers 128 hectares – about forty times the size of Federation Square – was for many thousands of years the country of the Woiwurrung people. During the nineteenth century the place was known for horses – it was the location of the Maribyrnong racetrack, and a famous racing stables. It became a Department of Defence site in 1908, and for most of the twentieth century was one of the most significant munitions sites in the western suburbs.

The Commonwealth explosives factory (Maribyrnong) was particularly active during World War II, when the site employed more than six thousand people, mostly from the western suburbs, the majority of them women. Their job was to make shells, bombs, grenades, mines, depth charges and cartridges using cordite, nitroglycerine and TNT. (This explains the name of Cordite Street, which runs along the south border of the site. A few other street names nearby refer to the history of the area: Sentry Place, Ordnance Reserve and Military Road, the main artery through Avondale Heights.)

The factory's contribution to the Allied war effort made Maribyrnong a byword for explosives. A history of an Australian battalion fighting in the Western Desert in 1941 recounts a conversation between two officers about misguided artillery:

‘You’d better turn your mob off, it’s landing right in amongst us.’

‘It’s not mine, Arthur.’

‘It’s not yours be blowed, it’s got “Made in Maribyrnong” all over it.’

The explosives factory was one of the largest employers of women during the war. The history of war is generally written by men about men's deeds, but we have a record of what life was like in munitions factories thanks to the women who recorded their memories, and to artistic and literary representations by women.

‘People started to flock in, they were employing by the hundred every week and we had all types of people, sports teachers, prostitutes, you name it, they accepted anyone and it was absolutely packed to the hilt,’ recalled

Edna Macdonald, who worked at the ammunition factory in Footscray. For some, it was their first experience of paid employment, and hardly a pleasant one. Workers at the explosives factory had to handle substances such as sulphuric acid and nitric acid, from cold to boiling point. There were many cases of workers being gassed by sulphur dioxide. Contact with nitroglycerine caused violent headaches and dermatitis, and the machines created a toxic dust that settled on faces and skin. TNT is easily absorbed by the human body causing serious, sometimes fatal liver damage. God only knows what health problems the workers suffered later in life – these long-term casualties of the war, one suspects, were never officially measured.

Besides that, there was the dread that, at any moment, a fatal accident could lead to a catastrophic explosion. In Britain, during World War I, at least three munitions facilities had gone up, killing hundreds of workers. Additionally, the factory was obviously a potential enemy target. Not much to smile about, one might think, for those who went to work every day in the Detonator Section, the TNT Room or the Pyrotechnics Annexe. And yet photographs from the period suggest a sense of camaraderie, purpose and pride among those working there.

The Melbourne artist Sybil Craig, appointed an official war artist in 1945, spent several months at the explosives factory painting the women: her paintings can be viewed at the Australian War Memorial website. They are great paintings. They convey the intense concentration of the women at work, operating shell-boring machines, soldering cartridges and weighing cordite, chatting in the canteen or hurrying between buildings in the shadow of smoke billowing out of the chimneys.

Dame Mabel Brookes, a member of the Melbourne upper class, a philanthropist and writer, was one of the more unlikely employees. She worked at the factory under the name of 'Mrs Brookes' and wrote a memoir, *Crowded Galleries*, including details of her experiences. She described:

The cutting of the explosive (in appearance rather resembling spaghetti), the neat wrapping of the silver foil and the fitting into bright cases...a panorama of precision and order, of brass scissors and implements laid in rows...ever-ready dust-pans and brooms to

gather up a snippet of cordite in case an unguarded foot or heel generated a spark from friction.

‘Mrs Brookes’ was put onto the night shift, filling hand grenades:

The pay was not very good. The women were obedient to regimentation. They sat by benches and screwed in base plugs, or stood and packed and wired boxes, or filled the iron shells that fitted so comfortably into a cupped hand, and their voices and gossip went on and on unquenched...the girls crowded around at the tea interval to ask advice: their boys had told them that they would become sterile if they worked in barratol. Would I find out?... Abortions were discussed, the pros and cons of all types of ailments, the habits of their boys, the life story of the woman down the street, children’s shoes, the movies, Leggatt’s ballroom...

After the war the factory went on providing rocket and missile components for the Australian services until 1994. The factory closed in 1994, and since the mid-2000s the site has largely been vacant – and fenced off.

Such a prime piece of real estate – with river frontage to make a salesman drool – has huge value, and is obviously a prime target for development. As I found out when I explored around the site, they have already built right up to the edges. The obvious problem is that the land is highly contaminated. However, thanks to various master plans and shared visions and remediation action plans, that is apparently no hindrance to it becoming a substantial residential area. According to the City of Maribyrnong website, the state government approved the development in 2009. There will be ‘approximately two thousand to three thousand dwellings and significant office space employing up to three thousand workers’.

Looking down at the location, in late 2014, I see no evidence of a clean-up or a development. What I see is land that is neither one thing nor another – what is sometimes called ‘vague terrain’. It’s strange to stand in the hot dry stillness, not a leaf moving, and imagine the site bustling with thousands of workers, the racket of the machines, the stink of the chemicals and smoke.

I imagine the clatter and scrape of the trams on Cordite Street; the crowds of women, of all social backgrounds, disembarking for work. Few traces of those people remain here now; but the chemicals will linger in the ground and water for who knows how long? The idea that it can ever be cleaned up seems optimistic to the point of lunacy. It is likely that our memories of the place will disappear before the poisons in the earth do. And maybe when that happens, with all the insouciance of our recurrent amnesia, we will build here again.

### **City of Cities**

TO WALK THROUGH the suburbs is to be a time traveller. This becomes particularly evident when you traverse them slowly. In the space of a few metres the walker may pass a Victorian terrace, a red-brick Federation house, a weatherboard cottage from the 1950s, a pseudo-Tudor McMansion built last year. Around the corner is a factory, its original owner's name still carved proudly across the top, now converted to apartments; close by is a deco cinema and a bluestone cottage. As you walk, you seesaw between time zones; the city can pick you up and put you down again in a different era. Walk a suburban laneway on a quiet morning, the only sound your heels clicking on the bluestone, and it could be any time in the last one hundred and fifty years. You don't need a website of old aerial photographs to bounce you between present and past: you can achieve a similar effect simply by walking down a street.

Compared with a city like Paris, where the main streets and grand boulevards were built around the same time by Napoleon III's great architect, Haussmann, giving the centre of the city its remarkable consistency of style, Melbourne feels haphazard. But this very haphazardness fuels the imagination.

Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities* is based on a brilliant conceit. In the course of the novel, Calvino's adventurous narrator, Marco Polo, describes fifty-five cities with exotic and evocative names such as Zora, Eutropia, Esmerelda, Penthesilia. The premise of the narratives is that he is describing to the great Khan the beauties of his vast empire. But all the cities are, in fact,

versions of the same place: the explorer's home city of Venice, viewed from different angles, at different eras. Calvino plays with the idea of one city having many different possible forms:

In the centre of Fedora, that gray stone metropolis, stands a metal building with a crystal globe in every room. Looking into each globe, you see a blue city, the model of a different Fedora. These are the forms the city could have taken if, for one reason or another, it had not become the city we see today...every inhabitant visits it, chooses the city that corresponds to his desires...

In order to visit many cities, it is only necessary to stay at home. This insight is at the heart of Calvino's novel. No city can be summed up in a single metaphor, except, perhaps, this of Calvino's. What is a city? It is many cities.

Likewise in the streets of Melbourne, many cities exist alongside each other. Marvellous Melbourne, when every small-time manufacturer built himself a mansion as ornate as his ego; the sprawling suburbs of the 1950s, infested with the blight of 'featurism' that Robin Boyd railed against; the city of today, and perhaps the future, with its crop of monstrous towers that turn city streets into canyons and cram tens of thousands of city dwellers into apartments the size of chicken batteries; the parks and botanical gardens, the secret toxic dumps.

Along these streets and among these buildings, characters from the past, present and future co-exist. The name of a nineteenth-century quack appears, miraculously, on a wall; generations of shopkeepers' names form a palimpsest on the side of an old milk bar. The memories of residents bring back to life the bloody figure of Cockbill, slaughtering beasts on the streets of Newmarket, and mud-spattered Private Leonski, hurrying through the darkened streets of the wartime city. The shells of factories, however they have deteriorated or been transformed, are alive with the voices of workers, speaking Greek and Italian, Serbian and Croatian, Vietnamese, Chinese and English, as they make clothes, peanut butter, or bombs.

The city has both conscious and unconscious minds; it has many presents, many pasts, and infinite possible futures. All of them can be read in its buildings, in its earth, in its rivers and creeks. Who can say that any city is more real than any other? There are as many cities as there are inhabitants. We are all Marco Polo as we walk the streets, observing, dreaming and remembering, and by the narratives we create we bring to life cities of our own.

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## ESSAY

# Psychotherapy for Normal People

Kate Ryan

*The flowers in front of me have almost died. Orchids, a beautiful orange colour with small flecks of red at their centre. They are in a jar of water, which is beginning to become murky. Decay creeping in. So much of life is this, it seems, accepting that decay will come.*

Diary entry, 10 September 2013

*Life isn't made of stories that you cut up into slices like an apple pie. There's no standard way of approaching a story. We have to evoke a situation, a truth. This is the poetry of life's reality.*

Henri Cartier-Bresson

M, A MAN perhaps twenty years older than me, though I never knew how old he was, taught me how to speak and how to listen. After almost twenty years of sitting in a room with him, undergoing the process known as psychotherapy, we said goodbye. I can't remember shaking his hand in the last session.

In fact, I can't remember anything of what was said in that hour.

I know that I left.

A room in suburban Hawthorn with chairs to choose from. I sat facing M but never in the chair directly in front of him and certainly I did not lie on the couch. Early on I refused this suggestion.

There was a period when, emboldened, I sat in a different chair. I remember deciding this. Something good had happened. Perhaps I had finished my PhD, a feat that necessitated dredging up every single one of my resources and literally crawling to the finish line. At the time I wrote, somewhat incoherently, 'Exhaustion in every pore of my body, even my fingers.' In the course of the PhD I had lived through my partner's parents' sudden deaths from cancer, and had changed universities to remove myself from a toxic atmosphere. In the month I was making my final corrections I was beset with headaches that made me want to rip my head off. Nevertheless, I finished. The reports were good. And so a different chair.

M was a tall man, long feet, long legs. He had a friendly smile and he laughed heartily at my occasional jokes – often black and arguably not often funny – in a way that surprised me and made me think I might like him. *Like*. It was hard to know what liking was in there. As for his attitude to me, I knew he must find me annoying at times, boring. And sometimes, sitting there, I longed – absolutely *longed* – to escape. There was always a small vase of flowers on the coffee table between us. This sat on a doily, which I found fussy. Nevertheless, I was interested in the attention given to the objects in that room, the decisions that had taken place.

On one wall was a reproduction of *The Arnolfini Marriage* by van Eyck. In the course of twenty years I thought a lot about why M elected to put it on the wall. The woman appeared pregnant and I pondered this as a symbol of the beginning of things, of consciousness. Sometimes it irritated me that the man in the painting seemed masterfully in charge. The woman's arm lay passively on his, her expression was submissive. Other days I wondered about her inwardness. Did she keep a part of herself away as we all do, as I did?

Actually, when I went back to read about the painting I discovered that the woman was not pregnant; rather her dress was fashionably cut for the time so her belly appeared to protrude. Some scholars have suggested that the appearance of pregnancy was intentional, a sign that the couple wanted to have a child, and the way their hands were placed together supposed to

suggest their equal union. Their spheres of influence and their relative power seemed clear, however. The man was positioned next to the window, symbolising his place in the outside world; the woman with the instruments of her domesticity. Van Eyck was known to be interested in the play of light, and the painting was seen as very modern in its accurate reflection of a room's interior. The convex mirror behind them revealed someone, perhaps the artist. In M's room, however, these facts become almost immaterial. I appropriated the painting for my own purposes. All objects in that room brought me to things about myself: reflections, likes and dislikes, judgements, fears.

How to describe what it felt like to be in that room? In Joyce Carol Oates' novel *Middle Age*, Marina, a central character, has the sensation of a wild animal pressing down on her chest as she slept, and a terrible sense of oppression was sometimes what I felt just sitting there. I knew my self-loathing was at the surface pulling me down, but at times it felt almost like a physical restraint was on me. The weight of things – history, family, self.

The act of speaking without being asked was the first thing. I had to try as much as I could to say whatever came into my head. Often, opening my mouth to speak felt impossible. I judged what was inside before it came out and frequently I could not see the worth of saying things. M would only very rarely ask a question to get things going. If he did it would most often be about the meaning of my silence. For a person used to deflecting away my shyness by asking others questions, this alone made the sessions painfully hard. The next was the repetition of pain, my feelings of failure and inadequacy and despair. Must I find a word for them all? What was the point?

There was a photograph of a big Victorian house on M's wall. Bizarrely, I remember asking whether it was of Xavier, the Catholic boys' school attended by my brothers, father and grandfather. Recently, one of my mother's cousins told me that, as a boy of seven, my father could see his own bedroom from his Xavier boarding school dormitory. He was sent there even though his house was only a stone's throw away, just up Studley Park Road from Kew Junction. But the photo wasn't Xavier and I was embarrassed at my transparent desire to be closer to M. I have a vague memory of M telling me that the photo was of the Tavistock Institute in London, associated with the famous psychoanalysts Winnicott, Klein, Jung, Bion and Laing – and where, I think,

he trained also. But as with other things I said or M said in that room, this conversation had a dream-like quality and I cannot now recall the details. Or perhaps there were none.

The area was quiet. A suburban street. Only very rarely was there the sound of voices outside, workmen. Once I saw a rat running along the paling fence just near the door where I went in. The key was left in the lock and patients could ring the bell and enter without the need for M to answer the door. I liked this, being trusted, and it also made my mind wander to my childhood home, where our back door was frequently left unlocked, even overnight. As for the rat, it seemed so weirdly symbolic that I almost laughed as I dutifully brought in the story. And there was the fact that I have a terror of rats – the residue of the torture scene in *1984* and a rat plague, unbelievably enough, which took place in Kew, circa 1981.

A few times I glimpsed a middle-aged woman through the window – I had a sense of a floral dress, a matronly figure but comforting. Did I make this up? In my mind she was very different from the woman in *The Arnolfini Marriage* picture. I was in here and she was out there. I didn't adopt her for my narrative. Certainly I knew someone let herself in with a key at the front door. We patients were relegated to the side door, which, besides the free and easy key, had less charming associations of tradesmen's entrance, a sense of the second class. (A powerful rendition of Leonard Teale reading Henry Lawson's poem came to mind: 'Wait here second class. Second class wait here.') Lesser, secretive, perhaps even a bit shameful, according to my mood on the day.

Around this time, receipts began to be written in a different hand to M's scratchy, masculine looking writing. The new writing had flourishes, was loopy and elegant. I wondered about this woman, M's secretary I supposed. I imagined the conventional reciprocal form of their conversations. *Would you like a coffee? How was your weekend? Where did you go for dinner?* I could have asked M those questions but there was little point. He would not answer. We did not have a friendship, not even the comforting ordinariness of a collegial relationship or employer/employee. What we did have I was not sure. Nevertheless, M knew more about me than any single person on the planet and this included my partner and closest friend.

HOW TO DESCRIBE the grief of losing someone you never knew? Though one might ask, what is it to really know someone? In *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession*, Janet Malcolm discusses the analyst Annie Reich's summing up of the process known as 'termination' – when, by mutual agreement, psychoanalysis ceases. 'In nearly all cases which I have analyzed, there remained a wish to be loved by the analyst...seen as a person endowed with special power, special intelligence and wisdom... he is still seen as partaking in the omnipotence which the child attributes to the parents.' Reich describes a patient's reaction to the termination:

I felt as if I was suddenly left alone in the world. It was like the feeling I had after the death of my mother. I tried with effort to find somebody to love, something to be interested in. For months I longed for the analyst and wished to tell him about whatever happened to me. Then slowly, without noticing how it happened, I forgot about him... About two years later, I happened to meet him at a party and I thought he was just a nice elderly gentleman and in no way interesting.

At twenty-seven I began psychotherapy, at forty-seven I stopped. I wasn't 'cured', and at times since finishing I have felt a crippling sense of loss. I should mention that there were a number of gaps over the years where I didn't go, and then something drew me back – problems in my relationship, some issue with one of my children that caused acute reactions in me that I did not understand.

And then it was over. All those words spoken. All those words listened to. But more powerfully I felt as if a dream space had been closed to me. That room, at the best of times, had the character of dream. In it I might be free to say things, though of course it was rarely easy at first, to remember, to imagine, to mourn endlessly if I wanted to. My mind ranged here and there – children, parents, friends, work, books I loved, dreams, attractions to people, conversations I'd had, birth, death. I remember once describing a dream I'd had about my father in which he was alive and spoke clearly to me in a voice I could no longer recall in my waking life. As I spoke to M, I remembered

the yearning I felt when I woke but also the great comfort, as if a blanket had been, for a little while, wrapped around me.

Not long ago on a Thursday, at the time when I would normally have been in my session, I felt a terrible pain and loss and hopelessness. The next day it had lifted. Just now, as I write, I would like to look at M's house again, to drive down his street. I think of the black humour of stalking a former therapist. I recall the room again. There was a print of a little house with flowers in the garden, a picket fence. It was so sentimental and asinine, I wondered whether it could be a portrait of M's childhood house or perhaps meant to evoke childhood itself, at least an idealised one.

Lena Dunham's essay 'Therapy and Me' explores how Lena sought out and befriended the daughter of her therapist Robyn. After a couple of effusive notes are exchanged, Lena tells Robyn what's going on, who confirms that the relationship is out of bounds. 'It's too bad,' Robyn says, 'because you two are very similar. You would probably be good friends.' Sisters under the skin you might say, joined by the love of a mother, who for Lena can never be the real thing.

In F Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, which I read belatedly at the age of forty-six, I was surprised and fascinated to discover the world of psychotherapy depicted. Dick Diver, a psychoanalyst, rescues Nicole, beautiful and very sad, from a Swiss asylum where she is under his care, and marries her. In the course of the book, Dick and Nicole's marriage collapses. Dick becomes an alcoholic; Nicole is not 'cured'. Zelda Fitzgerald, on whom the character is based, was not cured either and Fitzgerald's adventures with alcohol are well catalogued.

WHEN I FINISHED therapy my friend, who was undergoing psychoanalysis herself, gave me a book with the disarming title of *Psychoanalysis for Normal People*. It was a pocket-sized, green, hard-cover book, a bit faded looking, published in 1926, with black writing on it. I could imagine a strolling psychoanalyst slipping it into his or her (though in 1926 there weren't many women in the job) suit pocket and consulting it between sessions. I recalled from my time in publishing that, as far as covers went, green was thought to

be sales death, but this book did not seem to carry the contemporary pressure to look appealing. Nevertheless, it had its own charm. The word psychoanalysis was divided into two and capitalised – ‘PSYCHO-ANALYSIS’ – giving it greater connotations of illness, it seemed to me, but also making me give more weight to the word ‘analysis’. A sentence in Geraldine Coster’s introduction captured my attention: ‘Why does that woman, who ought to be perfectly strong and well, live the life of a nervous invalid, always tired, always with a headache, or indigestion – fussy, anxious, undecided, and full of self-pity?’ Why indeed!

To quote Coster again, ‘How can a search into the motives, thoughts of a patient cure him (or her) of everyday physical symptoms and obscure mental disabilities?’ That pesky word ‘cured’ again. The fact was that I found therapy profound and revelatory, but also boring, enraging, devastatingly sad and painful. The pain was often very deep, as if it were coming from a long time ago – like the pain of a frozen limb thawing. I began, I suppose, because of things partially hidden from myself that caused me pain and difficulty, that disrupted my life and bubbled to the surface in anxiety and depression. I came to understand well what these things were.

After dipping into Coster’s book, I discovered and devoured *The Examined Life: How We Lose and Find Ourselves* by psychoanalyst Stephen Grosz, in which he discussed his mode of working and the stories of his patients. I had the feeling I was reading about an exclusive club of which I had once been a member. I entered the room with each of his patients, heard their stories, felt comforted by the presence of one who listened to them.

I was particularly drawn to the story of Anthony M, whose sessions with Grosz became increasingly silent as he struggled to accept a diagnosis of HIV at a time when AIDS was fatal. The silence, Grosz concluded, ‘expressed different things at different times: sorrow, a desire to be close... but to stay separate, and the wish to stop time’. He also observed that the character of silence changed gradually: the ‘deepening quiet was a sign of Anthony’s deepening trust’. Perhaps, it was also ‘rehearsing the moment of his death’. As time went on, Anthony began to sleep in his sessions too, for longer and longer periods of time. From experience, I understood the distinction between silences in therapy, and I too had experienced the deep exhaustion

that could come at times of acute pain. I also knew that such a story would likely make psychotherapy sceptics go berserk.

What Anthony M's story provoked in me was a nostalgic envy. How safe, how childlike it seemed to be covered in a blanket (actually cover oneself – I was taking things too far, and in fact it was almost frightening, to imagine M doing so) and sleep in his presence. The reality was, however, that while I was with M the very idea felt both absurd and confronting.

In *Darkness Visible*, writer William Styron speaks movingly about his descent into depression when he was about to be awarded the prestigious Prix mondial Cino del Duca, bestowed on writers or scientists whose work is seen as epitomising 'humanistic' values or themes. In fact, Styron's own sense of himself was under attack from the moment he learned of the award, giving way to a 'dank joylessness' and leading to feelings of horror and despair. Styron's withdrawal from heavy alcohol consumption and the misprescription of the drug Halcion were seen as contributing factors to his deterioration; however, I took from the memoir the paradoxical sense that darkness might descend at times when the best things were on offer.

At the end of an exhausting day during which he received the award, made an acceptance speech, lunched with dignitaries and then had to face a photo session at the Picasso Museum, Styron said that his 'brain had begun to endure its familiar siege: panic and dislocation, and a sense that...[his] thought processes were being engulfed by a toxic and unnameable tide that obliterated any enjoyable response to the living world'. He described 'a sensation close to, but indescribably different from, actual pain...pain most closely connected to drowning or suffocation'. The evening culminated in a dinner with François Gallimard, his publisher, where, 'zombie-like', unable to speak or eat, Styron realised he had lost the del Duca cheque for \$25,000.

### **Car City, Maroondah Highway, Ringwood, 1995**

MY FRIEND SIOBHÀN and I weave through the lines of Mazdas and Corollas and Falcons. I have no interest in cars and don't really look at them closely, and sometimes in my anxiety they blur and are lost as if my vision is

breaking down too. I just see the colours – blue and red and silver, a canary yellow that, if I were buying a car, I would never consider. Seats and stripy umbrellas are placed here and there, in case someone wants to sit and contemplate or a salesman wants to rest in the shade pre- or mid-negotiation. I can't recall anyone sitting on them.

Today there is an icy blasting wind. Siobhàn and I, editors at Penguin Books, head for the Car City food van to buy our lunch, though it is becoming harder and harder for me to eat. Focaccia, probably roasted vegetable and rubbery melted cheese, pesto. The latter has just come into vogue in Ringwood and they put it on everything. We laugh that this is the best lunch option in the world of Penguin Books. It seems wrong, undignified. We are fiction editors!

This excursion is the best part of my day, partly because Siobhàn appears not to notice the horror that is growing within me, and this bestows the smallest comfort. Perhaps I will be okay.

When I began therapy, I had developed a pathological fear of driving on the freeway to my new publishing job – the job that seemed to represent everything that I wanted. Panic attacks were coming thick and fast, and happened at a lunch with an author when the floor seemed to rise towards me and I feared I would not be able to get a coffee cup to my lips. As well, I was frozen between a terrible fear that my relationship with my partner was wrong and a sense that it would be catastrophic to leave him. The fear had the character of torture. I felt incapable of enjoying anything in my life. These were the facts I brought to psychotherapy.

Somewhere towards the end of my therapy I became fascinated with *The Black Rose*, a project by photographer Trent Parke, an Australian member of the elite Magnum collective of photographers. The idea for the project began when Parke suggested to fellow members Jim Goldberg and Alec Soth, who were spread across the globe, that they could explore the idea of 'home' to better understand where each of them had come from.

At the age of twelve, Parke's life was irrevocably damaged, as was his idea of home. When his father was out at his squash night and Parke lying in bed, home with his mother and younger brothers, he heard his mother call him.

His first thought was that, as the oldest, he was always asked to do *everything*. When he got up he found his mother collapsed in the hall having an asthma attack. ‘Mum is struggling to breathe. I help her to the bathroom. She tells me to run and get the doctor Sou, who lives two houses up the hill. I run...’

When Parke got back his mother was dead. Since then, he has said, ‘I have never stopped running.’

There have been no memories of his childhood since then either: ‘The hallway is my only memory of my mum. There is nothing before and nothing after.’

I am walking home with my parents from Kew Library along Cotham Road on Saturday morning. I am the youngest child of five, lucky/unlucky to have time alone with my parents because my siblings are either deep in drug-like teenage sleep or far away in their inner-city share houses.

I turn to see my father standing very still and stooped, my mother leaning over him. They seem caught there – a tram clicks past, the solid houses stand, white Georgian, Victorian, Hawthorn brick, graceful European trees and solid family cars line the road. I wait, watching.

It is angina. Within a few weeks my father is dead of a heart attack. This is what it seems but perhaps the time in between is longer. I compress it in my mind. How can I know what’s true? Perhaps it doesn’t matter. It is my own story, the one I have pieced together. I go over it again and again with M. There was to be an operation at St Vincents Hospital but my father dies before it is performed. I am thirteen.

*The Black Rose* became Parke’s seven-year journey into absence, a search for the memories that disappeared when his mother died and a search for home. As he and his wife Narelle Autio travelled around Australia, Parke filled fourteen artist books with thousands of photographs and diary entries, eventually culminating in an exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia in 2014. In symbolic terms the project was shaped by Parke finding a black succulent in a motel carpark in central Victoria: ‘velvet-like petals formed a dark rich flower on the ends of each branch’, he recalls in an interview with *Try Hard*. A man approached telling him to take a cutting, dismissing Parke’s comment

that he and his family would be on the road for weeks. 'Just plant it and it will grow...' Parke was told. 'He then...announced this plant as the Black Rose.' When Parke researched the plant he found it had associations with 'the search for absolute perfection as the Black Rose...[did] not exist'. He also found that it was linked with black magic.

Reviewer Heather Robinson described the results of Parke's *Black Rose* odyssey as a 'Wunderkammer of curiosities'. Images of life, of death, birth and the natural world, the passing of time – ants on a Jatz cracker, a dead pig on a spit, cicada wings, a thousand photos of sunsets, his small son Dash, asleep and feverish – are presented as if thrown up by the unconscious or a fevered imagination. The effect is mesmerising, hypnotic, somewhere between dream and reality. 'Every second event,' Parke says, 'no matter how big or small, could be important. A lot of it is based on chance or coincidence as one idea leads to the next.'

Returning to *Psychotherapy for Normal People*, I read: 'Human consciousness has been compared to a vast sea in which the glittering surface represents what we commonly call the conscious mind, while the unseen and much larger body of water beneath represents the unconscious. As the under layers of water are constantly mingling with the surface water and changing its content and temperature, so the under layers of the unconscious are forever altering and modifying our conscious thoughts and actions.'

As the years passed, many things rose up in therapy. My father's death was the obvious one, which I perpetually circled and returned to. The playwright Simon Stephens described the loss of his father at an early age as 'a kind of bruise', and I too felt the imprint of my father's death as if it were on my skin. Everything in my life seemed informed by this event. Things relating to it that came up in M's room had the character of photographs. I described them, captured them again and again and yet they were a step away from the real thing. They were my attempt to solidify my memories and validate them – though they were mine alone. Parke said of *The Black Rose*: 'This show is everything I have learnt over my entire lifetime of taking pictures. It includes all of my life's experiences. This is the sum of it all. I'm not sure I'll ever do anything like it again.' In

therapy, too, I brought the sum of all the events that I felt had shaped me and made me who I was.

The church attached to the primary school I had left a few years earlier. Our Lady of Good Counsel, Deepdene – a small leafy suburb that is not quite Balywn and not quite Kew. As a child I never think about the meaning of ‘good counsel’. The words seem to run together like a football chant and more often we abbreviate it to OLG C, disguising the words further and making the letters sound snappy, ordinary.

My parents’ friend Dan redesigned the church and now my father’s funeral is here. There are hundreds of people spilling out onto the honey-coloured steps.

Afterwards, two or three of my school friends come back to our house where we hang around on the back deck. It is a school day and one of them, Liz, wears our winter uniform, the maroon jumper warm and strong in the light. I feel stiff and awkward in my good clothes, on show. The occasion seems a test I must pass and I am a bit dismissive to my friends about it all. I don’t show any sadness. In truth now I would say that I am frozen. Perhaps I am in shock.

Other events from my past appeared in therapy, more subterranean but just as significant. The stillborn baby named Michael whom my mother delivered six years before my birth, perfect according to her except for the umbilical cord around his neck depriving him of oxygen. I’m not sure whether she saw Michael or whether the doctor or my father told her he was perfect – a tantalising, devastating fact.

My father had the job of taking the little coffin out to Box Hill Cemetery with his friend Keith White. This is when it hit my father, so my mother said, the heartbreakingly small size of the coffin. My mother’s job was to sit up in bed in a pretty nightie and pretend to be okay when her other children – four of them before me – came to visit, no doubt bewildered. *Where was the baby?*

*You’ll have another one*, my grandmother said.

What followed after the birth/death of Michael (the name incidentally of my childhood best friend next door – a fact that must have set up painful ripples for my parents) was a miscarriage, then in 1966 my birth. Keith White

was asked to be my godfather and perhaps it wasn't surprising that he didn't do much in the role, in fact I don't recall ever meeting him. My mother reported universal joy at my arrival, with only a small but noisy protest from my two brothers who wanted a boy. So there I was, a desperately wanted baby but, as Selma Fraiberg famously wrote, one who might have co-existed with 'ghosts in the nursery' – the experiences and feelings my parents brought to my birth, including inevitably the baby that wasn't to be, Michael. And so years later, at twenty-seven, thirty-seven and finally when I stopped at forty-seven, there I was with M. Talking and talking and trying to talk, speculating, surmising at most, because as M says 'we can really never *know*' what my mother felt, what my father felt. At the very end of my time in therapy, however, we seemed to return again and again to Michael's birth. And I did know that my mother's eyes filled with tears when she spoke of his delivery, even when she was eighty-seven and it had happened at least fifty-five years before.

### **Fitzwilliam Street, Kew, Melbourne, 1975**

MY FRIEND MICHAEL and I cruise the streets on our bikes, we are ten and nine respectively. We have paused, our bikes rest against a grey paling fence while we open the little white bags containing our drugs of choice. My teeth are jammed with a Mate – hard caramel inside and somewhat cloying milk chocolate on the outside. We don't speak. There's nothing much left in my bag. I have eaten my musk stick, whose slight chemical tang seems to match its unappealing mauve colour. I have crunched through my favourite freckles – chocolate button-shaped things covered with hard hundreds and thousands. My jaw has flexed and clicked through rubbery snakes. I have bitten off the heads of several jelly babies, pink, yellow, green. They are pale with icing sugar and a film of it covers the bottom of the bag. Gelatinous sugar coats my tongue too. I pause to look at Michael and see that his own bag bulges, still infuriatingly half full. Occasionally he might take pity on me and proffer something the milkbar man has tossed in because they are so unpopular – maybe a bullet or a spongy milk bottle.

Mostly I wait. While Michael sucks meditatively I put my eye to a hole in the fence. I can see the electric blue of a swimming pool, as magical as a

mirage. I pull away reluctantly and become aware that my ankles sting a little where the pedals have scraped them. The sun sinks into my head and I feel suddenly drugged with sugar.

Soon we will ride off again. Our bikes are extensions of us – with them we are powerful, we can go anywhere, and be anything we choose to be.

In his memoir, *A History of Silence*, Lloyd Jones parallels the excavation of the secrets in his family – the maternal grandmother who had abandoned her child, *his* mother who spied on the mother she claimed to despise, childhood violence and poverty – with the devastating destruction of the Christchurch earthquake of 2011. Jones observes the way things bubble to the surface in the orderly suburban landscape: a man sits on an abandoned couch in the street, raw sewage seeps. Jones says, ‘I could smell the liquefied earth. Holes, subsidence everywhere.’ He describes the sight of a fissure appearing in solid ground: ‘In a few minutes a history of peat and swamp flooded a landscape thought to have drained its past.’ After a while, he says, the destruction ‘began to feel fake, to feel as though everyone had been living in a theatre set’. The image reminds me of Dali’s dripping clocks – random sights from the unconscious intruding or stuck incongruously side by side. For Jones, the stifling ordinariness of his childhood amounted to a kind of deadness and his family was the theatre set whose facade could no longer be kept intact.

As time passed in therapy I saw how my self was cast up and split open, my past and present excavated layer upon layer, things I had considered stable, rendered unstable and casting rubble around me. When I began, M had given me a piece of paper setting out aspects of the psychotherapeutic process. *Some thoughts and feelings might arise that will be unfamiliar*, it said. I am reminded of an image in Rachel Cusk’s strange haunting memoir of the breakdown of her marriage, *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation*, in which she described rubble thrown up on the beach of the seaside town in which she lived. These random, almost surreal objects were like portents of destruction or upheaval, reflecting the way the apparent order of her family life no longer held true.

As time went on, however, I was less surprised by what emerged in therapy than by the intractability of things. A line from my diary near the end: ‘How can I still be grieving my father thirty-four years after his death?’

Where Jones explored the physical environment of New Zealand to excavate his family history and its secrets, I was in a room in Hawthorn, frequently feeling trapped with another, above all trapped with the parts of myself that I could not seem to change.

The central character of the HBO series *In Treatment* is Paul Weston, a New York psychotherapist (played by Gabriel Byrne), and in the show we get compelling and occasionally disturbing glimpses into Paul's private life. We see his analysis with the wonderfully elegant Gina, played by Dianne Wiest – all creamy draped clothes and designer shoes. There is Gina with Paul, or *Pawlll* as she coos when trying to make him face up to his myriad blocks. We see him with his misbehaving teenage kids and his furious wife, not to mention his bitterness and rage over Gina's professional slight of him. We see him frequently despairing, cynical about the very process he is working within, grieving childhood losses – abandonment by his father and fury and sadness at having to look after his depressive mother. We see him as angry and irrational as a three year old. Yet there he is again with the troubled young gymnast Sophie, the suicidal pilot Alex and the seductive Laura, having emerged from his chaotic home life, smoothed down his hair and sucked in his stomach – in short, having put his rattled psyche in check. Or not.

I mentioned the show to M, who said he had never watched it. *That's what they all say*, I thought.

There were indisputable signs of M's children. For a start, he always took time off at school holidays. Early on this had been a point of tension – I was supposed to take holidays at the same time if possible, otherwise my missed sessions would not be covered by Medicare. *What*, I wondered, *does he rule my life?* However, as with other rigidities associated with the process I gradually accepted this, or was perhaps passively acquiescent and forgot at some point what M said in explanation. Sometimes I wondered where he went on holidays. I pictured Apollo Bay. Was there an Otways sticker on the back window of his car? There *was* a vespa parked outside the house, but for the life of me I could not conceive of this as a vehicle of choice for M. It must have belonged to one of his children. Once, when I was early to my session,

I saw him guiding an elderly man – I assumed it was his father – into a car. Both of them were wearing straw hats. In the last months of therapy following my morbid, old-ladyish habit of reading the death notices, I saw one for a woman with the same surname as M's. I was positive it was M's mother and on the following day my session was cancelled, an unknown occurrence that confirmed my suspicion. The following week I debated endlessly as to whether to offer my condolences. When I finally blurted them out, M merely nodded and the silence, heavy now, returned.

Another time when I was early, M came out and asked me, 'for reasons of privacy', to wait not in the waiting room but outside the house. It was true that the waiting room was more an antechamber, a small room with a few chairs, a pile of magazines, a coffee table and a small bathroom attached. I knew it made sense to stop people waiting, as you could hear everything being said through the sliding door, but surely he could set things up differently? I felt irritated – it was still a *waiting* room – but I was also mortified. I had done something wrong. Another time, my session was nearly over when the doorbell rang and M apologised and I heard him ask the next patient to wait outside too. I felt a little smug. I was important. I was loved.

As these stories indicate, perennially I hated the feeling of M's disapproval, however slight, or what I interpreted as this. Also his boredom, his scepticism, tiredness, his lack of praise when I felt I deserved it. I felt myself often swept with sudden primitive feelings, like some sudden summer storm coming down. I wondered if this was what it was like to be a baby, utterly at the mercy of hunger, cold, pain. M and I discussed it. What were feelings before one had words to describe them?

The changing weather was often a comforting feature of being there. I liked it when I could watch the rain fall outside the window. The autumn trees were lit up and their colours seemed intensified by my confinement and I sometimes got lost in looking at them or took myself away from myself; also the clouds, the glimpse of a house over the road. I remembered longing to be on a plane to somewhere, anywhere but there. It is no accident I did my PhD on ambivalence. This was my paradox. I was desperate to escape and yet I couldn't leave.

M's office was very close to where I grew up and this brought many memories of childhood – excitement, claustrophobia, sadness. It seemed funny though that when Michael and I rode miles in all directions exploring the neighbourhood I could not recall ever riding down M's street. I remembered so much of the neighbourhood: the park with its skull-cracking seesaw; Davis Street Kindergarten, of which my father was briefly president; Fitzwilliam Street milkbar. Sometimes I felt I could evoke the exact feeling of being a child in these places as I sat in M's chair. Then a kind of elation rose in me, the way that, as a child, the world could feel as open and exciting as a huge sky. There was also sometimes the peculiar understanding that I was still the child and adolescent I once had been.

COTHAM ROAD, KEW. This is the road that leads everywhere. My primary school – small and contained and mostly concrete – is down towards Balwyn, where I spend six years mastering the art of throwing a tennis ball and running until I am brown and wiry. When my shoes scrape and fly across the playground as I run and jump, catch and throw balls, I feel utterly myself and I am sure I can do anything. There is joy and a firm solid sureness in me then, and I am smug in the knowledge that I am always the first girl to be picked for any team. Sitting cross-legged in a tight group of girls *talking*, school seems harder, and I don't feel I know what the rules are or what to say. Nevertheless, when I leave primary school I have enough friends that the move up the hill to secondary school does not seem too onerous.

High school is Genazzano Convent, bang in the middle of Cotham Road, surrounded by rows of pine trees and an iron fence, a curving driveway dissecting rolling ovals. At one end of Cotham Road is Kew junction with its array, to a teenage eye, of boring shops: chemist; Lang Knitt, the old-lady clothes shop; newsagent; milkbar; Arthur's Coffee shop, where kids will go to smoke but I never do; the Skinny Dog Hotel, where later we will drink underage. Further along Cotham Road, closer to home, around the corner from my grandmother's flat in Mary Street, is Exposure Records. It's here I will buy my first single: Barbara Feldon, à la 99 from *Get Smart*, singing a cover of Nancy Sinatra's 'These Boots Are Made for Walking'.

Up the other end of Cotham Road you turn right into Burke Road and the allure of ‘going down Camberwell’. The suburb is famously ‘dry’, and my friends and I roll our eyes about this, but at fourteen we don’t drink quite yet. All the shops are there – Sportsgirl, Country Road, Esprit, Portmans (though I mostly turn my nose down at the latter as too crappy). There is the sedate Georges, the old-school department store that I am not scared to go into because my mum has a Georges charge card, courtesy of my dad who had tastes beyond our means; also the clean lines of Anthea Crawford.

We stray into these shops like a band of roving travellers with our bags and our runners, our tight high-waisted jeans and baggy jumpers, our candy-coloured Sportsgirl T-shirts. There is a crowded little jewellery shop down a black-and-white-checked arcade, a couple of shoe shops, the Chocolate Box and its iced coffee topped with fake whipped cream.

But best of all, when my taste begins to turn non-conformist, there is the sheer adrenalin of Camberwell Market – the smell of oily jam donuts on a foggy Sunday morning, the adolescent punks and mods, and the pure thrill of second-hand clothes, aisles and aisles of them. At such times, sidling along with my best friend, just as when I ran in the asphalt playground a few years earlier, my life seems to stretch before me with unknown riches. Though I have lost my father, his mortality seems not to stick to me. What does it even mean that he is gone? I am tough, untouchable; surely my life will be singular and special.

The chair I sat on was made of grey felt material and dark wood, a tasteful reproduction of an Eames chair. Sometimes I looked at the books on M’s shelf, but they didn’t give me much. Some dry-looking thing about the couple in psychotherapy, Freud or perhaps Klein; some uninteresting looking book about Shakespeare. It is no wonder I can’t remember the titles now, though the spines were also a little too far away to be read easily, perhaps intentionally.

Somehow I sensed that M was not a reader in the way I was, obsessive and perpetual, one book or four or five running endlessly into the next. In one of my whinges about writing rejections, however, M alluded to understanding something of the pain of the writing life. I imagined his article in some fictitious psychotherapeutic journal with a riveting title (strangely

interesting to me these days), along the lines of ‘Transference in the couple’ or ‘The psychodynamic approach to depression’. Perhaps I briefly imagined doing a bit of editing on M’s piece or even being in charge of knocking it back.

For a while there were actual copies of a magazine called, I think, *Psychotherapy Today* in the waiting room that I got to sit in *very* briefly. I remember having brought up some snatch from an article I’d read. When I next went back the magazine was gone. I felt like a child whose parents had confiscated a book deemed inappropriate. In fact, it brought to mind one of the last memories of going to Kew Library with my father, when he didn’t let me borrow Ian Fleming’s *From Russia With Love*. Shame washed through me on both occasions and I conflated this day at the library with the day of my father’s heart pains, though it is unlikely it was same one.

It struck me that the *Psychotherapy Today* incident, as I called it in my mind, was what sometimes enraged me about the psychotherapeutic process. The sense that I was held there, despite my freedom to choose otherwise, and that M had the knowledge, the power. When my partner questioned why I had to pay for sessions that I couldn’t attend I became defensive and annoyed, but privately my feelings about this were a mixture of resentment and shame. Money reminded me that I was a patient paying for a doctor, like everyone else. Often I felt powerless. Insights were grasped and then lost. There was something of the magical or perhaps the illusory about the experience. It was profound but also, as the payment issue showed, ordinary. In any case, M was the puppeteer pulling the strings and I never felt I truly understood what was going on.

At one point I questioned him about how he operated and he seemed vague – a bit of Klein, a bit of Winnicott, a bit of this, a bit of that. It seemed a frighteningly inexact science and yet I put my faith in it, year in, year out. And because of the person I was, who could drift into dreaminess and vagueness, or perhaps laziness, rather than comprehensively working things out, I let it go.

The physical problem of sitting there with no real barrier between us often occurred to me. Did I cross my left leg? I was aware of my shoes, when I had failed to clean them or when I had managed to buy a pair of new boots but not managed to pay M’s account. I also noticed M’s shoes, long and thin,

well-polished, serviceable, brown lace-ups usually, with a little extravagance and flourish expressed in coloured socks.

Sometimes I saw that my leg shook. A few times I wore too-short skirts and I struggled not to be overly aware of intense feelings of exposure. When I was not speaking M sat very still, didn't look at me, and a couple of times I was afraid that he had fallen asleep in my droning accounts of myself. I was almost too afraid to ask about this and when I did he denied it, but in slightly guarded terms – something about closing his eyes to concentrate or not feeling well. I was reminded of President Clinton: 'I did *not* have sexual relations with that woman.' Or as Queen Gertrude said to Hamlet, he 'doth protest too much'.

I saw M as a paternal figure always. When my son was a baby and I brought him along, he would tactfully or perhaps self-protectively leave the room when I needed to change his nappy. He would return with a plastic bag and leave the room again to take the unsavoury parcel away. I wonder now why I didn't bring my own plastic bag. Perhaps I liked bringing him into service of me.

As I walked in to my appointment I saw that M's garden was beautiful – there were daffodils and freesias and shrubs whose name I didn't know. During the drought a sign appeared saying the garden was watered by tank water, showing that M was not entirely immune to what people might think. The garden was artfully arranged, clearly a gardener's garden. I recalled a session in which I complained of the extreme boredom I had felt being taken tree by tree, shrub by shrub around the garden of my partner's parents. M made a slight but noticeable defence of them. Sometimes walking to the front door I leant in to smell the roses.

Occasionally I had to turn away because I could not cope with the sense that something I said had moved M. I could not bear to feel that I was intruding either. I learnt again and again that I feared intimacy and was afraid of imposing myself on people. What if they did not want me? I saw myself most often as a fatherless girl. This was certainly attended to, but not removed by the process.

BOX HILL CEMETERY. In the lead up to finishing therapy I found myself drawn to my father's grave. I only went once but the wish was always there,

as if I were pulled towards it, as if it were the only place I could feel safe. I had the desire to absorb my father's presence whatever that was, could be.

I went the slow way along Canterbury Road and I enjoyed the drive, the rows and rows of traffic lights. I liked the stopping and starting. In the car I felt protected, in a capsule, warm, Radio National *Book Show*, out of the inner city and through Kew, Camberwell, Canterbury, Box Hill and finally, when it seemed I had gone too far, the turn into Middleborough Road.

In the side street bordering the cemetery was a row of pine trees, the same as those in my childhood garden. Someone had nailed in wooden slats for children to climb up the trunk of one tree. There was a small platform and a dangling rope swing. My throat thickened with tears when I saw it. I walked in the gate.

I had noted the row and number of my father's grave in my phone but still it took a while to find it. For a moment I panicked: the last time I came, a few years earlier, I had spent half an hour looking, which was why I came prepared. As I drew closer to the grave, though, my stomach was caught between sadness and a kind of excitement. Later, reading about Parke, I thought I understood something of what he felt when he learned about a tree his mother had saved from removal by the family's neighbours. They named it Dianne's Tree and it overlooked his childhood home. Parke came to feel that the banal words of comfort repeated to him over and over, that his mother was 'watching over him', were actually true. For me, my father's grave seemed proof of connection too. My father was buried here. Some doubt in my mind, perhaps because of the suddenness of his death and how young I was when it happened, made me doubt the seriousness of the event, perhaps in a way to feel that it had never even happened. Maybe it was the reverse of Joan Didion's magical thinking in the year after her beloved husband John died, that he might not really be gone. But there it was, the date of his death: 11 May 1980.

The grave is austere, but the fact that it is in a corner of an intersecting path makes it feel tucked in, protected. Grey stone, a close scattering of gravel on top. There are no pots of artificial flowers or lush plantings, no urn. It is a grave, pure and simple. I think about my mother having to choose the type of stone, the words. They, too, are simple. *Dearlly beloved. Born, died. Rest in peace.*

I sit awhile. I don't know how long to stay. It feels peaceful and safe but my time also seems finite. I would like to stay a long time but of course I can't. The baby Michael is buried with my father but there are no words to say so.

It seems enough that I have come; I don't have any desire to walk around the rest of the cemetery. Across from my father is Joy Hester's grave and I think of the intertwining of art and loss, which is how it's always been for me. I think about Joy leaving Sweeney and what drove her to it: the diagnosis of Hodgkin's Disease, the disintegration of her relationship with Bert Tucker, the new one with Gray Smith. I wonder why it felt necessary for her to leave her son, more devastating because she went on to have two more children with Gray. Even now, however, it seems less significant for a father to leave his children and go and live in another country or start again with another partner, reveal himself as someone new. I sympathise with leaver and left but I myself do not let people go easily. I look at Joy's grave, I glance once more at my father's, and then I go.

In an interview with Jennifer Burne, Helen Garner spoke of the ability to free-associate and make connections in her writing as an outcome of her psychoanalytic psychotherapy, and I feel strongly that my work with M has changed and deepened my approach to my writing as well. Garner spoke too of her admiration for Janet Malcolm's use of psychoanalysis in the understanding of her subjects. Garner referred to things 'connected by filaments to things we might have been unable to access', of learning to 'trust leaps of imagination', and of becoming confident in seizing something about a person but also of 'trying to exist in doubt'. These are traits that I see as emerging from my psychotherapy and, in trying to observe the world as a writer, they have been vital.

Somewhere toward the end of my therapy I watched an interview with the baffled grieving mother of a suicide bomber. She related the story of a phone call in which her son asked her if it would be okay if he became a Muslim. She agreed. She wanted him to be happy and it seemed, she said, that he had turned his life around, become settled and focused. I learnt to question false polarities in my therapy as I learned to question everything – the suicide bomber had a mother who loved him and had been a loving son

and yet he committed a heinous crime. We are all a mixture of loving and hating feelings, of darkness and light.

THINGS THAT I attribute to therapy: I finished my PhD; I became a better mother; my relationship with my partner became disentangled from my deeply buried grief about my father and became stronger; and I felt the grief that, since childhood, had been closed to me. I grew more resilient. I do not give up. My attention to my art, the intensity of focus and my drive to be a writer, a certain tenacity growing in me – all these things I link to the process.

Things that have not gone away: sadness; despair; a persistent irritation when these states hover; the feeling, which comes and goes, that in some indefinable way I am not good enough. I observe these states rising up in me but most often now they do not drown me.

For Parke, the loss of his mother, Dianne, an amateur photographer, meant taking up her Pentax Sportmatic and entering her laundry darkroom. ‘Seeing the first photograph come up in the developing tray was the best magic trick I had ever seen,’ he said. Writing wasn’t a passion I shared with my father, although his letters attest to his skill as a writer, and a few months before he died he kept notes about his lawyer’s practice, describing his clients and the problems they brought him with an eye for their eccentricity and uniqueness – a writer’s eye. And like all my family he was a huge and wide-ranging reader.

Therapy made me aware of and begin to accept life’s transience – children are born, parents die, sometimes too soon – and it is this awareness that I bring to my writing. Julie Robinson sees Parke’s *Black Rose* project as ‘similar to sixteenth and seventeenth-century “vanitas” or “momento mori” paintings, reminding us of the transience of human existence and the inevitability of death’ too, and his urgent drive to tackle both life and mortality drew me to his work. At the end of his journey, Parke described finding a mirror belonging to his mother. He absorbed the tortuous knowledge that each day of his childhood the mirror had captured an image of Dianne brushing her hair in front of it, yet nothing remained of her. Just as the baby who wasn’t to be, Michael, left his mark, those missing from our lives have their effect. We try, consciously or not, to capture them again, carry them with us. In the room

with M, I was captured too, thrown up before myself but sometimes leaving that space what I took with me seemed nebulous, vanishing like smoke.

Parke says, 'The reason I take photographs is to make discoveries for myself. . . Most of it comes from memory, the subconscious and events experienced growing up.' In taking photographs, an image might emerge of the mother he lost and the boy he was. The reason I write is to make discoveries about myself, the girl-self who lost her father too young, and by extension to make discoveries about others and the world. I know now that I learnt much about myself in the room with M.

I have a love/hate relationship with my ups and downs. They fuel my writing I think, though in the midst of depression it does not seem so. But like Parke's loss, mine has been filtered in creative ways. I do not regret or wish away these losses, even my father's death – they have made me what I am, and that includes becoming a writer. In a recent article, Garner put it beautifully again: 'Sometimes it seems to me that, in the end, the only thing that people have got going for them is imagination. At times of great darkness, everything around us becomes symbolic, poetic, archetypal. Perhaps this is what dreaming, and art, are for.'

In my non-writing life, I am aware now of an ability to say things to people that I want to say even when I am frightened, and to sit with others' painful feelings. Just after I stopped therapy, my nephew was hurt in an accident in which he nearly died and I was thrown into anxiety in a way I hadn't been for years. Nothing much helped but I noticed I was able to pay close attention, to stay with and not fear my sister's pain. Only after I left her side did I allow that pain to affect me, often bringing it home to my family or carrying it within me.

In the last weeks of therapy, when I spoke of the pull of Dad's grave, M said something about my needing to live first. He didn't seem to want to explore the peculiar intensity of my feelings around the grave, or perhaps he thought he had done so enough. I don't think there was ever a question of my not wanting to live, however, but I needed to mourn M too. It was one of the times, not frequent, when M's comment seemed misjudged. My friend speculated that perhaps he had been derailed by the death of his own mother.

It was possible, I thought. M was human after all and it is a profound loss when our parents, our buffers against the world, are no longer there.

On a Sunday morning, my partner and I were sitting in bed joking with our younger daughter, aged nine, about the differing psychological profiles of our two cats: one nervous and flighty and uncomfortable with being held ('disliking intimacy', as I described it); the other pushy, demanding, always hungry, purring ecstatically at any attention and content at any minute to be picked up and clutched like a baby. Even to the point of laying his head on your shoulder. Apropos of this, my partner mentioned a cartoon he loved as a child called *Top Cat*. He could remember the tune and sang it gleefully to our daughter while searching YouTube to see if he could find an episode.

Watching it, the show's set-up came back to me. I loved the underdog reversal of it – alley cat comes out on top, outwits dim-witted police and the mob alike – but I was also struck that, in the course of a single episode, several members of Top Cat's gang spoke of needing help from their 'analysts'. It seems a pretty clear indication of the widespread permeation of psychoanalysis into US culture in the 1960s for a bunch of cats to be doing it – even if it was being made fun of. It was perhaps akin to the acceptance of the use of antidepressants now.

I have never taken medication. Perhaps I fear that some essential me – played out again and again in therapy – will be lost.

RECENTLY, DRIVING TO my mother's house, I caught sight of M hopping out of his car near Kew junction. He was wearing a jumper, for some reason I want to describe it as a pullover, and he looked prosperous and sprightly. He walked quickly along the street heading somewhere – where? For a second, straining to see in my rear vision mirror before I turned a corner, I thought he was headed for a beauty therapy place. What would he get done I wondered, a facial, a man wax? I was relieved to see him go past this symbol of the skin deep, though I had been in enough in my time. I drove on, not seeing where he ended up, relieved that I had not drawn catastrophic attention to myself from M by causing a car accident.

For the rest of the day I felt like crying.

I think of three photographs. The first is of my father holding me in his arms when I am a toddler. My sister got it framed for me and now the photo sits on a bookcase opposite my bed. My father is looking at me intently, joyfully. He is smiling. I am solemn, perhaps even uncomfortable. My arms are round and bare in a sleeveless dress, and my father looks wiry and thin by comparison.

Parke has only one photo of him and his mother together. He is a toddler too, and his expression, like mine, is uncertain. Perhaps he is afraid of the elaborate Versailles-looking merry-go-round they sit on – all curlicues and gold leaf – the blur of speed and people around them. Dianne is pointing at the camera and holding Trent firmly as my father held me. They are at the centre of the frame.

The third photo is of me holding my older daughter, also a toddler. Like my father I beam, holding her proudly while she looks out uncertainly at the camera, at the world that is just beginning for her. Each of these parents knows something of mortality, something their child does not, but each parent sees the life force in their child, too.

A child and her parent, intertwined but also separate.

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## ESSAY

# Jubilee: A hymn for Elsie Williams on Dudley Flats

David Sornig

*But the hands of one of the partners were already at K.'s throat, while the other thrust the knife deep into his heart and turned it there twice. With failing eyes K. could still see the two of them immediately before him, cheek leaning against cheek, watching the final act. 'Like a dog!' he said; it was as if the shame of it must outlive him.*

Frank Kafka, *The Trial*<sup>1</sup>

I'M HERE ALREADY, in the bleak, awful hour on Dudley Flats in which the final dereliction of Elsie Williams will come to pass. I'm beginning with it, so you won't be under any illusion as to how it ends. It's the 10th of November, 1942. Yesterday Eddie Leonski, the US serviceman who strangled three women on the streets of Melbourne in the autumn, was hanged at Pentridge Prison. I tell you this only to remind you that lives end every day and in many ways. The end of one life is violent and desperate. The end of another is peaceable and reconciled. Another again is simply bleak. Facts don't change. Lives end. Time marches on.

It's just after seven and still over 80 degrees in the old money. Because daylight saving resumed in September, for the first time since the Great War, there's still plenty of light. The sun is low over the Flats to the west; it picks out glints in the glass on the rubbish tip on the West Melbourne Swamp and its heat has lifted the life out of the deepest rot in the tip again; the chimneys and zigzag roofs of the factories and tanneries far away, past Coode Island and across the Maribyrnong from Footscray to Yarraville, are in silhouette.

And here, a little distance from the banks of the Coal Canal, the light falls through the slits and ruptures in the tin and wood of the squalid little humpy, a lean-to more than anything else, that Elsie Williams has been sharing with a man whose name has been lost to time. The two of them were up late the night before, slugging away at the metho as hard as they could. It beat them both into sleep around 1 am. When they woke, sometime in the morning, they started up all over again. A two-day bender that they blotted out with four bottles between them.

Now, except for the lumps of sacking and the foetid waste of Elsie's fouling of it, the humpy is empty. Her companion, the best guess I can make is that it's either Walter Fiddes or Siddy Wilson, has been gone for hours. It might be that he's fallen asleep elsewhere. Maybe he's in someone else's hut or has found his way up the canal to Dynon Road and made for Kelly's Grocer in North Melbourne to cadge another drink. Wherever he is, Elsie has given up waiting on him. She's embarked on her own mission. She thinks she's headed toward the canal, to the spot where she thinks she can see a group sitting about the cooking fire. But as she nears it, the light turns out to be a car hurtling down Footscray Road. It honks, long and angry, and slips by. She's in the wrong place altogether. She can barely string together the fizz of one moment into the next.

She turns in another direction, stumbling back down past the tip proper. A drink is all she wants. When she trips into a tub-sized divot in the dirt, the first swell of cool air from the south licks the grass around her. A change is coming, and tomorrow it'll rain.

Neither Walter Fiddes nor Sydney Wilson, the most likely of the Flats men to have been Elsie's companion these last two nights, has managed to aim particularly high in life.

Fiddes has been on-and-off with Elsie since the early '30s. In 1934 he was sent down for a fortnight for bashing her in a house in Chetwynd Street, North Melbourne. He kicked her to the ground and once she was there, he kicked her in the face. In court, Fiddes defended himself by claiming she'd attacked him with a razor. It's true she's kept a blade on her ever since the Sydney days more than twenty years before. She's said more than once that no one has given her a chance, not since the law first got hold of her. Back

then she told the coppers her name was Josie Maxwell and then, because she had a sense of humour, she said it was Josie Snowflake. Lately the only thing anyone's called her is Black Elsie. That name's become bigger than the person she really wanted to be. In 1937, she got her own back on Fiddes – she clubbed him over the head with an iron bar just over there by the canal. She won't let anyone, no man, no white man, have it over her.

For the last few years she's been tight with Sidy Wilson too. He went down with her in 1939 when they tried to do over old Ted, and then she went into the dark again and took to the Cornishes with a razor. Wilson ended up doing time for that, as well as six months on a vag charge.

Elsie herself has been done, locked up and drifted back so many times that she's lost count.

But let's leave the past for later. Just for now, we're on that cut of dirt and scrub a little way from the humpy. Counting isn't on Elsie's mind. The hymn is there, though. It's the one thing she doesn't have to make any sense of. It's always there. It was her Mama's song, in her Mama's tongue. The shout and cycle of it.

Let Jesus lead me  
 Let Jesus lead me  
 All the way.

They were all there at Mama's graveside singing it. Daddy leading with the stomp and clap, the way Mama taught it to him, beating the ground with his heel, and then the shout, calling for Jesus. They all follow him, her sisters and brothers: Fanny and James and Alma and Rupert and Elsie, herself no taller than the chair, and poor little Gerte who never did get much bigger than a girl. They shift and move in the dirt that gives way at the graveside under their feet.

All the way  
 From Earth to Heaven  
 Let Jesus lead me, all the way.

He leads my mother  
 He leads my mother.  
 He leads my mother  
 All the way.

That's where Elsie finds her holler. There, by her mama's grave. That's where she finds the blue note.

JACK PEACOCK IS the one that hears her from the other side of Footscray Road. A rich man in poor clothes, Peacock has been carving out a little empire for himself for ten years now at the back of the city council store yard by buying stuff the tip pickers bring to him and selling it on for ten times as much as the pennies he pays them. He grazes horses and hauls their manure out on the spring dray to the market gardeners. As Peacock sees it, Elsie's type have their place in his economy, but since she's been out of Pentridge again these last couple of months she's been too far gone to be of any real use. It's not that he's a cruel man. Not at all. It's just that they're at either end of the Flats hierarchy. It's the truth of it. Elsie's the untouchable. Peacock is the king.

Three weeks earlier, on the 22nd of October, the City of Melbourne town clerk writes to the Secretary for Lands, Treasury Gardens:

Dear Sir,

In confirmation of my recent telephone message to you, regarding the area known as 'Dudley Flats' on the West Melbourne Swamp on the Melbourne/Footscray Road, I desire to forward the following information.

At an inspection on the 16th instant, it was found that the area has considerably improved since the last inspection in 1939. In the latter year there were thirty-four shacks with a population of forty-two males and nine females, whereas the latter inspection disclosed that there are only fifteen shacks now standing, nine of which have been abandoned and only six occupied, with a population of six males and three females.

With the number of shacks and the population thus reduced, it would seem to be opportune for the authorities to take steps to have the abandoned shacks demolished and all material removed from the area. The occupants of the six other shacks might be given a limited time to get out, and the shacks ultimately demolished. It has also been suggested that if the area were cleared of all shrubs and other growth likely to give protection from prevailing winds, it might act as a deterrent to any future attempts at colonising.

I should be glad if action could be taken for the impletion of the suggestions contained herein.<sup>2</sup>

AT THE END of November, three weeks on the other side of Elsie Williams' dereliction, Jack Peacock writes, and not for the first time, to the Secretary of the Lands Department, giving his address as *Rear Melbourne City Council Store Yard, Dynon Road, West Melbourne*.

I am writing this letter to you to see if I can rent a block of this land from you. I have been given notice to go by your department. I gather up manure for the market gardeners, and the health inspectors will only allow me to do it in a place like this. I do not drink and do not know the taste of it.<sup>3</sup>

He sets terms of payment: £25 a year upfront for the plot he wants to live on and another £25 for the grazing plot. It's fair and reasonable. And he's got the money, too. He wants to show them what he is. He's different to all the others. He's certainly no Black Elsie.

A year later, by which time barely anyone will even remember Elsie, Peacock will still be there. The department, or the city council – he doesn't know which one – has demolished his humpy. But he's rebuilt it, again, better than it's ever been. When the Lands Department's inspector, Mr Groves, arrives to tell him, again, to vacate the area by the end of the week, Peacock is almost Jerilderie-like in his indignation:

You give that to me in writing or get the Secretary for Lands to do so, and I will see my solicitor. I got plenty of money. You can ring the ES&A Bank at North Melbourne. This life suits me and it is only mental weaklings who desire to remove me. Men of education would allow me to remain.<sup>4</sup>

But, again, let's not get ahead of things. This story doesn't go beyond that warm early evening in November 1942. Peacock has heard Elsie singing, if that's what you can call it. Keening for herself. And he's seen the dogs.

THE DOGS HAVE been here longer than anyone can remember. It was Bob the German who used to keep an entire village of them around the *John Hunt*, the bottom-rotted, silt-stranded lighter he once moored along the now-abandoned course of the Yarra at the Footscray Road end of Coode Island. While Coode Island will, after 1991 for Melburnians at least, become shorthand for the enormous liquid chemical fire that sent a plume of toxic black smoke over the city, in 1942 it was part of an uninterrupted tract of partially drained marshland that reached across an area larger than the CBD from the Maribyrnong River in the west to the bank of the Coal Canal in the east. Appleton Dock had been carved out of its southern end where the port's quarantine station and Bubonic Plague Sanatorium were housed.

When Bob the German – or Lauder Heinrich Rogge to give him his proper name – lived there, he kept as many as sixty dogs in and around the lighter that he'd bought after it was capsized in 1890 near Queenscliff.<sup>5</sup> He fed them on starvation rations of cabbage and broth and sent them mad with hunger. In 1936, when the VSPA came, having earlier in the year dispatched Rogge to jail for cruelty, they brought a detachment of coppers and a rifle with them to pick off the pack leaders from a distance. Afterwards they rounded up the rest of the animals for destruction.<sup>6</sup> But even after Rogge was gone for good, the old lighter having been reduced to ashes by a group of kids in 1938,<sup>7</sup> the resurgent remnant of his pack and the litters of its descendants that followed were still roaming the wasteland.

These are the dogs Peacock is keeping an eye on. They've been in and out of Elsie's humpy and they look as if they're closing in on something a little

distance away, behind the tip from where he can hear that note, that long train-whistle lament. Now they've assembled themselves around something, their snouts in.

When Peacock gets there, it's almost more than he can bear to see. Elsie is naked. The dogs are all over her. Her body twitches at the bite of them; one at her arm, another at her face, another at her foot. Her hands and legs flick and flutter and a terrified swell of noise leaps out of her throat. He'd thought that was the song.

He's seen a lot. Seen bodies mangled and turned inside out from shells and bullets. Faces gassed and burned. Things he cares not to remember, the night things, but this is another thing altogether. It's where civilisation crumbles away.

He takes up a stone and bowls it over arm. It hits one of the dogs square in the hindquarters and startles it out of its gnawing. He opens out his arms and makes himself large. He makes a large noise. No! Not here, not even if it's the end of the earth. He picks up a fence paling and swings it at the dogs. The voice in his head is the hammer of the Bible thumper. The animals scatter, leaving a swell of dust in their wake.

Now, in the quiet, Elsie goes back to moaning. It is a song. *My mother*, is what it sounds like she's saying. Peacock has a moment to look at her. He tries not to stare at what she has, at the indecency of her body, the tearing the dogs have done to her skin. What's the song? A sea shanty? For mother and father and love? A hymn, maybe. One of her old spirituals. It's not clear.

Elsie seems to have noticed him now and stops singing a moment. Peacock doesn't know who she thinks he is, but the full shock of the suffering seems to fall on her.

'A drink,' she groans. 'Get us a drink.'

She gets to her hands and knees. Her legs, Peacock sees now, are as rancid as a sewer. She's so weak that even in this position, her elbows stumble out from beneath her. Still, she rises again.

Her lips are coming apart in swollen, blood-caked segments. That smile, that beautiful, wicked thing on her face, can't come back now. It knew better than everyone, once. She was one step ahead of them all.

Maybe that's how people end up like this, he thinks. Maybe their minds are just so deep and wide open that they fill up with the entire world and the dark, absurd weight of it all just gets heavier and heavier until there's no way to bear it.

But what does he know?

He heads back to her humpy. He knows that what she needs is water, but he also knows that what she wants is what's at the bottom of the brown bottle. And that's what he picks up. He wipes the mouth of it with his sleeve and smells it, though he doesn't really need to. Awful. He really doesn't know the taste of it.

On the way back to her, he sees one dog, then a second, slip through the brush. It'll be dark soon. When he reaches her, he offers the bottle out and she reaches up, practically stands. She finds it blindly. The babe to the teat. She swigs from it and she can barely swallow it down before a noise rumbles from deep inside her. She stumbles, crumples.

'Elsie,' says Peacock.

But, nothing. Her lips shrink.

Peacock barks something back toward the canal, but no one is close enough to hear. Or they don't want to hear. He makes his way through the junk and shrubs.

A dog slips from out of somewhere. Their shadows are getting longer. They've been watching him. They've learned their hunger. They've learned patience across generations. Now they're making for Elsie again.

'Someone call the coppers!' he shouts. 'Someone! Elsie's in a bad way.'

At the fire by the canal a few heads turn. One of them, Otto the Swede maybe, or Jerry Ryan, or that Coward fellow, he can't tell who it is, waves him away.

The dogs are circling. He can't leave her. He listens for anything: a song, a word, a moan. He looks for her to move.

'Elsie?' he says. 'Elsie? You hear me?'

He doesn't want to touch her. All those scars and fresh gashes and the snot and shit. The milky eyes. He's disgusted.

In a surge, he heads back to the humpy and takes hold of a sheet of corrugated iron and peels it away. The humpy crumples.

He's done this a million times, pulled down shelters – these Dudley Mansions – and erected new ones. He knows what he's doing. He drags the sheet across the bumps and warrens, over the glass and iron and wood and pots and pipes, the reeking dead things, the spoiling food. He swings it at the dogs and they scatter again. He lays the iron over the poor woman's body then searches about for some stones to weigh it down.

When the police finally arrive, two hours later, they'll lift the iron sheet and the rats will evaporate from under it like water on a hot stove plate, but by then there will be no more use for it, this last edifice of Elsie Williams' life, her last home. It will be derelict.

The next weekend the *Truth* newspaper, famous for trading on the kind of lurid details that a life like Elsie's fed them, will report her death, especially the detail of the dogs, in a half-page article, together with a picture of her, the face of a beautiful woman, with maybe even a smile turned on her lips:

Cultured negress 'Black Elsie' Williams, 41, star resident of Melbourne's 'Dudley Flats', where people live under strange nomad conditions, died the other day as she had lived, in the glare of the limelight... [M]arried at 17, [Black Elsie] was a member of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and in recent years lived in a Dudley Flats shack. Born in Australia of American parents, her father, it was once stated, was a highly placed official in the service of the Government.<sup>8</sup>

When Peacock reads about it he wonders if she could still see him, as her eyes failed, watching the final act. He'd thought he'd heard her say one last thing and it only occurred to him later that it might not have been the animals she was talking about: 'Like a dog.'

The shame of it had outlived her.

## **The Flats**

January, 2015

IT'S ONLY JUST after 10 am, but at ground level on the concrete perimeter around Etihad Stadium the temperature is already 35 degrees Celsius.

There's rain promised for later, but I can't see it. The fan zone outside the stadium is deserted and the air is thick with oil and grease and the reek of air-conditioning outlets. The outdoors is unpeopled.

Down the steps and across Harbour Esplanade, there's no shade, no shelter from the heat. I track past the piers and wharves of Victoria Harbour that have been reinvented into platforms for high-rise apartments and luxury marinas. It's a leisure zone that still doesn't fit into my mind-map of Melbourne. The only landmark I recognise is the Melbourne Star Observation Wheel, the enormous real-estate folly that looks to me like a cheap rip-off of the London Eye. The Star is famous for having been shut down on another hot January day six years back already, just a month after it opened, when massive cracks were found in its steel frame. Over the next few years it was progressively dismantled, taken away and rebuilt. It's difficult not to see its failure resonate with the area's *genius loci*.

I pass the elephantine hangars of Docklands Studios and a hot sugary north wind fans the squeals of thrilled terror from a fairground that's up ahead. The taste of it reaches to my back teeth. A child's voice echoes through a multistorey car park, a referee's whistle blows from somewhere. An adult barks instructions. I hear all this without seeing another soul outside a car.

I'm walking along Pearl River Road. It's a new coinage. Ten years ago there was no road here. I figure that the name is a nod to the name of a vessel, one of the ships that once plied the trade routes from around the world to these docks. The names of some of the nearby streets have a maritime familiarity to them: Doepel, Aquitaine, Rakaia. The other option is that it's a joke, because the road runs parallel with the one-time Railway Coal Canal, the dregs of the Moonee Ponds Creek outlet.

It's to the banks of the canal, behind the ice-skating complex and the line of cars piling into the Costco that I'm headed. To Dudley Flats.

It was down here somewhere, maybe under one of the studio buildings, or under the observation wheel, or on the other side of the canal buried under the asphalt of the vast container port, or under the red-and-white electricity transmission pylon reaching into the sky over the lip of the tollway flyover, that Elsie Williams died in November 1942.

I have come here to rake through the surface archaeology, to try to understand how this woman, who went from a life begun with education, talent and aspiration to destitution in the margins, who died not, as the *Truth* described it, ‘in the limelight’, but in the most abject place in the entire city.

Under a tree on the canal side there’s a black item of clothing. I poke and lift it with a stick. It’s a Calvin Klein hoodie. Nearby, there’s a disposable razor. And there, another. A pen. A slew of Nike UPF 40+ tags. I reason that someone has probably stolen a box of shorts or shirts and that these are the cast-offs. I find red house bricks with no works name on them. There’s a tube of well-used lipstick, a flattened cardboard crate of Hershey’s Syrup – *Great With Milk!* – that’s been cast off from the nearby Costco. Closer to Footscray Road there’s even more detritus. The stuff people throw out of their car windows. Bottles and bits of unidentifiable but familiar plastic. The symptoms of disposability. It’s the stuff that shapes an archaeology of the present, canal detritus, the infrastructure of the reclaimed creek bank and wetlands.

To get to what I’m really looking for, I imagine the layers of surface material that would have to be washed away. There’d have to be a flood. Beautiful little grey birds squitter through the foliage against the groan and hum of the City Link.

Once I’m across the Footscray Road bridge I walk on along a bike path and then a dirt track under the tollway flyover. What strikes me most is that the only words I can see are far above me, they’re out of reach, addressed to the drivers fifty metres overhead: Wrong Way | Go Back. At ground level, there isn’t even a single stripe of graffiti. That this is a language-less place fills me with desperation, with something like panic. As if, in the vacuum of meaning, there is real physical menace.

I continue south along the canal side. I come to the transmission pylon. Beside it is a billboard tower made to the scale of the tollway. It has an enormous image of three nuns on it to advertise a television programme. Further along, I find the undisturbed skeleton of a bird. Then, back under the flyover, a bicycle and a camp chair in the canal, a rusted and bent iron pipe, the footings to an old bridge.

Then, in the mud, I see a book. I reason that it must have fallen, or have been thrown, from a car overhead. It’s a New Age tract called *Whispering*

*Winds of Change*. The chapter it's open to is called 'Death of the World Ego'. It only confirms the despair I feel in this place. I flick its pages with a stick. I cannot bear to touch the book. I cannot bear to read it.

There's a path ahead, muddy and narrow, but a path nonetheless. I can't see any human footprints in it, so perhaps it's not human-made, perhaps it's been beaten down by animals: stray dogs and feral cats. Perhaps it's the mark of the tidal high. At the very end of it, where the razor-wire-topped cyclone fence meets the water, a raven rises into the air. I walk as far as the path will take me.

Even though there are no signs to say so, it seems to me that beyond this is a restricted zone. It doesn't need signs; it's a place so forsaken by people that entry to it does not need to be forbidden. Land's end.

I walk back to Footscray Road and when I cross back over the bridge into the Harbour Town development, it's school holidays again. Children are everywhere. It's the first time I've stood properly under the observation wheel. There's a Wonderland Spiegeltent where Brian Mannix and the Uncanny X-Men, Scott Carne and Boom Crash Opera will soon be playing. No one is worried here. The fun is manufactured, but it's fun nonetheless. Subways, KFCs and bins that smell like burger buns.

On the tram back into town it begins to rain as if for Noah.

WHEN EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT of the Port Phillip District began in earnest in 1835, the low-lying wetlands to the west of the Hoddle grid that reached south from the Moonee Moonee chain of ponds to half a kilometre shy of the southern reaches of the Yarra, contained a body of water that was described by one early settler as 'a beautiful blue lake... a real lake, intensely blue, nearly oval and full of the clearest salt water; but this by no means deep.'<sup>9</sup> It was an area of ecological fecundity that was 'extremely rich in bird life and aquatic species of flora and fauna and would have provided a valuable food source for Aborigines.'<sup>10</sup>

While the ecosystem of the wetland was drastically affected through the first years of settlement by the exploitation and supplantation of its natural resources – 'the timber was cut for fuel, scrub was burnt off, introduced livestock destroyed the native grasses and introduced plants and animals

crowded out the natives'<sup>11</sup> – it nevertheless remained a place of great beauty. An 1849 report on the site of the soon-to-be-built Benevolent Asylum in West Melbourne atop a hill overlooking 'the junction of the Moonee Moonee Ponds with the Salt Water swamp' described the site as:

about the most magnificent that could well be imagined, the view being not only most extensive, and beautiful in the extreme, but peculiarly eligible for a public building, from the fact of its commanding every entrance to the city, North, South, East, and West, as well as forming a most prominent object of observation from the Bay.<sup>12</sup>

While the wetlands remained attractive, at least to European eyes, there was at the same time also a growing ambivalence about its proper place in the psychogeography and the economy of the growing city, an uncertainty that was reflected in the various terms that were used to name it – was it a swamp, a lagoon, a marsh or a lake?

A hint as to how the area would come to be transformed was probably already evident in the simple fact that it had been chosen as the site for the Benevolent Asylum. Despite the worthwhile role the Asylum might have played in alleviating the consequences of poverty, it nevertheless made explicit the association of the area with the containment of the least desirable aspects of the city's public life.

Ultimately, it was the pressure that the enormous growth in wealth and population that the 1851 gold rush foisted on early Melbourne's urban infrastructure, on its ports and transport networks, that drove the wholesale devastation of the wetland and opened the way to its reinvention as a place permanently on the city's margins.

It took only until 1852 for a parliamentary committee on harbour development in the freshly separated colony to hear evidence presented by Henry Ginn, the Colonial Architect, calling for the 'extension of the shipping business...in the direction of Batman's Swamp'.<sup>13</sup> In the same year, another committee, this time on the expansion of the railway system to the goldfields to the north and beyond, considered the desirability of creating a railway crossing over the swamp and even draining it altogether.<sup>14</sup>

By 1873, with the era of Marvellous Melbourne on the full upswing, the Commission on Low Lying Lands was charged with:

...suggest[ing] some definite scheme, based on reliable engineering data, for the reclamation of the swamps and other low-lying badly-drained land west and south of the City of Melbourne, and for the improvement of the approaches to Melbourne, by the removal of the present repulsive aspect of such land.<sup>15</sup>

Frederick McCubbin's 1880s painting *Dudley Flats, West of Melbourne*<sup>16</sup> reflects the enormous changes that had been wrought in the area over a period of less than fifty years. In contrast to the beauty of the blue saltwater lake, his scene shows a waterlogged, muddy and cart-rutted foreground dominated by a shallow pool of water that mirrors the grey and sick yellow winter sky overhead. On the horizon are clusters of industrial buildings, their smoke stacks and shadows.

The creek, ponds and wetlands were by this time being treated as both an official and unofficial receptacle for the city's enormous volumes of industrial and human waste. It served as the most convenient rubbish tip for the adjoining municipalities of Melbourne, North Melbourne, Footscray, Flemington and Kensington, as well as for the nearby docks and the Victorian Railways.<sup>17</sup> The Railway or Coal Canal itself, which extended the Moonee Ponds Creek more or less as an open sewer into the wetland and then into the Yarra, was cut in the 1890s to facilitate the movement of lighters to the expanded railway yards in North Melbourne.<sup>18</sup>

By 1903, the threat to public health of the tip area was so great that the chairman of the Health Board, Dr Gresswell, concerned at the very real potential for an outbreak of bubonic plague, ordered its inspection. His officers travelled to the tip at night and reported that 'in the moonlight they could see the whole surface of the tip literally swarming with rats'.<sup>19</sup> Gresswell went on to report that the tip 'provided a constant emanation of foul air from decaying vegetable and animal matter'.<sup>20</sup> He upped the ante even further the next month by presenting to a meeting of the Health Board conclusive evidence of the contents of the tip's 'foul air':

[He] caused pipes to be inserted in the tips, and the gas to be extracted by means of Higginson's syringe. The gas so taken was delivered into iron cylinders, one of which was brought to the meeting room, and from it was extended a small reticulation, which supplied four gas lamps, fitted with incandescent mantles. The lamps were lit, and kept burning steadily as long as the pressure remained in the cylinder, a period of about an hour. Dr Gresswell stated that there was enough gas in the tip to supply the whole of Collins Street with gaslight.<sup>21</sup>

The ownership of the wetland – now definitively referred to as the West Melbourne Swamp – was manifold, falling in part between the Harbour Trust, the Melbourne City Council, the Victorian Railways and the Crown.<sup>22</sup> One effect of this was that the programs of drainage and reclamation that the swamp became subject to, while ultimately comprehensive, were haphazard. It also meant that despite Gresswell's campaign to clean them up, the tips, and their decay, remained where they were.

It was this combination of the swamp's multiply divided ownership – no one was wholly responsible for it – and its location as the various statutory bodies' dumping grounds, each with a bounty of salvageable pickings, that was central to the eventual development and then persistence of the Dudley Flats slum settlement.

The first shelters in what became known as Dudley Flats likely appeared in the late 1920s as the effects of the Great Depression took hold. Certainly, by the early 1930s something of a community had sprung up either side of the Railway Coal Canal. The settlement on the eastern side of the canal, known as the Bachelor's Quarters, was populated mostly by single, often itinerant men who took whatever work they could find on the nearby docks, supplementing their income with tip pickings. It was the western side of the canal that was known more commonly as Dudley Flats. Here there were couples, families even, who had been so economically marginalised by the effects of the Great Depression that their best option, avoiding both the need to pay rent and the always looming threat of eviction, was to put up a shack and make do as best they could.

As part of his 1930s program to document the slums of inner suburban Melbourne that made a major contribution to the founding of both the Slum Abolition Committee and the subsequent Housing Commission, social reformer F Oswald Barnett took the settlement at Dudley Flats into his remit. His photographs of the area remain one of the best visual records of the settlement's existence. They depict a bleak, barren and windswept place. One image shows a so-called ramshackle 'Dudley Mansion' built out of tin and scraps of wood. A typed caption with the photograph notes that 'everything used in the building has been salvaged from the rubbish tip. The fence is made from wooden slats, scrapped by the Gas Company.'<sup>23</sup> Another house is bordered by a fence made from steel bars, the gate a rusted bedhead in which stand a rudimentary kitchen garden and a succulent in a bucket.<sup>24</sup> In another image a man stands beside a standpipe that serves as the only source of running water for the entire area. Another shows a shack on the end of a narrow and shallow peninsula jutting into the Coal Canal. In another, an outhouse is perched precariously over the Coal Canal. A typed caption claims that:

The lady said that she could not sleep because of the storm during the night. 'The old shack was alright', she said, 'but I was dreadfully afraid of the lavatory.'<sup>25</sup>

It's the place where future federal MP and ALP president, Barry Jones, credits as having profoundly influenced his political outlook. In a 2011 interview, Jones recalls a visit to the Flats as a child with his mother in 1937 to meet with a woman who had nowhere else to go. He recalls the 'indescribable stench' and 'of seeing a rat, which seemed to me about the size of an Airedale'.<sup>26</sup>

It was just as the city's most marginalised people began to inhabit the rubbish dump that the site's abject detachment, its status as a public blind spot, became subject to a more concerted set of bureaucratic, humanitarian and moral processes.

In his Depression-era memoir, *The Paper Chase*, Hal Porter remembers the view of the Flats in 1934 through the window of artist William Dargie's studio on The Strand at Williamstown. Despite, or more likely *because*, of his

distance from it, he could project on to it an astonishing degree of romanticised detail:

At night the twinkling fires of a raffish encampment can be seen inland from Fisherman's Bend – Dudley Flats, a squalid Alsatia of shelters made from packing cases, fish-crates, oil-drums and corrugated iron in which the gypsified and degenerate victims of the Depression and their own weaknesses re-enact Gin Lane, swigging methylated spirits from triangular bottles, gnawing Cornish pasties and shark-and-chips, and consummating goatish amours in nests of newspapers and sugar bags.<sup>27</sup>

In 1938 the one-time vaudevillian and then popular radio personality, Charles Vaude, recorded a song at radio station 3DB titled 'Dudley Flats'. Its purported narrator is 'the dud King of old Dudley Flats', a fictional rubbish tip scavenger named Malcolm MacMudley who dresses in the rags that have been handed down to him by various politicians of the day. 'Oh I walk around on Sundays', MacMudley sings in one verse, 'In Billy Hughes' undies'.<sup>28</sup> MacMudley, of course, bears more than a passing resemblance to Jack Peacock, the Flats' long-term resident entrepreneurial tip-scavenger, a composite version of whom must have filtered through into the popular imagination.

While the emphasis in Vaude's lyrics is on the stench, the rats and metho drinking, there's also an underlying assumption that the residents of the Flats are publically invisible, they are profoundly Other: 'Perhaps you don't know me/The papers don't show me/I never adorn the front page.'<sup>29</sup>

In 1939, the City of Melbourne's health inspector, Mr Wood, presented to the Medical Officer of Health his morally tinged and almost obsessively comprehensive documentation of the means of subsistence, type of housing and character of each of the Dudley Flats' camp residents. The medical officer's summary of the Wood report takes up the moral bludgeon, pointing out that the:

inhabitants of the shacks...on 'Dudley Flats' constitute the major problem... [T]he scandals which arise from the habits and

mode of living of certain of them make it desirable that they should be moved.<sup>30</sup>

The caricaturing and then judgment of a type – the tip-scavenging, debauched metho-drinker – was, for Charles Vaude, just as for Hal Porter and for the Medical Officer of Health, an easy net to cast over the multiple subjective realities of the individuals who lived on the Flats. An easy black-and-white contribution to the demands that the area be cleared.

Yet, over and again, from the late 1920s until the mid- and even late-1950s, despite the efforts put into comprehensively clearing the Dudley Flats settlement, the convenience of the site as a material and human dump persisted.

‘What you ought to do,’ wrote Jack Peacock to the Lands Department in November 1943, complaining that rather than trying to evict people from the area more effort should be put into making the place habitable, ‘is to stop them throwing their dead pigs and chalves [sic] in the creek that reeks smells [sic] something awfull [sic].’<sup>31</sup>

The deaths on the Flats in 1953 of brothers Joe and Les McGlade, after they had eaten contaminated tins of food that had been dumped on the tip by the University of Melbourne, seems to have been another prompt to express moral outrage about the site and a catalyst for a final concerted effort to clear it. A 1954 *Pix Magazine* photo-essay, showing in lurid detail the squalid conditions in which the remaining Flats’ inhabitants lived, heralds the end of the camp in response to the deaths of the McGlades in typically judgemental terms. One picture, of a rubbish-strewn wasteland across which the ubiquitous pall of black smoke drifts, is captioned: ‘Deadbeats driven out at last, the desolation of Dudley Flats is left to the raids of scavenging gulls.’<sup>32</sup> The same article shows a photograph of Jack Peacock still on the Flats, a rag-and-bone man if ever there was one, in a trench coat tied together by a rope, claiming to have recently shown a policeman the fold of £500 and a number of bankbooks he kept with him to fend off a charge of vagrancy.<sup>33</sup>

The Dudley Flats settlement seems to have been properly abandoned by the 1960s. By the 1990s, it had been so comprehensively wiped from the collective cultural and material memory of the city that archaeologist Gary

Vines' end-of-decade report on an archaeological dig of the site ahead of the construction of the City Link tollway, could only reflect its insubstantial, fleeting footprint:

The investigation revealed substantial remains of the former tips in the area, dating to the period from the 1880s to 1940s as well as more recent fill. A small quantity of artefacts from the rubbish tip material was collected as a sample collection. No confirmed evidence was found of the actual shanties or other material remains of the Dudley Flats settlement.<sup>34</sup>

Like China Miéville's crosshatched cities and citizens of Beszel and Ul Qoma in *The City & the City*, Dudley Flats is a place whose site and people, while certain, have become at the same time utterly invisible. It's a place of fruitless archaeology, a place of erasure.

### **An anomaly**

*Bendigo Advertiser*, 1 April 1907:

Mrs Paulina Carr, wife of Mr James Carr, of Retreat Road, died somewhat suddenly at an early hour on Saturday morning at the Bendigo Hospital, at the age of 46 years. The deceased lady had been in indifferent health for a long time, but was able to attend to her domestic duties. While so doing she was seized with apoplexy, and was removed in the ambulance wagon to the Bendigo Hospital at 10 o'clock on Friday night, where she expired a few hours after admission. Dr Fullerton, who had attended her, certified to the cause of death. The deceased lady was a native of Carlton, Melbourne, and lived in this state all her life, many years of which were spent here. She was well known and much respected... The funeral took place yesterday morning, moving from her late residence, Retreat Road. The cortege was led by fifty members of the Sandhurst Druids Lodge and railway employees, amongst whom her husband is very popular, and a large number of sympathising friends, followed to the Bendigo Cemetery, where the remains were laid to rest in the

Methodist section. The coffin was borne to the grave by Messrs W Bolger, E Magee, H Aitken, and T Oliver. The burial service was conducted by the Rev. R Kelly. The singing of the hymn, 'Jesus leads me all the way' was very pathetic, all the members of deceased's family joining in.<sup>35</sup>

There is something deeply perplexing about this obituary of Elsie Williams' mother that isn't obvious simply on the face of it. What's puzzling is that it was written during a period of Australian life (one that, it might be argued on another day, continues into the present) during which it was virtually impossible to find any reference being made in public discourse to non-white people without an even incidental mention of the colour of their skin or their supposed racial origin.

Any quick survey of the nation's newspaper headlines of the early twentieth century reveals just how necessary the identification of colour and race seemed to be to public interest.<sup>36</sup> The sentiments of one correspondent to the *Barrier Miner* in 1901, for example, whose fixation on maintaining Australia's sexual and economic racial purity was typical, reflects just how credible the enormously spurious theories of race of the late-nineteenth century had become by the turn of the twentieth. 'Do not the minds of 90 per cent of Anglo-Saxon and European people revolt,' asks the correspondent, 'against the suggestion that their sons and daughters might intermarry with the daughters and sons of the peoples whose skins are of a different colour, and whose training has unfitted them to become married to Europeans?'<sup>37</sup>

The federation of the Australian colonies that same year had of course been driven by an incandescent desire by the colonies to fuse their various xenophobic immigration measures – driven initially by hostility toward Chinese and later Pacific Island labour but essentially aimed at all non-whites – into the infamously tricky Immigration Restriction Act that went on to serve as the legislative basis of the White Australia Policy for the greater part of the twentieth century.

Australia's first prime minister, Edmund Barton, certainly found no cause for shame in revealing just how deep his underlying antipathy was toward

non-whites – whether they were Chinese, Aboriginal, sub-continental, African–American, Afro–Caribbean or otherwise. He did not think, during a 1901 parliamentary debate on the act:

...that the doctrine of the equality of man was really ever intended to include racial equality. There is no racial equality. There is that basic inequality. These races are, in comparison with white races – I think no one wants convincing of this fact – unequal and inferior.<sup>38</sup>

It cannot but seem remarkable then to learn that Paulina Carr's 1907 obituarist should have written an account of her life and death in a way that was utterly blind to the fact that the Carr family were coloured.

Paulina Henrietta Carr (nee Jackson) was born in 1862 to an Antiguan father in Carlton where something of a community, nominally Jamaican, had already been built on the foundations of the many African–American and Afro–Caribbean seamen who, in the middle of the century, had been tempted to jump ship for the colony's gold diggings.<sup>39</sup> Her husband, James Alexander Carr, a West Indian<sup>40</sup> mason two years her junior, arrived in Sydney via London in 1887 and met and married his wife in Melbourne in the same year, possibly having been drawn south by the promise of community and the likelihood of work with the railways.

In the introductory essay to *Adding Pimento*, a collection of oral histories about the Caribbean community in Australia, Karina Smith draws a picture of the presence of Afro–Caribbeans in the colony of Victoria during the second half of the nineteenth century in a way that suggests it was possible for there to have been a greater mix of attitudes to race and colour than I'd previously imagined possible.

In particular, Smith highlights the work of historian Barry Higman who 'makes the important point that because of the multicultural mix of people residing in Melbourne and wider Victoria during the gold rushes, the Jamaicans "appeared far less exotic than they might in other times and circumstances".<sup>41</sup>

Further evidence for late nineteenth century white Australia being more generously ambivalent in its attitudes toward racial difference, particularly

in relation to Afro–Caribbean and African–Americans, is highlighted by the reception afforded to the Fisk Jubilee Singers on their arrival in this country in 1887.

The original Fisk Jubilee Singers were founded in 1871 by a group of African–American students in Tennessee in an effort to raise money for Nashville’s new Fisk University, an institution with a largely black student population. The Fisks brought to the stage the spirituals and choruses that they and their forbears had sung during the still recent slave era, and achieved fame across the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe.<sup>42</sup> The company that arrived in Australia in 1887 was one of many companies that had emerged in their wake to capitalise on the success of the original.

The Fisks who embarked on that first Australian tour passed through many of the country’s town halls, large and small, and were regularly met with great popular acclaim, earning them – or whichever group of singers took on the name – a celebrity that continued right through to the late nineteenth and well into the early twentieth century. Typical of the celebratory tone to the Fisks’ billing in the local press during their first tour was this preview of their December show in Traralgon:

On Friday evening the platform of the Mechanics’ Institute will be occupied by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a company of coloured vocalists whose unique performance has gained them a worldwide reputation. The singers, who have perhaps the most interesting history of any company which has ever trod the concert platform, numbers fifteen performers, who have either been slaves themselves or are the children of slaves before the emancipation of their race in America.<sup>43</sup>

The fact of the Fisks being ‘coloured’ was of course central to the perception of their authenticity, and the kind of popular praise they were showered with emphasised their direct connection to the epoch-defining era of slave emancipation.

This popular acceptance, even embrace, of the Fisks in Australia, buoys the more generous side of my imagination as it tries to come to grips with

the possibility that the colour blindness of Paulina Carr's obituarist might not have been more typical than I had previously allowed.

It's the side of my imagination that wonders whether the Carr family had actually managed to become racially invisible to the Bendigo community by simple virtue of having been so culturally attuned to and aligned with its subjectivity. From the obituary at least, keen as it is to emphasise the wide network of friendly relations the family had with the community at both an institutional and an informal level, that invisibility seems a distinct possibility.

But on the other side, I can't help also being weighed down by my more realistic self. I can't help but wonder whether the obituary's colour blindness might not also have been a deliberate, perhaps exemplary, act of effacement: a gesture intended to demonstrate to those who were in that community – its networks of workers, churchgoers and lodge members – that on any other day and in any other circumstances Paulina Carr's colour would have been part of the headline.

In the end, it's impossible to ignore the truth that despite the Fisks having offered to Australia a model of post-bellum, Christian-integrated black America, they did so in a way that was enormously palatable to a set of colonial people who, at the very moment they were consuming the Fisks' entertainments, were also feverishly erecting policy walls that would cement the hegemony of their own white Britishness.

It's impossible also to ignore that fact that just as the Carrs and their forebears, who arrived in a Victoria that was increasingly multinational and that was perhaps less racially hostile to them than it might otherwise have been had they not been so familiarly British, and who had spent decades carefully constructing their well-ordered, late-Victorian family life together in Bendigo, was, by the time the obituarist was writing his or her account of Paulina Carr's funeral, utterly alien to the vision Australia's political class had for the future of the country.

When Paulina Carr died, it barely mattered whether or not her obituarist was colour blind. The fact was that the obituary was an anomaly. The future of Australia was to be determinedly and pitilessly white, and it was this fact that would pull tight the knots that, despite her struggle against them, would bind up the life of six-year-old Elsie Carr over the next two decades.

## Ladies and Gentlemen, Miss Elsa Carr, the Black Nightingale

1907-1917

JAMES CARR, THAT good and kind man, that solid man – Elsie’s daddy – couldn’t see the future anymore now that his Hetta was gone. He couldn’t do anything better than pull up everything and fall headlong into the pit. It didn’t matter that they’d been in Bendigo for the best part of twenty years, that they’d buried three of their babies in the cemetery, Daddy didn’t want anything more to do with it.

He was glad for Fanny, whose Fred had found a position in Sydney. And for Alma too, already fourteen and not long off marrying that Henry of hers. Daddy would have been glad for them to be wed at once if only the law would have allowed it. Then Alma would have been off his hands without delay.

The rest of the children, the younger ones at least, he scattered in all directions. He sent Rupert, who was like a spring trap with all his nine years and his angry little heart, to the Reverend Cole at the Mission Farm at Tally Ho. It wasn’t as if the boy stayed put. He got himself into all sorts of trouble later on and it all started with running away. Even when they took Daddy to court for keeping the boy under his roof for a night, and Daddy thrashed him for it and then the judge ordered that the boy not stay with Daddy again, he still wouldn’t stay on the farm. Even when the Reverend Cole had had his fill of him and made the court send him to the reformatory in Royal Park he managed to run free. The constable who’d driven him there had to chase him over and under fences for three-hundred yards before he could catch him. It was even in the newspapers. They called him ‘a little coloured boy’.<sup>44</sup>

Elsie still doesn’t know where Daddy sent little Gerte. Somewhere like the place he sent Elsie, she supposes. To the convent in Fitzroy. Gerte was only four when Mama died, so maybe he sent her to a new family, to be brought up as one of their own. She would have been frightened, too, just like Elsie was.

The only one who was allowed to stay with Daddy was James Jnr. So much like Daddy. Strong and sensible. When Daddy abandoned the railways and moved to Coburg, James Jnr. took up a job and followed him. He knew Daddy was crumbling. He knew he that he couldn’t keep his eye off the bottle.

Elsie liked some of the nuns at the convent. Some of them were kind,

strict, but they taught her well and she liked to learn. Others were at one with the girls in her dormitory. They wouldn't leave her alone at all. They told her she was dirty. They told her she was a wicked child, born of a wicked, savage people. They made Elsie so sad and angry she lost count of the times she cried herself to sleep at night, wishing for the day they'd all be together again.

In that watching hour, in the deepest night, she knew she had the magic to make it happen. She still has it now when she's stepping out on to the stage: a voice so beautiful that, when she sings, it makes folks weep; makes their hearts hurt and whole all at once.

Her strongest magic is that hymn, the one Mama knew from her own Mama who knew it from her Mama. From the Gullah people. Mama always said she was American. No matter that she was born in Carlton and spoke her own father's fine Antiguan English, she was American, from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, for the sake of her Mama's people.

When Elsie sang the hymn to herself in the convent, even the awful little girls who called her nigger and coon, and the sisters who told her she was a worthless black who needed to know her place, those who beat her and put the cane to her, all of them held their tongues.

Even now when she sings it, she's on the ship that sails back to that day at Mama's graveside, to the thrill of pity and pride she felt. Daddy leading them all for the last time. All the men from the railways and the families from Daddy's lodge, almost the whole town of Bendigo, they all turned out to be at Mama's resting and they heard them sing.

She keeps the hymn so tight to her heart that sometimes she swears it's the only thing that keeps her alive.

## 1917-1922

WHEN ELSIE LEFT the convent in 1916, she was glad to be gone. She found her way from Melbourne to Sydney, to her sister Fanny, who'd been left alone with her little ones after her Fred shipped out. But with Fanny, Elsie found herself restless. Her sister had so many little rules, was so right and proper in everything, so particular about her God-fearing, that she might just as well have been another one of the Sisters.

Elsie said it was because she was afraid of being picked as black, as if it wasn't obvious. They bickered and argued. The worst of it was over Fanny's objection to the tone in Elsie's singing in church. It didn't matter that it was the same tone she'd used at the hospital where, even with their missing legs and arms and minds, the men who'd found their way back from the war couldn't help but find a smile for her. Fanny said it was immoral. It brought so much strife between them that Elsie struck her sister hard across the face then walked out, the children crying, and said she would not be back.

Daddy's heart gave out in the middle of 1918, just when the war was almost won. The first Elsie heard about it was when Fanny's letter finally found its way to Mrs McGuigan's where Elsie had found work as a live-in domestic. It was two weeks already since they'd buried him. Fanny had clipped out the notice that she and James and Alma – the adults of them – had placed in all their names. *A loving father at rest.*<sup>45</sup>

That evening, once Elsie had done her duties for Mrs McGuigan, cooked and cleaned, she told the old lady what had happened and the old widow poured them both a Benedictine. It didn't matter that Elsie was only seventeen. She was woman enough to drink. They stood by the piano and Elsie sang the hymn.

He leads my father  
 He leads my father  
 All the way  
 From Earth to Heaven  
 Let Jesus lead him  
 All the way.

When she was done they started right over again from the beginning. Benedictine. Hymn. Benedictine.

CYRIL WILLIAMS WAS there the night in May 1919 when Elsie stood on a chair at the Strand Hotel in Darlinghurst and sang for love and pennies. She'd found a job working the sewing room floor of a coat maker's in the

city through the day and it paid well enough for her to take a room in Riley Street, with no help from Fanny. She was having a high time of it.

Cyril, a strong young British–Guianese seaman, his neat face almost godly, had found his way to Darlington from the tramp steamer he'd left at the new wharf at Pymont. He let his eyes go moist when he heard Elsie singing. He followed her up to her bed and in the morning he walked with her to the factory. He was there with a smile when she left again at night. They stopped in at a picture show and then for a drink at the Strand again where he told her about the new life coming for black people. He told her about Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association. He'd been around the world, from his home in Demerara to London to Cape Town to New York City and he saw it coming. He showed her his poems about the sea, and the archipelago of belonging, said he'd take her to Harlem where she'd find her stage. That's where the future was for black people. In Harlem they'd become people the whole world wanted to hear.

At the end of the week Elsie and Cyril took themselves to St Peter's Church in Darlington, and had the Reverend Denman marry them. The certificate shows that Elsie, who was still seventeen, had obtained the consent of Mr Bayliss, the state-appointed guardian of minors. Next to her father's name – *James Alexander Carr (deceased)* – she entered his occupation as *Railway Foreman*. She wanted Daddy to be somebody: a man of importance, in service of the government. A black man of importance.

Cyril sailed before the week was out. Even if he'd had wanted to, he would not have been allowed to stay in Australia. The country was not for the black man. It was for the whites.

June became July and July became August and soon enough Christmas came and went without word.

Elsie tried to put her money away for the passage to San Francisco, but between the low pay, the rent and the little Benedictine she liked, she couldn't find enough for even a fifth of the passage to anywhere. It didn't matter so much in the end, she reasoned. Cyril would wire her soon enough. In San Francisco she'd board the train and take it all the way to New York City.

But all through the summer, then through the spring there was no word. It was Benedictine she liked the most. It warmed her in the place the song

came from, the dark place by her mama's graveside. When the dark place was warm, the shackles came off.

Some nights she spent her free time down at the wharf with a bottle and some of her new friends. She looked out to the water, so dark, and imagined the ship coming in, the day when she'd step up to it and collapse into Cyril's arms and they'd know the name of what was passing between them without even having to give it a name.

She drank, and even when she asked Jesus to lead her she couldn't find her way back from the dark place.

It was winter again. A full year since she and Cyril had married. By now the job had disappeared and when the rent fell due one too many times, she skipped out. She wouldn't go to Fanny. Whether she was too ashamed, or too proud, she couldn't tell. Instead she found a bed with a man who gave her enough to make do for a little while. Then she did it again. And again.

It was easiest with the seamen. The blacks. The Lascars. The Chinese. The rotten whites. The ones she'd never see again.

When she let them have her, whether in an alley or in a park or in some dirty bed somewhere, she couldn't help but imagine that her shame was being sent down through the underwater telegraph cables, relayed from frequency to frequency on the wireless, to every port in the world's archipelago. Cyril knew. How could he not know? Why else wouldn't her husband find her?

IT WAS 1921 when the copper who'd been keeping an eye on Elsie for months up and down Oxford Street finally decided to have a go at her. He put his finger into her face and warned her that he knew she was on the game. She'd better watch herself.

Elsie knew she should have taken the warning, but when she was drunk it was easier to argue back. The copper was the awful little girls in the convent who'd called her nigger and coon. He was the Sisters who'd told her she was a worthless black. He was the nun who'd put the cane to her.

The copper arrested her for having no visible means of support. When they took her name down at the station, she told them it was Josie Maxwell. In court the next day she asked to be given a chance. It was her first trouble

with the law. But she wasn't given a chance. Even when she appealed, it was no use. She got ten days.

She drank. It got dark and sometimes, when it was light again, she was battered, sore in places no woman should be. That was why she picked up the razor, the way the other women told her to. If a man makes any trouble, show them the blade. They'll run a mile rather than lose their peckers.

Now that the local constables had got to know her, they wouldn't leave her alone. In May 1922 a Constable Walton picked her up for using disrespectful language to him. This time, as a joke, she gave her name as Josie Snowflake. When the press got wind of it, they wouldn't drop it, not even when she admitted to the court that her real name was Elsie Williams. The *Truth's* hack seemed to think it worthy of some awful pulp:

All eyes in No. 2 Charge Court at the Central on Wednesday were glued on the door of the ante room that would admit the woman prisoner to the dock. Visions of a dainty but sinful sylph or a fairy-like flake of humanity were conjured as the court waited for the Snowflake to drift in... She eventually was thrust into the dock, and incredulity gave way to amusement, for Miss Snowflake proved to be a young American negress, with a pyramid of fuzzy black hair and an expression of insouciance on her rather good-looking ebony features.<sup>46</sup>

In June, a Constable McMahon chased her down Oxford Street from Pelican to Brisbane trying to get her on a charge of soliciting. When he got his hand to her he twisted it up her back so hard it felt as if it would snap. He called her a black whore.

'I may be black,' Elsie roared back, 'but I'm not a whore. I would not like to be white, if all whites are like you.'<sup>47</sup>

That was when the razor fell from her coat. When they struggled, Elsie bit McMahon on the leg. Later, the constable said she'd threatened to kill him.

Elsie couldn't remember it. But she knew this was what happened when she was in the dark. She struggled. She resisted. She wouldn't have any man, and especially not one in a uniform, try to shame her for what she was most

proud of. She was a black woman. She bit and punched and tackled and slashed. That was her pride. That was all the power she had.

But all the papers saw was all anyone saw: the colour of her skin and the sex of her body. The *Truth's* hack again:

A black snowflake! What a fund of humour she must have yet. One could not picture her floating carelessly about on a chilling breeze, or going towards making one huge snowball. For she is of big build with a figure that would make Olga Petrova, or Theda Bara groan with envy.<sup>48</sup>

Elise moved from room to room. From Charles Street to William Lane. Sometimes there was no place but a doorway. She still dreamt of Cyril but even he was falling into the darkness and she knew that was where she'd lose him forever. She had to get out of Sydney. That dirty old city.

#### 1922-1924

BY THE END of 1922, Elsie was back in Melbourne, living with her sister Alma and her husband Henry, again looking after children. Somehow the darkness had lifted. In December, she landed a role in Oscar Asche's *Cairo* at Her Majesty's, a mosaic play, an orientalist spectacle. *The Sporting Globe* noted that:

The company... is the biggest organisation that has ever appeared in Australia. There are 310 people taking part, including ten coloured people, men, women and children. There are also two camels, two donkeys and a hyena.<sup>49</sup>

Elsie had a role in the slave market scene and in the bacchanalian orgy.

It was the role in *Cairo* that brought her to the attention of Marshall Palmer, the local impresario and singer, who was looking for a soprano for the company of Fisk Jubilee Singers he was putting together.

Jubilee. The forgiveness of debts. Freedom.

She met with Palmer at the Palace Hotel in Bourke Street where he'd been living for weeks, putting together the tour. The rest of the company were there too. A mixed group. Mostly, they were white people. But there, front and centre and larger than life, was Belle F Gibbons. She'd been there from the beginning in Australia on the Fisks' first tour. She'd grown old and grand and her voice had mellowed into a lady baritone's. But my, she was mighty. At a piano in the shabby old bar of the Palace Hotel, where a drink hadn't been served for nearly ten years, Elsie sang for them and she was in.

Palmer ran her through the program an hour before dropping her into the show the next night in Williamstown at the Mechanics Hall. All the old spirituals were there: *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*; *Help Me*; *Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray*. The Fisks' slave spirituals had been part of Elsie's family. She remembered Mama and Daddy singing them around the piano in Retreat Road when she was just tiny. She knew them as well as she knew herself.

She'd be in the glee to start off with. They'd sing a few numbers in the chorus, then there'd be solos from Miss Gibbons, Miss James and Mr Spencer. Mr Pope, the only other negro in the company, would do some of his old comedy turns. Palmer's big hook was a print of the new moving picture of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It was the perfect future for the Fisks. A perfect double bill.

Elsie had heard now the new music that was coming out of Harlem. Its jazz and blues and poetry. Elsie imagined that the Fisk Jubilee Singers would be her ticket to San Francisco and to New York. She'd find Cyril in Harlem. She'd be famous. A star, travelling the world. All sins would be washed away.

At the beginning of April they set out in a train of cars, all ten or more of them. They went to Geelong first, then, through May, June and July, up and down central Victoria, tracing a square on the map, west along the Murray and around the Western District. They were testing out the show, to find the right fit between the chorus, the solos and the picture show. Palmer had them act out a scene from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* after the screening, but left Elsie out of it.

For the tour, Elsie dropped the name Williams. She went back to Elsie Carr. Later, Palmer made the decision that *Elsie* sounded too plain and changed it in the program to *Elsa*. Elsa Carr. She thought it sounded better. It suited her. It was a name without shame, right for her new beginning.

In July she got her first mention in a review. The *Horsham Times* noted that her ‘mezzo soprano voice pleased in her daintily rendered songs’.<sup>50</sup> She clipped it out. Come the day, she’d make sure that Palmer noticed her. Soon enough, she’d make sure that she was the one who had top billing.

She’d never really stopped drinking. But now it helped the hours pass when the company was stuck in a hotel waiting for their next booking. In Camperdown more than one of them were hung over, but they managed to pass themselves off as being sick with colds. Palmer noticed though, and he read them the riot act. He’d cut loose anyone who turned up to a show under the weather.

They headed to South Australia’s Limestone Coast to start the tour in earnest. They’d play a show in one town and the next morning drive to the next town where they’d put on another show and so on. They followed the coastal towns of South Australia across to the far side of the Eyre Peninsula before heading back to Adelaide.

In September they filled the Adelaide Town Hall for a week solid. The *Advertiser* wrote that:

In such choruses as ‘In the Morning’, ‘Peter, Go Ring Dem Bells’ and ‘There’s a Meeting Here Tonight’, the company’s power of vivid dramatic presentation of the old-time slave camp gatherings met with the emphatic approval of the audience.<sup>51</sup>

From Adelaide they drove across the Nullarbor to Kalgoorlie, where Elsie was mentioned again for her rendition of the ‘coon song’ ‘Kentucky Home’.<sup>52</sup> Along the way some members of the company dropped out but they picked up others just as quickly. Elsie’s singing roles switched from soprano to mezzo-soprano to contralto. She was proving herself.

Their season at the Majestic in Perth was successful beyond any imagining. ‘An hour of musical joy’, said Perth’s *Sunday Times*.<sup>53</sup> They extended their week-long season of shows, matinees and evenings to two weeks. They travelled up and down the west coast from Fremantle to Geraldton before heading back to Port Pirie in South Australia, cutting backward and forward through the east of the state on their way across the New South Wales border to Broken Hill. There their run again lasted for two weeks.

But it was somewhere around here, in Broken Hill, that Elsie started to fray again. The drinking had taken hold of her properly since Perth. There wasn't a night that she didn't fall asleep drunk. She was getting tired of the constant travelling. She drank from a bottle before each show and afterwards she was always so bright that it was easy to let an admirer into the circle to buy her some more. She thought no one had noticed, but Palmer was watching her.

By the end of the Broken Hill run, the audiences had dropped off and somewhere along the way the print of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* went astray. Palmer got them together at the end of their last show in Broken Hill and made apologies for not being able to pay them in full. That was when Belle Gibbons left. She'd had enough and was heading back to Sydney, too old now to keep on the road forever, she said. Too poor, said everyone else once she'd gone.

For the rest of December, Elsie and the rest of the company circled around the northern Yorke Peninsula like a rudderless ship. The bookings were getting thinner and thinner. Elsie drank more and more. On the day they were meant to be performing in Wallaroo, Elsie woke up in a bed in Hindley Street, Adelaide, a hundred miles away. The four days since they'd played Kadina were gone. There was a man beside her. A stranger. He had a car and she begged him to drive her the hundred miles to Wallaroo. All the way she drank from the bottle of Benedictine in her lap.

By the time they got there, it was too late. The show was already over. She found Palmer in the hotel but he refused to let her into his room. She bashed at the door and called him a fake. This wasn't a real Jubilee anyway. It was a white man's fraud. She wanted her money. Soon he wouldn't have even one solitary singing coon left. Where would he be then? She beat the door so hard that Palmer threatened to call the police. By now the rest of the company had come out of their rooms to see what the commotion was. Elsie pulled out her razor and sliced it clean down the middle of the door.

Her companion, who'd been waiting downstairs, left her outside the Royal Hotel in Moonta twenty minutes away, out of harm's way. He sped away into the night. Somehow, Elsie found her way into a room and sometime that night, the 18th of December, 1923, she swallowed down an entire bottle

of Lysol. In the morning, the publican broke down the door, the service girl having found the door jammed from the inside. The papers reported her name as Elsa Carr and said she'd been lucky to survive.<sup>54 55</sup>

She'd travelled the better part of the seven thousand miles of the crossing from Sydney to San Francisco, but had gotten not one inch closer.

By September 1924 she was back in Melbourne, appearing in a vaudeville line up, again at the Mechanics Hall in Williamstown:

First appearance of ELSA CARR, the Coloured Nightingale, from Oscar Asche's *Cairo*, in *Negro Songs and Plantation Melodies*.<sup>56</sup>

When she got up on the same stage again in November, she was drunk and slurred her way through the songs. She was booed off the stage. No matter what she tried, she couldn't get an audition anywhere. She was twenty-three-years old.

## 1925-1929

OVER THE NEXT four years, Elsie bounced around Melbourne, in and out of trouble. It was like Sydney all over again. Her charge sheet grew ever longer: soliciting prostitution; offensive behaviour; resisting a constable in the execution of his duty; using indecent language in a public place; having in her possession an unregistered pistol; having insufficient lawful means of support; throwing a missile; unlawful assault; breaking panes of glass; unlawful possession and of procuring the hire of a motor car by fraud. Alcohol was everywhere. Always, she was a coloured woman.

In 1926, in one of three incidents for the year, she was arrested for vagrancy in Little Lonsdale Street. A Constable Dawson, giving evidence in court, told how Elsie, 'stupidly drunk' and using 'bad language', resisted arrest by two officers 'violently in a taxi-cab'. She'd almost broken the taxi's window. Plain-clothes Constable Baker reminded the court of a previous vagrancy charge on which Elsie was let off on condition that she go to a convent. 'She decided to go,' said Baker, 'and then ran away.'<sup>57</sup>

In the middle of it all, one night in 1928, on the same day that thousands turned out to greet the visiting ships from the Japanese and Argentine navies

at Port Melbourne, Elsie, in a house in Little Lonsdale Street, downed another bottle of Lysol.<sup>58</sup>

When she woke up in the Melbourne Hospital she wondered what it was that was keeping her alive.

THE DARKNESS CAME and went. It was gone again in the autumn of 1929 when word came that JC Williamson's were casting for coloured people for the first Australian production of Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's musical adaptation of Edna Ferber's novel *Show Boat*. Elsie tracked down a copy of the book and the seventy-eight of the London production. She played the record on Alma's gramophone. It was like nothing else she'd ever heard before. The songs with the feel of the graveside, the smile of the soldiers. The story fell on her like the heavens. It was her life, funnelled into this strange retelling of it that had come from the world she knew she belonged to. It pained her to admit that she was Julie Dozier: abandoned, rotten with booze and, in the novel, whoring to make ends meet. When Elsie auditioned, that's who she wanted to be: Julie. But they wanted a white woman, someone who'd black up just a little, because Julie's character was miscegenated. White was always the starting point. Instead, she landed a role in the chorus. It was enough for her. It got her close enough. All through the rehearsals in July and when they finally took to the stage in August for eighty glorious nights, every time she heard Julie and the jazzy blues of 'Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man' and 'Bill', she wanted to fall through the floor for the wanting of Cyril. She knew this was for her. This *was* her. This was the turning point. The next steps were clear: she'd stop drinking, and when the season in Melbourne was over, she'd follow the production to Sydney. And from there, finally, to America. To Harlem. To her true homeland, where she'd be queen: the little girl whose Mama died and left a song in her heart.

And every night now, when she steps up on to the stage, she sings it, that jubilee hymn.

### **Common desecrations**

I AM WRITING this at a piano. Or at least it's something that used to be a piano. It was given to me by the family of a friend who had learned to play

on it when she was a child. A decade ago she moved to Vienna and left the piano behind. When her parents followed her a couple of years back they offered the piano to me.

It was out of tune, a number of its keys were silent, its hammer shanks snapped, its damper lift rod detached. The felt was worn in places I didn't know how to name, not even after I tried googling them. I had neither the talent, the money nor the inclination to restore it.

At the same time, I didn't have the heart to let the old instrument go to the tip. So, despite its decrepitude, I kept it and let it sit in a room for more than a year, unplayable under a growing pile of household detritus. Then, finally, I came up with a plan. I stripped the piano down panel by panel, removed each of the individual mechanisms that connected keys to hammers to pedals to harp, and stored them in careful order in the garage in case I ever wanted to reassemble them. In the key bed I lay a plank of MDF I had painted a shade of brown that matched the rest of the edifice. I sanded down and repainted the white paint splashes and scratches it had accumulated over the years and rigged up an array of fairy lights across its strings.

It is now my desk. When I sit here, I run my fingers or pen across the harp. My favourites are the long bass notes that resonate through the frame and the entire room. When I speak into it, the strings sing back to me the same notes I've just breathed out.

By rescuing the piano, I imagine that I have done something noble, that I have respected the life of an almost-living object. I imagine I have preserved something sacred about it.

IT'S MAY 2015. I'm seated in a booth at the National Film and Sound Archive at Melbourne's ACMI Mediatheque to view a copy of a 1914 newsreel of a bonfire of pianos on the West Melbourne tip.<sup>59</sup>

Siobhan, one of the archive's collection access officers, has given me instructions on viewing the reel, and at the end of her spiel hands me a set of headphones. But just as she does she remembers that they're pointless, because what I'm about to see is a silent film. Perhaps, when it was first played in blacked-out town halls and mechanics' institutes, the early suburban movie houses, the reel was accompanied by the playing of a piano. If so, it would

have added to it a weird, ironic aura. But, given the subject matter, it might as well have not. Silence, when it erases what ought to be voluble, what needs to be heard in substance, is always ghostly.

Now, sit back and imagine the black screen and the flicker of decay.

A TITLE:

A COLLECTION OF WORN-OUT PIANOS COMMITTED  
TO THE FLAMES AT WEST MELBOURNE SWAMP (BY  
COURTESY ALLAN AND CO.)

CUT TO:

A funeral procession, moving north along Elizabeth Street near the corner of Bourke. The first vehicle is an automobile – an open-tray lorry. If there's a piano in it, then it's difficult to see. Perhaps it's lying flat, or is not even part of the procession.

The second vehicle is a dray, drawn by a pair of Clydesdales. The man driving it has all the shape of the nightmare figures I invented in the dark as a child: someone long-dead, a workman in a worn-out fedora concealing his eyes, a shirt rolled up to his elbows; dirty as a night soil man. The dray is stacked with upright pianos. A banner, a repurposed drop-sheet perhaps, has been draped the length of its flank. It has a hand-painted slogan on it that, across 101 years, is difficult to read. I have to go over it back and forth, rewind and play, until it becomes clear: PIANOS FOR BONFIRE and, below it, the logo of the company: Allan's Music. In the background a sign over a shopfront above an awning calls out COME OVER HERE. The second cart is loaded high and wobbling. It, too, is draped in a banner. A Brunswick tram passes. If it's even possible, the third dray is stacked higher still. Men on the street stand by and watch. I imagine that these are the men a newspaper report from the time means when it says that 'when someone in the working party struck up "Auld Lang Syne" several of the wondering spectators joined in'.<sup>60</sup> The fourth cart looks to be less stacked. It's attached to a fifth. The horse out front pulls them both.

This is a spectacle. The first station in a ritual sacrifice of surplus supply.

## CUT TO:

The pianos on the West Melbourne Swamp – a pyramid of them, shining, polished and intact. They've been stacked four-tiers high. One piano has marked on it two crossed circles: pennies on the dead man's eyes.

## A TITLE:

## RAGTIME ON A RAG HEAP

'The Musical Bonfire'

## CUT TO:

The pile of pianos. A man in a bowler stands astride the second-highest tier. He's in a Jerry Lee Lewis or Little Richard stance. He's rock and roll more than forty years ahead of time. He's playing hard and fast and the intensity of his playing is meant to show something. It's a message. It says that this thing is playable. He's playing into what is to come. It is 1914. The wind blows up his coat tails.

## CUT TO:

Three men, workers, maybe the dray drivers in their shirtsleeves and vests, standing on the pile of pianos. One of them is at the base of the pile, two at the peak. The two at the top are working across the piano that the musician was playing earlier. Each man is administering a fluid – a libation, an anointing oil – from shining, almost perfectly cuboid canisters. It's kero. It splashes and sprays. None of the men are smoking. At the bottom-right of the frame a pall of black smoke drifts in small clouds from another fire that's off screen.

## CUT TO:

The burning pianos. The base of the pile is visible now. The rubbish-strewn foreground. A barrel. A burning piece of wood – a fence paling perhaps – is prodded into the base of the pile. The hand holding the wood looks black – or perhaps it's gloved. The pianos look like a tower from this wider angle. A musical Babel. I am filled with a kind of dread. A piano has the structure of a living body. It appears as if it were some misshapen branch of evolution, a steppe-roaming beast that has found a niche in the service of the musical human ear.

An account from the time gives a wider view:

The pianos were placed one upon the other, until the stack was about twenty-five feet high. Many tins of kerosene were poured over the frames by several workmen, who then applied torches, and in little more than a minute the pile was a mass of roaring flame, the heat of which could be felt several hundred feet away. The spectacle attracted a number of sightseers, including many photographers, and the now almost ubiquitous cinematograph operator.<sup>61</sup>

What I am watching swells not with the logic of a cremation – the destruction of the already-dead – but of a witch burning. I am watching the life being cauterised from the instruments. Keen to emphasise just how repulsive the objects have become, the psychological need to purge the familiar that has become unfamiliar, the *Leader's* writer describes '[t]he discoloured ivory keys of an upright grand...[that] looked as uncanny as the yellow teeth in a skull.'<sup>62</sup>

CUT TO:

The pianos are utterly aflame now. They are obscured by thick, chaotic carpets of black smoke. The sheen of the topmost piano has peeled away. Its skeleton is beginning to show the signs of its coming collapse. The oven-hot hellishness of it must by now be powerful enough to play across the harp. What I want most of all is to reach into the scene to hear it. On this count, another contemporary witness can offer little more than Edwardian sentimentality:

When the noise decreased of the crackling timber, a purring sound accompanied their flicker, and – shades of Chopin, Strauss, and Spohr! was it their swan song? – those dim echoes of the old, old airs!<sup>63</sup>

Later, I discover New Zealand composer Annea Lockwood's description of her 1968 composition *Piano Burning*. The ideal piano, she says, is an upright because:

The structure is much more beautiful than that of a grand when you watch it burn. The piano must always be one that's ir retrievable, that nobody could work on, that no tuner or rebuilder could possibly bring back. It's got to be a truly defunct piano.<sup>64</sup>

In Lockwood's version of *Piano Burning*, there's a kind of respect that's paid to the instrument. She describes the burning, the entire event of it unfuelled by any accelerant:

Slowly the flames will spread through the whole structure and as they do, they burn away one layer of the structure after another, until finally you get down to the harp and it's absolutely beautiful to watch. Often I suggest that people overstring the strings, so when they pop they really resonate... The flames are the most beautiful colours because of the different varnishes on the instrument, so you get violets and greens as well as reds and oranges. Sometimes I've seen smoke just spiralling up from between the keys. And the sounds are terrific.<sup>65</sup>

So, now I can see it. And later, when I track down a YouTube video, I can hear it too.<sup>66</sup> The pop, snap, whip and twang of breaking strings. Bullets and ricochets.

CUT TO:

Another angle of the same. The spectacle is evidence – more evidence – that the will to destroy the surplus, to keep these things out of the market, out of society and civilisation, is of iron. These pianos must be undone, desecrated. There is no turning back from this. Now the flames are burning *through* the pianos. It's difficult to even fit them any longer into the ontology of instruments. There are no more pianos. They are simply containers for flame.

CUT TO:

The topmost piano is shown in side silhouette being swallowed by an ejaculation of flame, a solar flare, a volcanic eruption. The piano with which it shares

the top-most pedestal has collapsed into it. The skeletons beneath them surely must be about to give way as well. The music must be gone from them. And there it is, finally: the collapse. The top piano gives way. It sinks into the smoke and fire and wood and charcoal and metal. It's gone.

CUT TO:

Another angle of the pianos. Ashes at the bottom of the pile now. Burning ribs. They could be burning tables and chairs and bedheads for all anyone knows.

CUT TO:

Another view of same. Black smoke at the top. White from the ashes.

CUT TO:

Same again. The pile of ashes has grown to the point that they are swallowing the pile. It's over now.

This final scene is, to me, haunted by the closing chapter of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, the novel he began writing in the same year these pianos were burnt, in the month leading up to the outbreak of the Great War. Kafka's Josef K, after a year of meandering through a nebulous legal system on an indeterminate charge, is brought to a place where death is dealt to him by two men representing the law. The law men, or rather, those who have been charged with enforcing the law's edicts, are like the workmen who have draped the pianos in festive bunting, who have played the instrument on the top of the pyre-to-be and then poured fuel on it and set it to flame. They corral the forces of both civilisation and brutality in a more-or-less orderly process. The final scene in *The Trial* plays out in a place in which erasure is not only possible, but essential. When I watch the scenes on the West Melbourne Swamp over and again I see its uncanny shadow:

So they came quickly out of the town, which at this point merged almost without transition into the open fields. A small stone quarry, deserted and desolate, lay quite near to a still completely urban house. Here the two men came to a standstill, whether because this

place had been their goal from the beginning or because they were too exhausted to go further.<sup>67</sup>

It's a place in which things are reduced to bare life, where such desecrations are common.

END.

When I leave the booth at ACMI, I head to my regular café-bar in the once sordid Little Lonsdale Street precinct. I eat lunch there with my brother. I don't have a great appetite for food, but I drink wine – one glass, two. I find myself making excuses for drinking. It's something about the dizziness of the newsreel, watching the three minutes of it over and again for an hour that has made me feel this way. Once lunch is over, I meander alone around Little Lonsdale Street, my shackles loosened by the wine, enlivened by the prospect of closing in on the topography of Elsie Williams' crumbling life.

THE LAST TIME I did this, after a another boozy afternoon lunch at the same bar with some writer friends, I ended up on Elizabeth Street where I was approached by a man in his twenties, maybe his early thirties, his bottom lip pinched and blue, his skin like a too-loose coat. I slotted him as a junkie. He asked if he could use the internet on my phone to enter some data for a Centrelink payment. Wary, I told him he'd be better off getting to the State Library. But it's ten to five, he said. He'd never make it by the five-o'clock deadline. He was right. There was no way he was going to make it in time. By refusing him, I was effectively denying him money. As he turned away, I must have disappeared for him into the mass of faces that everyday expected so little of him and that shaped for him a sometimes abstract and sometimes precise cause for resentment. I was just another unhelpful prick.

I called him over and invited him to sit down on a bench with me then opened the browser on my phone for him and handed it over. He nimbly navigated his way through logins and passwords that must have been hardwired into his needy, tenuous routine of survival, and plugged in

whatever information the machine of state needed in order to keep its dogs at bay. It was over in a minute.

When he handed the phone back to me, grateful, I was gripped suddenly with the need to tell him that I was from the west of Melbourne, originally from Sunshine, as if this was some kind of badge of authenticity; that I wasn't just some guy who had no roots in a place where people didn't do it tough, that I knew people like him. I wanted to tell him that when the wave of cheap heroin swept across Melbourne in the 1990s, I would regularly hear news of kids I'd gone to school with dying of overdoses. I wanted to tell him about the nest of junkies who'd haunted my life the year after I finished high school. I was pretending at camaraderie.

But Sunshine, I could tell, meant nothing to him. And a junkie, I knew, doesn't want to be known as a junkie.

Still, he offered his hand to me. It was rough and grazed.

His name, he said, was David and he could tell, in the moment I told him it was my name as well, that there was a transaction in the offing. He could tell I was drunk, sentimental.

I told him to follow me, to wait with me at the pedestrian lights to cross over Elizabeth Street and up to the Bank of Melbourne ATM near the corner with Latrobe. He knew just how to behave. For the few minutes I had him in my company, we would both pretend that he was the friend I was helping out of a hard place.

At the machine, I pushed in my card and shielded my hand as I plugged in my PIN. I withdrew twenty dollars, the minimum possible amount. I handed the note over to him, and expected him to treat it like a fortune, when really we both knew that it was the lowest price I would pay for what it was he was going to give me in exchange: his obsequious gratitude.

I looked at his hands again. I don't remember if I pleaded with him to not put the money into his arm. I was drunk, so I guess I did. I wanted him to feel shame.

In any case, when I gave him the money, I saw the statistical possibility of his death. I saw Elsie Williams' death. I saw that I was Jack Peacock, or whoever it was that night in November 1942, who'd handed Elsie the metho bottle for the last time. I saw the shame Elsie must have felt at not being able to refuse.

I looked at David hard a moment then pulled him toward me and embraced him.

‘I could have been you,’ I said.

It was maudlin, sentimental, narcissistic. It was stupid. It was a lie. But at that moment, I believed it.

David pulled away from me. The transaction had been done yet there I was still trying to extract something else from him. I wouldn’t have blamed him if he’d punched me. When we broke off I turned the corner into Latrobe Street and, in the wind, cried into my hand.

I’M IN THE front bar of the Elms Family Hotel on Little Lonsdale Street’s corner with Spring Street, typing up the notes I took earlier in the day while watching the newsreel of the piano cremation. I have come here because, as the oldest continuously operated pub in Melbourne, and given Elsie Williams’ history, I have imagined the Elms as somewhere Elsie might once have been. But the bar has all the character of a plaster-ceilinged 1970s schoolroom, or the back-storage room of an office I once worked in during the 1990s. It is featureless and depressing. It has nothing to do with the 1920s.

As one drink becomes two, and two, four, I overhear the barman talking with one of the two other men in the place. The barman is telling the patron about Elliot Perlman’s novel, *The Street Sweeper*. I reviewed the book a few years ago, and was disappointed by it because I thought it had done little more than shoehorn a collection of interesting historical characters and facts about the Holocaust and the US Civil Rights movement, into an unlikely story. I thought it bought directly into what JG Ballard accused the novel of being at its worst: ‘a vast, sentimentalising structure that reassures the reader, and at every point offers the comfort of secure moral frameworks and recognisable characters.’<sup>68</sup>

In the bar, I nudge my way into the conversation, and the barman shows his copy of *The Street Sweeper* to me and refreshes my memory of the plot, telling me how much his wife loved it and how much he’s enjoying it. As I listen to him, I can’t remember that I didn’t like it. Instead, I remember just the opposite.

When I leave the bar I end up going on another meandering, slur-brained walk through the laneways off Little Lonsdale Street, looking for a trace of

the kind of shabby, sordid house I have been trying to imagine Elsie into. But all along I can't help thinking about Elliot Perlman. I can't help remembering, suddenly, that I didn't really like *The Street Sweeper* much at all and that, in the bar, I'd let myself fall into the sentimental trap the novel offered.

And now I've convinced myself that I'm a writer lurking in a laneway, looking for the trace of real a person, that I'm looking for the real Elsie Williams.

But I realise that I'm actually only skimming off the cream of the historical record so I can cram Elsie's life into a sentimental, bourgeois story about the death of her mother and her epic love for a sailor, and the magical hymn that could have transformed her. I'm imagining a story whose edges and truths I am already casting a blurry eye over so that it looks more like something that has meaning, that finds reason in her being: a story that undoes Elsie Williams' erasure by resurrecting her the way I have resurrected the piano at which I write.

The truth is that the piano isn't a whole piano anymore and the version of Elsie in the story I've imagined for her is isn't the whole of her. I've retold parts of it. I've invented others.

The things about her being racially taunted and beaten at the convent, her mother's Gullah ancestors with the hymn the family sang at the funeral, fighting with Fanny, the meeting with Cyril and the plan to go to America, the place she met Marshall Palmer, and the circumstances leading up to her suicide attempt in Moonta? They're all more-or-less conjecture. Possible, yes. Likely? Some yes, some I'm not so confident about.

What I've come up with is a story that might be the solid foundation for the story I'm not yet finished telling, about a girl who grows up with promise, who is going somewhere, but has the world turn sour on her and that she goes sour on. It's the comfortable story. The one that equips me with a moral lens through which I think we can observe the past and bemoan its terrible ways.

The fact is that there are two people inhabiting the same body who are constituted in the public record: Elsa Carr, the singer, and Elsie Williams, the violent alcoholic. The irony is that without the latter – the woman who is like Kafka's Josef K, only ever constituted as a subject before the law, the one whose erratic, unpredictable violence I admit I would be

frightened of meeting – it would be almost impossible to have reconstructed something of the former.

What I imagine is that those two women passed one another for the last time on the stage of Her Majesty's Theatre in 1929. Elsa Carr, the black nightingale, in the chorus of the Melbourne production of *Show Boat*, never made it to Sydney. It was Elsie Williams who took her place, standing trial in Fitzroy for the theft of 'three £1 notes and two postal notes of total value of 10/'.<sup>69</sup>

I imagine again the parallels between Elsie and Julie Dozier, that they were too much to bear for her. In Ferber's novel *Julie*, who also doesn't rest on having one name, ends up working in a whorehouse. In the musical version she becomes an alcoholic and sacrifices her career for the younger Magnolia. In all cases, Julie's not on the showboat, not on the stage, she's left behind on the riverbank.

In every version I tell of her, Elsie is defeated. By the White Australia Policy, by her probable mental illness, by her addiction, by her violence, by the law. In every version I tell she ends up dying that same awful death in 1942, in the very place that those pianos were torched.

One part of me, the one that now deeply suspects his own motives, believes in ghosts and is writing this because he wants the revenant Elise's obsequiousness. He wants her deep, grovelling, shameful gratitude for finding and appropriating the story behind her terrible death. For finding reason in it.

I don't know if he's same man as the drunk man who is lurking in the alleyway of Little Lonsdale Street, ashamed of himself for having played his part in another common desecration.

### **The Trial**<sup>70</sup>

FIVE FULL DAYS before his younger brother makes his self-avowedly melancholic, but nevertheless axiomatic declaration of war on Nazi Germany, Frank G Menzies, Victorian Crown Solicitor, receives a letter from a prisoner who is awaiting trial in Pentridge on counts of larceny and of causing grievous bodily harm.

The prisoner stands accused of having, on August 10th 1939 at Dudley Flats, attempted to rob an old-age pensioner known only as Ted and attacking with a razor blade Albert Cornish and Myrtle Cornish, an older married

couple who are well-known to the prisoner as her neighbours and regular drinking companions. Mrs Cornish in particular suffered terrible injuries.

The prisoner's request to Menzies is that one Sydney Wilson, also currently a prisoner at Pentridge, be allowed to stand as a witness in her trial.

The next day Menzies replies to the prison governor, asking that the contents of his letter be relayed to the prisoner. His answer is no. Wilson is a co-accused in the same trial so cannot be compelled to take the stand.

The next day, August 31st, the prisoner writes back to Menzies arguing that since Wilson has not been charged with grievous bodily harm, only with the attempted theft, he ought be able to take the stand. She closes her letter with a professional flourish:

Hoping you will see to this matter at your earliest convenience as it is imperative that I have him there to give evidence for me...

Her valediction is to the point:

I am  
Elsie Williams

The trial is scheduled for the following day. Menzies does not reply.

IT'S NOT UNTIL Thomas Doig finally steps up to the witness box in the Court of General Sessions five days later that the prisoner at the Bar squeezes her fists to herself. She's kept her composure all the way through. She's defended herself as best she can and has shown no fear. Even yesterday, when the jury came in to find her guilty on the charge of larceny, and twice guilty on unlawful wounding rather than grievous bodily harm – not as bad as it could have been, but still bad enough – she held herself still.

But now she's showing just how close to slipping she is. She needs a chance. Just one brief chance, finally. Some sympathy from Judge Richardson when he passes sentence.

That's why Doig's here. Last November, the Society sent him to visit the prisoner in Pentridge after the savagery she'd inflicted on that tram conductor

with a razor blade, which she said she'd done after he'd abused her on account of her colour.

That attack is now the chief reason for her infamy. Just last month came news of a woman in North Melbourne caught by her landlady in the act of slashing her boyfriend's throat and face with a razor. Bloodied and in the grip of some kind of ecstasy, she called out for anyone hear: 'I'm going to be like Black Elsie!'

When Doig first met the prisoner in the visiting hall at Pentridge he was expecting a similar madness. Instead, she was singing to herself with a voice that was so sweet and patient he was almost overcome. And when she spoke her mind, she did it so freely, so beautifully, that he felt certain she could be salvaged. She was intelligent, educated, articulate. Such rare qualities in a woman of colour.

Doig had expected, once the prisoner's previous sentence for the attack on the tram conductor had expired, the nine months done, that the authorities would apprise him of this fact. The Society had, after all, expressed great interest her case. But in the end no one thought to send word, and it wasn't until she was again in trouble, on this current matter and again with the razor, that he knew she'd been released at all.

If only they'd let him know earlier, before she'd had a chance to return to that nest of degeneration on that rat-infested swamp, then the Society might have been able to do something for her. Put her in a better place, at least. Even turn her away from the grog and tame that wicked temper.

But looking at her now, he has to admit that he thinks it might be too late. The wickedness just will not leave some people.

Doig has never felt at ease in these formal places and once the clerk swears him in and Judge Richardson invites him to tell him something about the prisoner, he looks into the sheet of note paper in his hands: the things he has agreed to say for her. But before he begins, he folds the paper in half again and lays it flat on the bench. He knows already how he will open.

'I represent the Aboriginals' Uplift Society,' he starts, addressing himself to the judge. 'It is not charity, just social service. It is to help coloured people of our state, whether they are Aboriginals, half castes or coloured.'

It is with his reference to her colour that Doig looks to the prisoner now. It is her most obvious affliction. She still has her fists balled tight and now half her lip is between her teeth. Her breast rises and falls rapidly. He supposes she is listening, but she will not look up from the floor.

‘Well we know in our work,’ he continues, ‘that the colour in this country works to the detriment of those less fortunates known as abos or coons.’

The judge nods sagely in agreement. Still nothing from the prisoner.

The men from the press in the public gallery shift on their benches. More than anything, they’re bored. They’ve heard all this before. To interest their editors, they’ll need something even more interesting than Black Elsie in the dock again. She’s been there too many times before. They want an angle.

Doig shifts his weight to his right foot. The left shoe has been rubbing his heel all morning and he can feel a blister coming up. They’ll need to be repaired soon. But the discomfort is more than just the shoe. He opens the fold of paper and looks at the phrases he’s written on it. He doesn’t like to lie and wonders whether these exaggerations, as he’s agreed them with the prisoner, will qualify as such.

The prisoner is looking to him now. He wonders if she really does deserve his help, then checks himself. Surely it would prove him faithless if he truly believed her to be wicked. Does not every one of God’s children deserve mercy, the benefit of the jubilee?

Finally, he clears his throat. He will try to convince the judge as best he can that her account not be weighed down with further debt.

‘She must be given great credit,’ he says, ‘for the manner in which she will not say the name of her father.’

He leaves a pause, in which the reporters finally sit up. Why not? Doig reckons. What difference will it really make? He knows she wants him to say it this way, so that he will make more of her father than he really was.

‘Her father,’ he says again with dramatic emphasis, ‘who was a *senior* government officer.’

Now, there’s the story the press can make something of. A measure of the disaster that her life has become. No matter that it’s an exaggeration. This is a story of exaggerations. Perhaps, in the end, it will save her from prison.

When the prisoner is asked to speak, she is clearly anxious. More than that. She's terrified. There's not a trace left of the girl in Sydney who once seemed to be able to make light of whatever charge came her way. The girl who could see a future, no matter how dark it got.

'I would ask you to be as lenient as you can,' she says. 'I have been in the hands of the police since 1921. I have never been given a chance. I have been out six or seven weeks and I come back again. I have never been given a chance. I know I can do better. Gaol is not doing me any good at all.'

The judge considers her. He's sizing her up.

'You are certainly a very intelligent woman,' he says at length. 'It is a pity you do prefer this type of life. Is it correct that you are an Australian aboriginal?'

'No,' she says. 'I am not an Aboriginal.'

'That is what I wished to enquire from you. Where do you come from?'

'I am Australian born of American parents, African blood.'

She senses the urgency now of what has to happen. She wants him to pass sentence immediately, while she can taste just the hint of compassion in the air. 'Can you suspend it on a bond instead of gaol?'

There's desperation in her voice, despair. The judge gives a little shake of his head.

'I want to think over your case,' he says. 'The jury have taken a merciful view of the charges against you with the result I can only pass on you a sentence which is really light in view of the injury which was inflicted. I will think over it and remand you for sentence. I will try and be as easy with you in view of my duty to the community.'

The Prosecutor, Mr Cussen, takes the chance now to hand up to the judge a character report from Constable Rosengren, at North Melbourne police station, sworn on August 28th. His statement is not quite so equivocal as Doig's:

The accused Williams is a notoriously dangerous woman, especially when under the influence of drink and possess an ungovernable temper. When in her violent tantrums she will stop at nothing in the way of violence, and possesses remarkable strength and vigour.

She is very quick and active and commits her assaults before her victims realise what has happened. More often than not she is under the influence of cheap wine and is also reputed to be a drug addict. When so under the influence, she usually roams the streets of North Melbourne behaving in an offensive manner and uses most disgusting language, and if spoken to goes into a rage and calls out such language at the top of her voice. She is an associate of undesirables and is usually in their company. She is an absolute menace to the community.

From Rosengren's point of view, all this accords with the woman he's had to deal with over the last fifteen months. If she ever was that other person, the one they say was a singer, then he doesn't know what happened to her. She's been erased. She can say all she wants about not having been given chances. She has to stand up for the things she's done, for the person she's been. Every year it's more and more violent. One day, she'll kill someone.

Cussen steps up to confirm it. 'Drink seems to be responsible,' he says. 'When she gets drunk she is a perfect fiend.'

'It is drink that is your trouble?' the judge asks the prisoner.

'That is the only thing, drink.'

That's the final word for the day. The judge sends the prisoner down to come up again in the morning for sentence.

IN HIS STATEMENT the judge tries to show that he's recognised some mitigating circumstances, but it's clear that all his compassion from the day before has evaporated. He's thought about what he needs to think about. The sentence is just what the prisoner fears. Two months on the theft, a year for the attack on Bert Cornish, and two years for slashing Myrtle Cornish across her back and face after the prisoner had already knocked her down.

'Of course,' says Judge Richardson, 'I must recognise that you perhaps labour under many disabilities that do not affect the ordinary member of our community, and no doubt history is partly to blame for you standing where you are today. No doubt you are subject to temptations and passions rather different from those ordinarily affecting white people. I have to protect the

community from such people as yourself. You are really dangerous when you are abroad.'

Now she knows it. She is the prisoner in the final chapter of Kafka's *The Trial*; the process that has been playing out in slow motion over her entire life, on the charge without name that she has always known she has been facing. She has reached the moment when those two plump men have arrived for her. She's at the window and can see nothing in the street but the dark, the windows of the houses opposite are curtained, lightless. No one can see her.

'Your Honour,' she begs, 'could you possibly make any of those sentences concurrent?'

The judge hardens to concrete. 'I think such conduct cannot be tolerated in this community,' he barks.

The law has been applied.

He closes the book and stands. The entire court stands with him and before the prisoner knows what's happening, the warder beckons for her to step down from the dock. How quickly things move. Now Kafka's men have pinned her arms to her body, persuading her to move in the direction of the wasteland. In the slow unfolding time of her life's trial she's been able to see it all coming. So often she's resisted with whatever resources she's had – her brain, her mouth, her fists, the blade – until everything was knotted together and every fibre of her being was resistance. She had thought there to be something noble in it. But now she makes the same realisation as Josef K:

There would be nothing heroic about it were he to resist, to make difficulties for his companions, to snatch at the last appearance of life by struggling.<sup>71</sup>

The prisoner doubts that the judge is even in the court still when she takes that final step down and collapses into the arms of a warder. She has to be carried away from the court, unconscious, down to the cells.

## The Watching Hour

July 2015

I HAVE COME again, in my night thoughts, to the Flats, this time in the teeth of winter, in the dark of night. It's the watching hour. I imagine Elsie on the last night of her life wandering, just as far as she is able, to places that in the dark no longer seem forbidden. It's an hour of lucidity that she's rescued from the bottle. In the dark, they all float in front of her. Her Mama. Cyril too. He's the one she won't give up on. She waits for him to come up the canal from the rolling main. He'll lead her up onto the ship. She'll let him lead her all the way from this earth here.

Don't sleep Elsie, says a voice, or you'll miss him. Don't sleep. Walk a little further. Watch for them all. Quiet, and you'll hear Mama sing. She's the wind in the reeds. She's the crackling over the wireless on the water's edge.

These are Elsie's night thoughts. They're my night thoughts. Always so difficult to remember in the morning.

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## ESSAY

# No Skin

Maria Tumarkin

WHAT HAPPENED TO that house in Cairns in which a woman stabbed eight kids last year? I woke the other day with this question pressing down on my head. Part of what it's like to be alive at this moment in history is waking up from time to time and going, 'Shit, what happened to Haiti? Japan? Ebola?' This jolt is a diluted version of something people in the middle of acute grief describe, except it operates at the level of a culture – the repeated momentary forgetting of the terrible thing that happened, followed by the anguish of re-remembering. Sonali Deraniyagala's description goes: 'It used to startle me. The sudden realisation of not having them... I'd find myself gasping, violently...'

Shock of re-recognition – human mind can't hang on to all it knows about the world and occasionally trips over things it has spilled unwittingly along the way.

34 Murray Street, Manoora, Cairns. Last time I saw it on the news, the house was being taken over by police, cordoned off. The camera would flash it up quickly then scuttle across the road to a modest park where a makeshift shrine of toys, flowers (media has gotten in the habit of calling them 'floral tributes'), candles, handwritten letters and children's paintings was becoming – in the precise way we'd seen most everywhere by now, from Newtown in Connecticut to Norway's Utøya island – the central, throbbing point of

the surrounding neighbourhood. A hinge. On some of the raw pre-footage not yet cleaned and filleted for TV broadcast, family members could be seen collapsing at the shrine's threshold, not sobbing, not weeping; wailing.

Who cares about the house on Murray Street? About the 'where' of this kind of 'what'? How about asking, for starters, what's become of the twenty year old who walked into that house to find his seven younger siblings plus one cousin murdered and his mother, the one who killed them, bleeding from self-inflicted wounds? The young man's name is Lewis. He now has one sister alive. They're the two oldest – they outlived the rest of the brood. Outliving is always a tragedy. So this one must go on top of all the others. And? And: I care about the house. I care about the street around it. As previously noted, I wake up wondering what happened to them. I care not in a what-must-we-do-with-this-place-now (erase? rebuild? erect a monument? maybe just a plaque? leave as is?) kind of way, although figuring that bit out is how the subject of *place* usually gets brought up in the aftermath, as if tragedies turn physical pieces of our world into construction sites whose sole function is to help us demolish or memorialise our way out of pain and shock towards a seemingly inevitable state of 'healing' (I call for a quota to be imposed on this lying little word). I care because I spent a long time – the longest I've spent on any one thing in my life, apart from raising children perhaps – thinking about places like these, their power, their fate, and I have come to believe that the question of what to do with them obscures the inherently bigger question of what they do with us. Oh, they do things, places like these.

Four years it took Sonali Deraniyagala to step into her family home in London, yet in the months after 2004's Indian Ocean tsunami had, in one gulp, taken the lives of her husband, parents and two young sons, she couldn't tear herself away from the debris of the hotel they all stayed in that Christmas: 'I searched, dug about, scratched my arms on rusted metal.' Only clay-tiled floors remained. The hotel was the Yala Safari Beach Hotel in Sri Lanka's south. She lay on its floor and could breathe again. 'Nothing was normal here, and that I liked.' She wrote about it in *Wave*: 'My surroundings were as deformed as I was. I belonged.'

The geography of her aftermath... Home in north London – out of bounds. The place where they died – a lifeline. And her dead parents' house

in Colombo, which her brother Rajiv cleared out and rented to a nice Dutch family, must, Sonali insists, be urgently reclaimed. ‘The house, it anchors me to my children. It tells me they were real.’ Sonali Deraniyagala, a lauded economist with impeccable manners, Cambridge, Oxford etc, had a go at forcing the Dutch family out. ‘They were trying to reason with me, I was trying to be a ghost. They were all “maybe we can talk. I think you have problems”, and I was just “WOOOO!”.’ It is not only her intensity – she was suicidal then, and drinking like a beluga – but her methodology, her need to haunt, that gives an inkling of what’s at stake.

The Murray Street house is already bulldozed. I’ve checked. Arising in its place will be a permanent memorial – details TBC, but decided on and built by the family and community most likely. Their hands. Whatever anyone says, though, the memorial will not re-place the house. It won’t do away with the presence, anchoring or wallpaper, of the number thirty-four in people’s memories of their own lives; or mute the subsonic hum of the house’s absence; or put to rest reminiscences of the funeral procession, all eight of them going past the house one last time; or make invisible new plants growing in the park’s soil fertilised by one hundred years’ worth of tears fallen in a few days.

Historian James Young tells of an international competition held in 1994 to design a Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in the middle of recently reunified Berlin. One artist suggested a ferris wheel composed of cattle cars. Another imagined a gigantic empty vat, a symbolic vessel for the blood of the millions destroyed. Horst Hoheisel proposed blowing up the Brandenburger Tor – grind stone into dust then sprinkle the dust over its former site. Ashes on ashes. A void to emerge from the void. Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan wanted a field of yellow flowers in the shape of a Jewish star. Berlin artists Stih & Schnock wished to construct bus stops from which buses would take visitors to death sites within Germany and right through Europe. Five hundred plus design entries came in. None ended up getting built. Young wrote at the time, ‘Better a thousand years of Holocaust memorial competitions and exhibitions in Germany than any single “final solution” to Germany’s memorial problem.’ The process of looking for and not finding the answer, a ‘perpetual irresolution’, that, *Damen und Herren*, was your memorial.

The mum at 34 Murray Street – abused as a child, pregnant by fourteen, dirt-poor, hit on the head with a hammer by one of the guys she was seeing (at least that’s what newspapers say), drinking, having kids with her stepfather... The Holocaust. What am I saying? I am saying I am surprised we are still talking about memorials when it comes to what are essentially private tragedies, however non-private their reverberations or causes; also, when it comes to past and present transnational traumas. I’m surprised we’re talking about memorials as if once we’ve talked about them, once we’ve had our ‘heated’ debates – four years of them before a memorial was unveiled at Port Arthur; years of tortuous back-and-forth at New York’s Ground Zero – we’re pretty much done considering our relationship with the physical locations of tragedies.

Memorials as the end-point of the conversation about these houses and streets and beaches and sunflower fields in certifiable mid-nowhere lead us to suppose that places of trauma are there to be done things to, or, at a pinch, with. This holds no matter how new-seeming or complex the forms they take: anti-memorials, counter-memorials, temporary memorials, like the memorials that appear without fail following an untimely, unassimilable death of one hundred, one thousand, one. A temporary memorial materialised at the base of Melbourne’s West Gate Bridge after Arthur Freeman threw his four-year-old daughter Darcey off. In 2005 the Berlin memorial was finally built: two thousand, seven hundred and eleven grey slabs, or stelae, of the same width but varying heights, designed by architect Peter Eisenman and artist Richard Serra – although the artist pulled out while the architect stayed on, modifying the design, ‘accommodating the client’, and in the meantime Young, who was on the selection committee, changed his mind in the face of pan-European neo-Nazism and revisionism, and the passing of survivors and eyewitnesses. He came to believe that not building anything was an untenable luxury.

Around the time of the Berlin memorial’s unveiling I wrote a book about physical sites of violent death and loss in different parts of the world. I called such places ‘traumascapes’ and the word stuck. By the time the book came out, I was ready to walk away and think about something else. Or to think about anything else, in fact. So I did. ‘The Moor has done his

duty, the Moor can go' – that's from Friedrich Schiller's 1783 play *Fiesco*. I am not that well educated, god no, just grew up with this phrase, not sure why. Anyway, I thought I was done with traumascapes. Except all of a sudden this whole thing – this impossible-to-miss, no-point-arguing-with-it sense that we actually *need* places to deal with unexpected, violent tragedies of just about any size – erupted. (Or maybe it was a case, for me, of *don't think of a pink elephant*.) Either way, everywhere I looked people seemed to be turning to places, and returning to them, marking them, re-returning, debating past ear-bleed point what they mean, so that the hard-earned conclusions of my book – singling out the importance of traumascapes in individual and collective mourning; remembering and making meaning of traumatic events and histories – began to seem, at least to me, increasingly duh.

(Interestingly, while the public conversation remained stuck in the memorialisation gear, the 'reality on the ground' as reporters are fond [still fond?] of saying was richer and more riveting. Let's estimate that the whole memorialisation business is actually only 15 per cent of what's really going on when a place is caught up in a terrible event, but that the current volatility around memorialisation – its changing and non-changing shapes, the debates it spurs, the public life of grief it's bound to, the rise of the ephemeral and decline of the monumental – is a window into precisely how much more is at stake in our relationships with sites of trauma. Let's estimate that and say this: making it all about memorialisation is like stuffing a wall in a hatbox.)

Meantime I (done with traumascapes!) wrote about mothers and daughters, about courage, about the ascent of food culture, about memory, migration, the fetishisation of storytelling, and the way in which bad women and men (yoo-hoo, Prof. Orlando Figes, how's tricks?) in our universities' higher echelons continue being bad without too much to fret about. I didn't want to be someone who laboured the same point all my life. Seven years was enough. I didn't want traumascapes to become my shtick. At some point, though, not quite noticing it at first, I relaxed my self-imposed quarantine. I read writer Lloyd Jones on going back to Christchurch after the 2011 earthquake

when I went wandering through the landscape of the earthquake the foundations were revealed, the ground was ripped apart and there it all was...the liquid mass that oozed out of the ground... This whole city in one way or another was being disassembled, and I began to think, What if I was disassembled?

and I watched and read everything I could on the aftermath of Black Saturday. I started envisioning a traumascapes exhibition, with performances – music, documentary theatre – and public talks and educational resources and... something else, I forget what. I had meetings. They were encouraging. They went nowhere. I let myself be passionate (otherwise known as getting ahead of myself) again. It was important, I thought, for this new stuff I had to say not to be channelled into just another piece of writing. Right now, with the arts sector cut up into thin strips of paper, my bursting through the barely ajar doors of cultural institutions proclaiming my ideas are important, universal, as old as the world itself and as new as chocolate beer, looks painfully naive. I cringe when I recall some of the meetings. There are worse things in life than cringing at memories of your own misplaced enthusiasm, of course. Probably I would have walked away then – how many meetings can you have before telling yourself that certain things are simply not meant to be? – except I kept bumping into trails and traces, suddenly they seemed to be everywhere.

A year ago I get a text from my daughter: ‘mum, smth’s happened on Sandringham line’, our train line – between the two of us we’re on it pretty much daily. It’s a Friday afternoon, midway through June, and trains are stopped, the service suspended, ambulances and emergency crews on the scene. By evening we know what has happened: Jordan Porter, twenty-six, an admired graffiti artist, the ‘king of the bombing scene’, stripped naked and got on the train roof as his train was approaching Balaclava Station. A train-surfing stunt; the ‘last hurrah’ – he was, said a friend, about to leave the street-art scene for the art-art scene; death by the overhead wires. Somewhere nearby a mate was meant to be taking photos. If a man climbs naked on a train’s roof and no one is around to film him, does he make a sound?

Around that time Balaclava Station was under reconstruction, a mess of scaffolding and fences and workers, annoying, because you had to walk

extra and around to get on and off platforms one and two. A ‘major upgrade’ – taking forever, as these things do. Apparently Jordan chose Balaclava for its industrial look and because of the way construction sites tend to wear graffiti without much fuss.

That night, the station and many trains were graffiti-bombed. Jordan’s tagging name ‘Sinch’ appeared in a hundred different iterations, plus ‘RIP’, ‘True Legend’, ‘We All Miss You Brother’, and the touchingly child-like ‘We Are All Upset’. On the walls of buildings around East St Kilda, and across the city I noticed graffiti messages addressed to Sinch – a mural, too. His name was on a toilet wall at the Wall Café opposite Balaclava Station (a year later I happened to have to visit that same toilet – ‘Sinch’ is still there). Back at the station itself, bouquets of flowers with notes were tied to a temporary construction fence. After a few days I saw, instead, a typed note from Jordan’s family, attached by duct tape, positioned beside some of the flowers:

All cards have been removed for safe keeping

[paragraph break]

The family thanks you for all your love and support

That Jordan’s friends in the scene would seek to tag the place where he died – died pulling the kind of crazy number they might contemplate themselves, if only they were as up for things as he was – and to do it with his name, in his idiom, makes every bit of sense. Marking / tagging / inscribing. But his family choosing to speak through the site to his friends and total strangers, that blew my mind. And yet it was clear, during those few days, that the station was precisely the place to articulate certain things: eg how big a loss like this felt, how uncontainable, how grief made you want to turn your back on the realm of humans and to start talking to ground, grass, walls. In those few days Balaclava Station became the mourning headquarters. It was the main switchboard connecting Jordan’s family with strangers and with those of Jordan’s friends who couldn’t bring their grief indoors; between Jordan Porter’s life and his incongruous, stupid, unfathomable death, the station was the portal.

At a café two stations away from that station I have a conversation with a renowned psychiatrist, retired, still on the board of several institutions. I tell

him I thought I was over traumascapes, and vice versa, but they follow me. Maybe I should try to get an exhibition up? He looks over my notes and says:

*'Portals? A puzzling word.'*

And he says:

*'Life-giving? That's too much. You're going overboard. Even "profound" is a big word.'*

*'Meaning? Can we really make sense of these events? Can we?'*

My not-up-to-scratch notes talk about how in the last quarter-century or thereabouts, in the Western world at least, traumascapes have emerged 'as places of undeniable power and vast cultural significance', so much so that we must document this moment in time, the intensification, this firming-up of ideas and rituals, these myriad ways grief and memory can be elicited, anchored, sustained, triggered, absorbed by sites of trauma. A little history is being made.

*'Undeniable power? For some people these places trigger something, for others they trigger nothing.'*

Yet another case of *l'esprit de l'escalier*... Only after I begin walking home do I know what I should have said: whatever these places might or might not be, they are never nothing.

JILL MEAGHER'S FAMILY hates it when her story is rehashed, and it is rehashed all the time. Her photograph, same one always, is reprinted every time her rapist and murderer Adrian Bayley appeals, just as every time someone mounts an argument for safer streets or better resources to combat violence against women she becomes Exhibit A. The facts of what happened to Jill Meagher are well known and I won't go over them here. Bayley was a serial rapist, a sadist, who was on Brunswick's streets because the parole system failed, and the public response to Jill's death, both in 2012 and every year since then on its anniversary, shocked Oscar Yildiz, Moreland City Council's mayor at the time:

Oh my god, Maria, to be honest with you, I didn't think we were going to get thousands after thousands of people marching down streets. The flowers were incredible. We had people from all over

Australia coming to the march. People from all over Australia delivered flowers. I was blown away. I expected maybe a hundred people. And I expected maybe three or four bunches of flowers.

The march along Sydney Road! Those images on the news, on social media! Easy to bring them to mind now. ‘Marchers of many faiths walked the 3km stretch of Sydney Rd as though marking Stations of the Cross’ – that’s a *Herald Sun* reporter. Sydney Road is flooded. With flowers. Flowers and tributes in front of Duchess Bridal Boutique, where Jill Meagher was last captured alive – talking to Bayley – on CCTV cameras, have to be moved to the concrete outside Brunswick Baptist Church so the boutique can continue operating. Loud, large-featured grief. A quieter story, forgotten already, concerns Bruce Wood of Diggers Rest. Bruce, a racehorse breeder, goes every day to the site in Gisborne South where Jill’s body was found in a shallow grave. He looks after the flowers and tributes, keeps the site ‘tidy’, and is devastated when Mentone City Council in response to the persistent complaints of locals readily offended by (a) noise, (b) traffic, (c) strangers ‘lurking’ and (d) the outright weirdness of this Wood guy, removes the memorial. All non-perishable tributes are sent to Jill’s parents in Perth.

Bruce Wood has no connection to Jill Meagher or her family. As far as I know he never had a daughter like Jill to whom an attack, or a violation, happened, or could have happened. A residue of something that cannot be explained away lingers in Wood’s story, especially because the public response to Jill Meagher’s death went primarily along ‘it could have been me (my daughter/sister/wife)’ lines. This was mostly heartfelt but also inadvertently diminishing, self-serving: who were we mourning for? The tragedy Jill Meagher’s family has to live with is absolute because it *was* her, their Jill, not because it *could have been* any one of us. This whole ‘could have been me’ business is always complicated: imagining yourself or your family being the ones afflicted may call forth deep reserves of empathy, but it also brings relief, a feeling of vigorous appreciation for what you have and what has not been taken away from you, ie it creates whole classes of feelings fundamentally unavailable to the stricken family you’re at pains to identify with. The public response to Jill Meagher’s death prompted other questions (I am by no stretch

the first to ask them) as well – what of the non-white, the non-young, the non-beautiful, the non-middle class, the non-sunny, the non-innocent, the kind we don't want to paint our daughters' faces on? Judith Butler writes about 'grievable lives'. Yeah, the dame has a point.

Before disappearing from view, Bruce Wood gets quoted in newspapers saying he doesn't know why, but right from the start he felt like he needed to look after the shallow gravesite. Then news of the council's decision reaches him: 'Why this particular thing has upset me, I don't know... But this has really knocked the socks off me.' No straightforward psychological or sociological rationale explains Bruce's actions. Overt identification – that's not it. The land where it happened is not his. The horror is not his. And yet. He is drawn. Pulled. How to speak of the way sites of trauma can call out to us, whoever 'us' might be? The best words I've found belong to Alexis Wright, a member of the Waanyi nation and one of our most important writers:

This country and its seasons of heat, rain and mud could pull at my conscience. It could make me travel long distances just to be there. I always feel it calling. Sometimes it has great need, more than I can give. And this place creates so much love and yearning, and raises questions I might find it would be easier to forget.

Wright is talking about her relationship with her country in the Gulf of Carpentaria, which, despite the violence it has endured and tragedies it has witnessed, is a place that has been creative of life, love, deep knowledge and power. Yet to me she is also describing what places of trauma do: how they tug at us, make us come to them, request our presence, raise questions that may break our heads.

Mayor (the position rotates between councillors) Oscar Yildiz pays ten thousand of his own dollars to go to Drogheda, an Irish town about fifty kilometres north of Dublin, where Jill Meagher was from. His motives are questioned:

They all attacked me. They thought it was a stupid idea. And I said I don't need your approval. I don't need your vote. I don't need your

council's money. Without being arrogant or rude, I am going to do this. I am not asking for any money, so what's the problem? But there were still people who were knocking me. Lots of councillors knocking me, questioning me.

Usually what a council does is send a letter to the family. Moreland City Council did that, offering sincerest condolences, saying the earnest, empty stuff expected of a council. Yildiz knows 'crime doesn't choose its suburbs' but it is hard to get over it happening in Brunswick. He grew up in the area, knows every bit of it, including the spot where she had her last drink, the way she walked home. He asked police to take him through what Bailey did to her, where – step by step – how. By the end of that he couldn't stomach a letter. Too pissweak. 'I felt we needed to go over there...say we're sorry... What better way than a mayor of this city meeting up with a mayor of her city?'

Yildiz is a near-extinct type who picks up his phone when it rings. 'Communications department is one thing,' he says, 'but when you call me, you get me.' It flabbergasts journalists. We have all learned to take for granted our elected representatives being covered by layers of bureaucracy as if by Gladwrap. I contact the communications department at Port Philip City Council, enquiring about the aftermath of Sinch's death and also the 2013 murder of a street sex worker, Tracy Connelly, loved and cherished by all who knew her in St Kilda, and get: 'We can issue a statement but we won't be having a council officer speak to you directly on this issue.' And – 'as stated previously, public displays of grief haven't been an issue for our staff members in recent years.' A wooden, nothing statement is, therefore, a possibility; a half-human conversation is not.

When Yildiz gets to Drogheda, cameras are waiting at the airport. His visit is news. The BBC turns up, for Christ's sake. He is unshaven, tie-less, in a T-shirt. He shaves in his hotel room then meets with the mayor, Jill's uncle, her aunt, the in-laws; goes to her school, the park she sat in, the pub she liked going to. Drinking through the day of course. Why is this man here? – at first the uncle is suspicious. He lets go of his suspicions, Yildiz says, after the time they spend together.

Today the trip, and the fact it was no junket, makes Yildiz stand tall. 'If you asked me,' he says, 'what are some of the pivotal moments in your life

that you feel proud to have done as mayor, proud to have done as Oscar, this one is really right up there.’ He would have liked a Jill memorial – something from Drogheda perhaps – but the family doesn’t want it. It’s the family’s call. The legacy of her death is the CCTV cameras installed – eventually (how else?) after delays, controversy – along Sydney Road, and the illuminated taxi stands and extra lighting in key areas, like train stations, and the rise in citizen arrests. People are looking out for predators. ‘We kept all the objects and all the notes and gave them to the family,’ Yildiz says. ‘The father showed me some. He said the letters these kids had written about how the loss of Jill changed their world means more to them than a monument.’

Something about this image, of a family, reading tributes, left behind at the sites of their trauma... I remember seeing photos of Rosie Batty bending to read tributes to her son, Luke, how lonely she looked. It was just her. All the communal marching, mobilising and swaying together, the cheek-to-cheek grieving, seemed far away.

So much has happened in ten years since I wrote my book.

In the aftermath of the Port Arthur massacre in April 1996, it seemed both remarkable and gut-wrenching that Walter Mikac should leave his wife Nanette’s joggers and stuffed toys belonging to his daughters, six-year-old Alannah and three-year-old Madeline, at the exact places where they were killed by Martin Bryant and that, in no time, these objects should be surrounded by toys, candles, letters, flowers left there by the public. Now teddy bears are a staple. ‘Staple’ – what a word. In 2012 officials in Connecticut had to ask well-meaning Americans to please stop already – within a week of the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School, the town was drowning in tens of thousands of donated bears. Sociologist Karen J. Engle calls it ‘kitsch communitarianism’. Philosopher Bruno Latour calls it ‘Dingpolitik’, a democracy of things. I came across a photograph of a distraught woman in Connecticut carrying a teddy bear nearly twice her size.

ALL THOSE FLOWERS on Sydney Road, Brunswick. In Koonung Creek Linear Reserve in Doncaster where seventeen-year-old Masa Vukotic was stabbed to death by a stranger. Opposite 34 Murray Street. At Martin Place in Sydney – so many flowers there following the Lindt café siege that the

media took to photographing them from the sky. En masse like that, they resembled a topographic feature, a mound or lake. One photograph, taken the day after the siege ended, was of people, hundreds of people, lining up at a 'floral memorial', standing in a long, winding queue in singles and pairs, holding their bunches of flowers (phones too), patiently waiting to have their few minutes at the site. I am always interested in what people line up for in Australia. Can't help it. I am a child of a command economy, a queue dweller all my childhood and adolescence.

By now we almost expect this nearly instantaneous transformation of a place of tragedy into a site of public mourning. Sometimes, though not for much longer, I guess, the transformation's scale might be beyond what we could imagine. Still, how incredible to think of all those people going to a florist, buying flowers, bringing them to a busy thoroughfare – Sydney Road or Martin Place – putting their bouquets next to thousands of fellow bouquets, watching them engulfed, squashed, subsumed by all the others around them, their own flowers' individual charge extinguished in an instant, their particular history lost. Is it not like carrying a grain of sand to add to a sprawling beach? The good old 'bystander effect' says people are much less likely to intervene in an unpleasant or dangerous situation when others are present. A diffusion of social responsibility, it's called. Why aren't more people saying of these places something as human as: 'yes, this is very sad and important, and of course I am touched, horrified, but frankly there are enough flowers at that place already, look at all those people who have gone to the site to pay their respects, and good on them, no point really in us going now, right?'

You can find plenty of disquisitions on what temporary memorials are for and about. The collapse of old religious rituals around death and mourning. The reclamation of public spaces. Trauma overload. The public's hunger for shared, in-body experiences. The reaction to death being institutionalised, quarantined from our daily lives. Am I forgetting anything? We're rightly reminded that this seemingly new compulsion to mark and memorialise is underpinned by rich histories and traditions, most new things being well-forgotten old things. Roadside memorials – their persistence – is an example. Even so, is all this not that same thing again: our unexamined insistence that

it is humans shaping places of trauma, not them shaping us? It is remarkable how little is said about time, and how, for example, certain history-making events cannot be fixed in time, only in place: so we say Chernobyl, not 26 April 1986, and we say Hiroshima, Gallipoli, Srebrenica. Perhaps only 9/11 has as much of a fix on a particular constellation of events and their legacy. The question of time cannot be sidestepped if we are to understand how and why places – not simply us doing things with them – may come to matter after a tragedy. Time is the X factor in the wake of trauma. Those who must, as writer Meghan O'Rourke puts it, 'relearn the world in the aftermath of a loss', discover that time no longer works for them the way it did before, and that often it is only a particular category of places that can make it possible for them to live in this new time. New time: still time, circular time, backwards-and-sideways-going, ambushing time. 'Up till this I always had too little time,' CS Lewis wrote after his wife's passing. 'Now there is nothing but time.'

The thing about flowers at temporary memorials is they die. Some anthropologists believe that the dying of flowers, and the dying of memorials themselves, is actually integral to their purpose rather than merely inevitable. Flowers die a natural death, in their time, on the ground where people's lives have been cut by an untimely, unnatural death. The manner of the flowers' death could be a way of sanctifying the ground. A kind of purification ceremony takes place, though it is never articulated as such. Purification does not come from flowers being pretty, wholesome and Mother Nature-y, or acting as poignant reminders that the world is essentially a goodness-filled, nice-smelling place; it comes from the way flowers decay at the site, change over time. Flower-laying traditions don't help us much in making sense of this present moment in our culture: placing flowers in the middle of a metropolis is fundamentally different to placing them on a gravestone. Overflowing islands of flowers on our streets and roads are purposeful intrusions. They insist on making the dead part of our social fabric, lest they be gone too soon from our daily thoughts and lives. Robert M. Bednar, who studies roadside memorials large and small, writes wisely that a temporary memorial is not only 'an active attempt to keep the memory of the past loss present and alive in the public sphere – but also a talking-back to the death itself through

material means.’ Talking back to death, yes. Also, talking to the world – to this world so compulsively ready to move on, come what may.

Sooner or later I have to mention Diana. The princess’s death in 1997 is usually cited as Year Zero when it comes to large-scale grief entering and changing public life and spaces in the West, even if its actual physical location, the Paris underpass, could be neither reclaimed nor turned into a site of public mourning. All those books, PhDs, reports and essays – the beautifully lucid; the instantly dated; the almost unreadable – with the most relevant, to us, questions going something as follows: hyperbolic wishful thinking aside, and taking as a given that there is no such thing as a nation ‘united in grief’ or united in anything, is there actually a discernible *we* in what is routinely described as public outpourings of grief? For there to be so, we would have to see new communities emerging in the aftermath of tragic events, in ways not otherwise forgeable, brought together by their shared grief, communicating via sites and objects. Can grief be the basis for genuine solidarity, in the same way as memory, or pride?

Well, it seems obvious to me that when Diana died people were grieving for different reasons and different people, for different Dianas, but also for other people gone from their lives. The grieving was hardly a consistent, uniform activity. It was impure, contradictory and self-negating, laced with pageantry and bullshit. At its worst, it produced what British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips described as ‘the coercive demand that people should perform their feelings’. This robbed non-witnessed, non-public expressions of people’s deep, cutting, private loss of authenticity. And yet what is equally obvious is something profound happened on the streets of London (and not only London) in 1997. To deny that it did would be a form of madness. Hilary Mantel was there and remembers:

none of us who lived through it will forget that dislocating time, when the skin came off the surface of the world, and our inner vision cleared, and we saw the archetypes clear and plain, and we saw the collective psyche at work, and the gods pulling our strings.

When I first read Mantel’s words, I remembered the feeling I had travelling

to sites of trauma – the feeling that these places were like tears in the fabric of the universe, through which we can peer at ourselves and from time to time see something that is unseeable any other way. The tears did not close in. Because traumascapes didn't just keep memory alive, they kept disbelief alive too – not domesticating it, not allowing it to fade – the disbelief that what happened here, in this very place, on this patch of earth, could have happened anywhere. *Skin coming off the surface of the world.*

I watched the footage of Martin Place being cleaned up and returned to its normal urban square existence. 'Cleaned up' makes it sound brutal. Actually the process was surprisingly gentle. Ornaments and candles were placed in boxes lined with bubble wrap. Cards and letters were taken away to be digitised for the families of Tori Johnson and Katrina Dawson, the two hostages killed in the siege. Flowers were transported to a warehouse for mulching so they could become part of the compost for the future memorial's garden. World's best practice, surely. I watched the footage and thought we're getting good at this, good at knowing what to do. Then I thought, anxiously, that the more we iron out our responses and protocols, the more mechanical our interaction with these places could become. However counter-intuitive this may sound at first, it is very possible to be both heartfelt *and* mechanical. If we decide we really 'get' this whole marking-and-grieving-on-the-streets business, perhaps we risk inadvertently narrowing down or neutralising what can happen at these places, which is to say, what can happen at these places and no place else.

In Kiev, my mother's and my aunt's home city, one of my very favourite places (so beautiful, so beautifully old) from childhood, the main square, Maidan Nezalezhnosti, is now the site of revolutions, uprisings, occupations, battles and mass death. At the start of 2014, across several particularly harrowing days, riot police killed close to one hundred protesters. Ukrainian journalist Yana Moysenkova went to Maidan a few days afterwards and described, unforgettably, in Ukrainian language, what happened to her there.

First time she cried (soon after entering the area): 'I physically felt other people's fear, not the fear that is base, but the other kind – on the brink of self-oblivion – the fear of those who have resigned themselves, the fear of those ready to cross the line.' All around her people were taking photos.

Crowds. Over the heads of strangers she saw a pair of eyes belonging to an older person. Something so pure was in those tear-stricken eyes. The two of them looked at each other. Everything went still. They didn't move closer, didn't speak. Just stood, eyes locked, in mourning together.

Second time she cried: that was in front of a helmet of one of the protesters killed. Around it – flowers, candles, icons, photographs, vodka bottle, a slice of bread, a soft white bunny, an inscription 'here human blood was shed'. On the stage – some hysterical, talentless rubbish oration, debasing lives lost at the site, turning them into 'the sacrifice we had to have'. Sacrifice, patriotic duty, slain in the name of... Intolerable. She felt someone looking at her. Then she spotted familiar glasses. A fellow journalist. They'd bumped into each other on their respective beats. From that moment they recognised each other to the moment they were standing there – 'shaking, sobbing, holding each other tight, in the middle of the road, blue and red jacket, knocked out' – no time passed at all.

Moyseenkova – to her compatriots, my ex-compatriots:

Go there. Take your children and go, whichever side you are on, whatever you did a month ago – supported them, condemned them, maintained your Swiss neutrality. Go there and look at your torn and scorched country... Go there and cry.

God forbid that the main squares in this country should burn and we should wonder whether our children need to see the ruins to learn what can be done to their world in the name of some god-awful grotesquerie. Except we already have plenty of those 'go there and cry' places. Massacre sites all across the country, most of them unmarked to this day – *take your children and go*. Or the ruins of heritage-listed St James Catholic Church in Melbourne's Brighton – playground of a long-serving paedophile priest – gutted by a deliberately-lit fire earlier this year. Surely actress Rachel Griffiths spoke for many when she described feeling elated by the fire. 'We've all attended,' she told reporters, on-record, 'many funerals of boys that we now know were abused by Father Ronald Pickering...and other perpetrators in the parish.' Now that the church is no more, perhaps it can become a place for contemplating the

untold destruction of lives wrecked by institutionalised paedophilia in this country. Unlikely.

I can tell you story after story about the ways in which physical places of trauma can be staggeringly important in the immediate aftermath and across generations. Perhaps though I should tell you about what happens when, for reasons of history and war, a place of trauma becomes unreachable, unvisitable. We are back in Ukraine, this time it's the eastern part, the fields and villages of the Donetsk region. (When I left with my family in 1989 the idea of Ukraine being broken up was inconceivable; the 'breakaway Donetsk region' still sticks in my throat.) Two hundred and ninety-eight people who had nothing to do with Ukraine died in this place on 17 July 2014 when their Boeing 777 – Flight MH17, Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur – got shot down by separatists mistaking it for a Ukrainian military plane. Thirty-eight Australians died among them. To this day the separatists and the Russian government, led by Dear Comrade Putin, deny that this is what happened. The crash site is not far at all from where I grew up. It was from the airport in my former hometown, Kharkov, that human remains recovered from the rubble were taken to Holland. In wooden coffins. A minute's silence. Unbearable.

Two hundred and ninety-eight bodies flew from the sky and landed in sunflower fields and inside villagers' homes.

*Skin coming off the surface of the world.*

A tragic distinction of many modern-day tragedies – large-scale terrorist attacks, for instance, but also natural disasters like the Indian Ocean tsunami or Japan's earthquake–tsunami–nuclear meltdown of 2011 – is they leave families without bodies to bury and grieve over. Places of death often stand in for the absent bodies. There are the 9/11 sites in America, and the Sari Club and Paddy's Bar in Bali, whose state of neglect as they over-ran with weeds and became improvised public urinals was experienced by many in Australia as something akin to a dead body's desecration. The Donetsk area is part of rebel-controlled territory, at war with the Ukrainian government and army. Governments of Holland and Australia, who had the greatest number of people on Flight MH17, had to virtually stand on their heads to negotiate access to the crash site to recover human remains. No way families and friends

could ever come here.

So no bodies. What families will get in the end is remains. And no place to go to. So: another layer of catastrophe. Families did what they could. A mother left her teenage son's bedroom untouched: this room was his memorial, his grave. Everywhere families waited for the remains. 'You see it on the faces, they want their children back,' a Dutchman said to reporters as the first plane with yet-to-be-identified human remains on it was about to land in Holland. A memorial of flowers, tributes and the flags of different countries touched by what happened rose up at Schiphol Airport, where Flight MH17 began. At the crash site, women from nearby villages performed a Russian Orthodox ceremony, sending off the dead, crying for the innocents and their families. 'We will remember them for the rest of our lives.' Of course they will. Souls of eighty children were trapped near their homes.

Australian journalist Paul McGeough and photographer Kate Geraghty were reporting from the crash site. They decided, wrote McGeough, that 'if families and friends of the Australian victims could not get to the crash site, then we were obliged to bring them a keepsake.' First they thought of bringing back soil. No, not quite right. Then they came up with the idea of sunflower seeds. Seeds could be planted, they might grow into beautiful flowers and produce more seeds in turn, and the cycle would continue. McGeough and Geraghty wrung flowers' heads from stems and put them in a big empty suitcase. They drove for hours out of the conflict zone and flew to Kiev. In a Kiev hotel room they shucked the seeds and packed them in hotel laundry bags. They brought those bags to the US, dried and repacked the seeds, then took them to the Australian embassy in Washington DC to be dispatched, in the diplomatic mail, to Nicola Hinder, a woman in charge of quarantine at the Department of Agriculture back home. Hinder could have killed the enterprise at several different points. Instead, under her supervision, sunflower seeds were planted and painstakingly tended to at the Knoxfield Post Entry Quarantine Facility in Melbourne's south-east. In time, they could be harvested, that was the idea, and a clean, second generation of seeds distributed to MH17 families and friends in Australia and across the world.

Scientists and plant pathologists fought to turn the seeds into viable plants. The quarantine fee was waived.

Reminds me of a few lines by poet Mikael Yohansen, unjustly forgotten, unpublished in English, a Ukrainian writer killed under Stalin, aged forty-two: ‘To husk and eat sunflower seeds, primarily pan-fried, one by one during chats on summer evenings after work, on a bench, under a tree, used to be – and in some places remains – a favourite pastime, especially in villages and among old women.’

MELBOURNE ARTIST JANE Korman really likes a Fatboy Slim video. ‘You know the one where they are dancing in a circle in front of a supermarket and there are all these odd, random people in the circle?’ I nod. It’s actually a movie theatre but may as well be a supermarket. Spike Jonze’s video is a piece of genius. ‘I loved it,’ Jane says. ‘I love this kind of stuff. And then it just clicked: can we dance at Auschwitz?’

It wasn’t just dancing she was after, but three generations dancing together – her father, herself, and her adult kids and a niece. It did not end up just being Auschwitz either. In June 2009 they danced at Holocaust sites across Europe. To get the kids on board, Jane sent them a link to the Fatboy Slim video. Some of her kids live in Australia, some in Israel. ‘Praise You’ was the video. Her daughter and niece in Israel freaked out the most. Jane tried to explain that what they were going to do would be affirming. They were not making fun, no. Dancing was about celebrating the survival of their grandfather and great uncle and the miraculous birth of new generations.

Jane’s parents are both Holocaust survivors. When they were younger they threw big parties in their North Balwyn home for survivor friends. Everyone was made to dance. *Come on, dance. Celebrate being alive! No excuses.* Jane was the only kid at her parents’ parties. Her sister wasn’t a part of it. That was Jane’s childhood: dancing and Holocaust. In her fifties now, a grandmother, she felt the need to bring the two together again. ‘Dancing somewhere else,’ she decided, ‘has no purpose. It’s not shocking. This has to be shocking.’

To work out what music they would dance to she googled *survival songs*. Gloria Gaynor’s ‘I Will Survive’ popped up in the search results. It had that kernel of contagion in it, made you want to dance the arse off it. And of course it was also incongruous, jarring. Song sorted. Okay, what to wear? Jane had made T-shirts with words on them for past art projects and it felt

natural to make them for everyone on this trip too. Printed on the shirt of her father, Adolek Kohn, was: SURVIVOR.

Jane's parents had been back to Poland once, in the early 1980s. But this time her mother didn't want to go. Too overwhelming. Emotionally, that is. 'In her later years,' Jane tells me, 'Mum is feeling all the losses and traumas... Her own mother was gassed. She is really feeling her mother's loss.' Adolek thought the trip was a great idea. 'He loved the idea of being the boss, the patriarch, taking us to Poland. It was important to him to explain, to share, to tell stories to us in real place, real time.' To say: IT HAPPENED HERE.

She did not mention the word 'dancing' to her father till they were already on their way.

I knew I was pushing things a bit. I'd gotten the kids prepared. But I guess Dad was the main one and I still didn't know... On the way to the airport I said, 'Dad, I've got this idea. You survived. You're alive. You've created a generation and that generation created another generation. I think we could do an art piece where we dance to life.' And he goes, 'Wonderful. Why not?' Immediately he got it.

Each kid had a job to do. One was responsible for tickets. Another worked out the accommodation. In Europe they took buses everywhere, stayed in youth hostels. You don't see many eighty-nine-year-olds in hostels but Adolek loved having young people around him. In the morning, Jane would hand out T-shirts to everyone to be worn under their regular clothes, saying: 'This is yours, this is yours, this is yours.' Part of Jane's job was to hustle. *Come on, don't forget we are dancing in half an hour. Time to dance and rejoice!*

When Fatboy Slim and Spike Jonze were making their video, they didn't apply for permission to film it or enquire about public liability insurance or some other piece of paper they could wave in people's faces. They just got everyone together and did their thing, and kept doing it even after someone pissed-off had turned the music off. Jane didn't contact anyone beforehand. She didn't try to wrangle some way of being authorised. It is not as if you can be issued with a permit to dance at Auschwitz. Seeking

permission is not in her nature anyway; she looks for loopholes. 'I am not sure if "naive" is the right word or more "I'll try my luck". I am just cheeky. Living in Israel for eighteen years makes you learn how to get around things.' They would walk through sites and wait for a moment when not too many people were around. Then she'd cry out. 'Come on, quickly, everyone... Come. Come. Come.'

They could have been caught plenty of times. Then, who knows?

They danced at Dachau. Danced at Theresienstadt. Auschwitz was the hardest. Jane's kids would say to Adolek, 'Is this the place you saw your mum for the last time?' And he'd say, 'Yes, here on these tracks.'

The sky was grey. Every one of them carried a heavy feeling. Jane felt conflicted about the dancing: 'We were pushing against something at Auschwitz.' Somehow it was not so hard at, say, Dachau – other visitors there found out Adolek was a survivor and were in awe of him. He became a bit of a celebrity, which he enjoyed, and his celebrity status gave the family a cover when they filmed themselves dancing. Some onlookers actually clapped.

In 2010, Jane put the edited video of their dancing (*I Will Survive: Dancing Auschwitz, Part 1*) on YouTube alongside two other video pieces (*I Will Survive: Dancing Auschwitz, Parts 2 & 3*). Because – why not? *Part 2* was an old home movie of young Jane dancing with her parents and their survivor friends in a forest. *Part 3* was a video documenting their encounters with Holocaust sites. It contains the words of Adolek at Auschwitz:

If someone would tell me here, then, that I would come sixty-something years later with my grandchildren, I'd say, 'What you talking about? *What* you talking about?' So here you are. This is really a historic moment.

Jane's Israeli-based daughter was uneasy all the way through. At one point you see her walking off. Really historic, yes. And big. Hard. Also, exhilarating. 'Artworks,' says Jane, 'are not created out of the blue. It is something that sits within you. Something that is different. It's how you were raised. It's all the events in your life. It's what happens when you have these stories told to you over and over again so they become part of you.' In Poland, Adolek took them

to places that held deep meaning for him, not the nostalgic pre-war sites, but sites of violation and human fear.

‘This is where that Nazi put a gun to my head,’ he’d say. ‘This is where Jewish mums and babies tried to run away from the ghetto.’ Jane had heard it many times before. She always was obsessed with her parents’ stories. This time, on Polish soil, she heard it differently.

*Part 1* got picked up by anti-Semitic websites in Hungary and Holland first, then by a white supremacist site in America. Neo-Nazis wrote to Jane: ‘Fuck you, Jew. Your dad should have been gassed.’ Other emails – accusing her of trivialising genocide, or praising her brave affirmation of Jewish survival; shrill, soft – started arriving. More each day. Jane was in Israel at the time: her daughter was having a baby, her son a psychiatric breakdown. When the media hit on the controversy, *Part 1* went viral. That meant interview requests from everywhere.

The emails kept coming. She felt compelled to answer every bit of correspondence, including the anti-Semitic stuff. Writing back to people, and not just once, but staying in the conversation, developing relationships, was part of the artwork, just as much as the dancing was. Jane collected the emails, went to Officeworks, and printed an impromptu little book: *The Best of Hate, the Best of Love, the Best of Healing*.

Replying to neo-Nazis was not as tough as writing back to some of the outraged survivors and their families. How do you respond to accusations of dancing on the graves and desecrating the sacred memory of six million of your people? You can talk about celebrating the miracle of survival, about returning humanity to the dead, about recasting the survivors as more than victims, about bringing to life memorial sites that were no longer speaking to the young. The chances of these arguments outweighing the feeling that you had disrespected – publicly, loudly, smugly, stupidly – the dead were not high. Some of these letters and emails were so powerfully angry that Jane would ask her sister’s husband to help her draft a reply. He always was a good writer. She couldn’t withstand these letters alone. Jane’s parents lost friends over it. Her ex-husband’s father was vocal in his disapproval. Some friends who defended Jane’s project have lost some of their friends.

I do not know if Peter Matthiessen saw Jane Korman’s work. His novel

*In Paradise* is set in Auschwitz in 1996 during a week-long gathering of more than one hundred people from Poland, Germany, America to pray, meditate and bear witness. Matthiessen himself attended one of those gatherings. The novel draws on his personal experience. To what extent we don't know. Being in the camp is an agony. It cannot be otherwise. Most of the people gathered there are overcome by the terror of the site's history, squashed by the weight of it. In time, some begin to see faces of the dead, and to hear the dead's voices. One day a dance erupts out of nowhere as people form a circle, taking each other's hands, while the cantor sings *Oseh Shalom* – 'Making Peace by Making Whole'. In that circle, inside that routine holding of hands, an acceleration takes place, a letting go: 'Arms start to swing, then overswing, tossed high like the arms of children holding hands in schoolyard dances.' Clements Olin, academic and poet, an enemy of cheap catharsis and of sentimental self-indulgence in this place of all places, finds himself taken over by the dance. 'The bonds of his despair relent like weary sinew and gratitude floods his heart.'

The dancing he experiences is outside words. Not a denial of grief, but the expression of a kind of grief that is beyond consolation. An unexpected moment of 'gentle rejoicing' that inspires not paralysis, but awe. Possible only at this place where dancing should be the very last thing imaginable.

If I were pressed to put into words the most important thing I have learned about traumascapes, I wouldn't talk about how they are sacred places for mourning and honouring the dead, or for remembering those who should not be forgotten. (I once knew a novelist who liked to mention that he had been to Auschwitz six times. He said it to my mum the first time he met her.) I would point to Jane Korman's videos and say: we must remember that these places are alive. Alive, and powerful. We think that once we have turned places of trauma into revered memorial sites, we know what they are about. Actually we don't know. *Anything* can happen at them. Even dancing. When we treat these places as alive, the way Korman does, look at how much is brought into the world. All the outrage and hard thinking, the love and abuse, people in different countries, of different generations, asking themselves and each other: would my family dance on the site of its own trauma? What do we owe to the dead, and to the living? What stops us forgetting? Does grief ever end? Does trauma?

PERFORMER AND PLAYWRIGHT Kym Vercoe went to Bosnia on holiday in 2008. No personal or familial threads were pulling her there. On a whim she ended up in a town called Višegrad on the Bosnian–Serbian border, spending an excruciating night in a spa hotel called Vilina Vlas on the town's outskirts. Couldn't sleep, couldn't breathe properly. It wasn't some banal body freak-out that you get when travelling. Something about this place was pushing down on her. Back in Australia she got on her computer, started reading. Višegrad, she learned, was a site of wholesale ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s. It was now part of Republika Srpska, a self-governing Serbian administrative entity within Bosnia–Herzegovina. The hotel where Vercoe stayed was, less than two decades earlier, a rape camp. Two hundred Bosnian Muslim women were detained, raped repeatedly, then killed there. Their bodies were never found, their names never made public. And she was in one of the rooms where it had happened; she lay on a bed where women had been raped. How is it possible that this hotel could still be standing, unchanged, its name the same, its interiors the same, its sheets (probably) the same, its owner still living in town, its recent history as a rape camp not marked even on a plaque, not acknowledged even in a photocopied booklet on the side of the counter? Vercoe was not going to forget the two hundred women who had no names, no graves, no memorial, no way of being remembered or mourned, just this damn hotel, the last and only public evidence of their presence on earth. This damn hotel, where she couldn't bear to be in her skin.

She went back to Višegrad, to Vilina Vlas, wrote a play. The play became a feature film, *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales*, directed by Bosnian filmmaker Jasmila Zbanic.

I watched the film. Then I wanted everyone in this country to watch it. They won't. Trauma, Bosnia, genocide, a sleepless night in a provincial hotel room... Enough here to turn off most of the population. I wanted everyone to watch it so they may begin to see that sites of trauma do things with us just as we do – or don't – things with them. They can, for instance, turn a stranger with no knowledge of or connection to the history they harbour into a lifelong rememberer of dead souls she never knew. *For instance*. Unmarked, unacknowledged, unmourned, whatever their fate, they persist,

continue to matter. All those creeks and crossings where Aboriginal people were massacred, buildings where children were institutionalised and abused, bits of Melbourne where Tracy Connelly and Jill Meagher were ambushed and killed, empty houses to which no one returned after Flight MH17 – all waiting to haunt us into some new, essential knowledge about this world. 34 Murray Street, Manoora, Cairns. Christmas Island. Nauru. Don't get me started. Each street – almost. Each suburb, town, highway, river – definitely.

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Maria Tumarkin writes books (three to date, fourth on the way), reviews, pieces for performance and essays; she collaborates with visual artists, psychologists and public historians. Her work has been published, performed, carved into dockside tiles and set to music.

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