

Kambarang

The first time she visited, she was pregnant. Every sense was heightened: the smell of a distant cigarette, the prickling of buffalo grass beneath her bare European feet. It was lunchtime, early October. She was adrift in that liminal space where nausea and obsessive hunger jostle like prize fighters in a derby. Muscle mesh deep around her throat and inner ears pulsed and tautened, even though minutes earlier her thoughts had inexplicably seized on plump kernels of sweetcorn dripping with chilli sauce. She had called him and begged him to find some, bring it straight away: a level of demand and insistence that was alien to her. Then she had caught a blast of the bin near the barbecue and a switch had been thrown. She suppressed a retch, one hand on her bag and the social safety of plastic bags, mints and bottled water. This mundane helplessness, then, was this a foreshadowing of motherhood? A descent into a canyon of anarchy, her previous self merely theoretical, removed to an abstract dimension like some mathematical proof she had once understood to be true, now elusive as mist.

She shielded her eyes from the glare as she squinted towards the lake, its fountain spewing diamonds into the water. Of course she was happy, how could she not be? Everything lay ahead: love, love, love. She shifted her bulk slowly, trying to find a position that felt natural. Every day, adjustments had to be made, surprises accommodated. The brittleness of survival, the smug barrage of knowledge and scrutiny and goddamn expertise. Maybe she should have done this at eighteen or twenty, like her indentured mitochondrial forebears, still young and beholden. A time when she would not have had time to think, still less intuit the imminent vortex of her depletion, its steepening sides frictionless beneath her.

Kangaroo paws were flowering near the verges, improbably tall, their skinny red velvet fingers yielding to green flourishes. Had they been planted, or were they there of their own volition? They seemed so exotic that it was hard to think of them existing unplanned; inconsequential and unwitnessed. Would the child she was carrying belong here, like a native flower? Would it be innately of its birthplace? Or maybe it would never assimilate; forever an invasive deposit blown in by a clumsy stranger, a disruptor of a delicate environmental balance.

She stared at parents smothering sunscreen on toddlers, running after them with hats.

Birak

She is shy on the too-big scratchy seat, watching as the companionable couple across from her mother smile and admire her sister's looping plaits. She hasn't been on the train five minutes, and yet here it is: the exotic prospect of conversation with strangers – tourists! – heading south towards a city that fascinates adults with its castle and gothic splendour, but which to her is familiar, and thus, mundane. As they enter a tunnel the dim carriage light washes all their faces a salty yellow, the damp coastal air shrieking as the diesel tugs them onwards to North Queensferry and its seagull-perch of a station.

The woman leans forward, asking names and ages; the child's mother, clipping her vowels even more than usual, politely inquires whether the couple are having a pleasant holiday, whether they have visited Edinburgh before. Do the couple realise they are about to cross the Forth Bridge, where the train will clatter through a skewed forest of vast maroon crossbars and rivets, its Victorian hexagons squatting sumo-like over the steely waters below? Sometimes American tourists get up and stand by the train door and pull down the window for a better view. These people aren't American, though.

'You don't sound Scottish!' says the woman, acknowledging the mother's cut-glass accent. 'You're English? And how do you find it, living up here?'

The child watches her mother carefully. Blue-grey eyes flicker for the merest instant and she sees her picking her way disdainfully through the grim square of their new hometown with its soot-blackened buildings. Five pubs, four chemists, three bookies, two tobacconists, one hardware shop. No supermarket. Not yet a Chinese restaurant, still three years away. Her mother is a long, long way from the soft Dorset forests of her ancestors. She is not welcome in the workplace, for she is an English woman in a Fife town, where jobs are scarce. Her marriage is already a chasm of dismay. She cannot drive a car, she cannot make friends, and increasingly, she cannot hear. Otosclerosis is gradually causing the bones of her mother's inner ears to seize up,

and, although her daughter can only sense this in ways for which she has no words, emotional isolation is making her mother's heart seize up too. The child realises she is not the only one who feels a frisson of excitement from talking to outsiders on the train. The couple are sitting right in front of her mother, so lipreading will cover any gaps. Nobody will know what is wrong inside the mother's ears, or her heart.

'Well,' her mother says, taking a moment to stare across to Leith as they start the crossing, 'It's wonderful really. We are so close to Edinburgh. You know – the theatres, the museums.' Her voice sounds higher than usual. A panicky thought skips into the child's head that her mother might start to cry.

The man nods, kindly. 'Do you know where we come from?' he asks the child.

She hesitates, and the woman takes a small gilt pin from her lapel, leans over and shows it to her. 'This is a good clue!' she whispers. The child looks down at the gold shape in her fingers. A kangaroo.

'Australia?' the child asks, surprised. There are not many things she knows about Australia. Kangaroos. Koalas. And a song sung at Brownie camp about kookaburras sitting in old gum trees. Kookaburras are probably birds, but what sort? Like seagulls, perhaps?

'Yes! From Perth, Western Australia.' The woman holds the child's gaze as she pins the tiny kangaroo onto her duffel coat. 'You can have this,' she smiles, 'And maybe one day, you'll come to Australia yourself'.

The child thanks her, fingering the pin. Australia. On the other side of the planet. So unimaginably distant. If Scotland is so different to England, then how much more different would Australia be again? I will never be allowed to go there, she thinks.

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She takes the children to *Naturescape*, the last opportunity before it closes for late summer. The nausea of old is still there, these days accompanying a pervasive tide of anxiety. She has never resolved the oxytocin overdose of the early years, and she hums tunelessly to drown out the inner screaming as her son and daughter wave sticks in each other's faces, climb trees

and scramble over rocks in the stream. She turns her face away from them as they play, so as not to communicate her terror. She listens for a cry or a thud, plans the route she will take to the children's hospital. This is how the obstacle course of her mind looks now, a constant tsunami of danger surging up behind all of them. Beaches full of jellyfish and sharks, playgrounds full of equipment designed to break limbs, paddling pools and letter boxes hosting redback spiders, paedophiles advertising themselves as babysitters. She feels sick, sick to her stomach, exhausted and strung out like the faded bunting of an abandoned beach resort.

Bunuru

The grass is pale as straw alongside the Magpie path, the rattling screech of cicadas already drowning out the early-hour Thomas Road traffic. Pony-tailed and visored, she paces the grey ribbon as it threads through still-blackened trunks of trees caught in the last fire, their remaining leaves copper-coloured and accusatory. The desiccated understory reveals tracks and portals normally obscured by greenery, traces of human occupation. In February, she had followed a couple of these trails out of curiosity, arriving at flattened spaces that belied makeshift campsites, occasional bottles and pieces of plastic amongst the banksia and gorse. The second time she had only gone about a hundred metres before the bush swallowed her, closing over her like pondweed, metamorphosing every log and branch and slice of sunlight, erasing her footsteps. *Where am I?* She stood still for a long while, trying to unravel her confusion as the trees regarded her patiently. The sun, directly above, offered no answers. In the end she had used the GPS on her phone to regain the main path, heart thumping. Afterwards, elation surged in her veins: she felt strangely absolved, and forgiven.

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Schools are back. She takes pictures of her son by the War Memorial as Year 12s swarm Fraser Avenue like a flock of exotic birds. It is Ball season. In the benevolent and golden light of the early evening, the children have shockingly morphed into icons of glamour. Limousines queue by the gift shop. The nausea is gone now, replaced by other things – disbelief, pride, a nervous anticipation of the fledging ahead. Already, nostalgia.

Behind, high in the she-oaks, large black cockatoos preen and call loudly to each other, cracking seeds. She watches them make swooping, joyous descents, their tailfeathers flashing scarlet.

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A stage has been built out over the Pioneer Women's pond. One night in March she walks through the darkness with a girlfriend to hear bands play to thousands sitting on the grass of the natural amphitheatre. Beyond the bandicoot burrows, the river curves around under the stars to Matilda Bay, where she taught her children to paddle a kayak. This evening, for the first time, she does not check her phone for news of deaths or emergencies. As the last song plays she looks around her and realises that everybody knows all the words.

Djeran

After the accident in West Perth, he was in an immobilising collar for 16 weeks, the hair trapped inside growing long down the back of his broken neck, curling like a boy's as the bone slowly reknitted itself. Too late for his teeth, though: they were gone forever, untethered at the side of the bike path, somewhere in the gravel. Titanium and porcelain would eventually take their place. There were many firsts that year, and many tears, the children still so small they had to stand on a chair to see him in his hospital bed. After six months, he began doing loops of May Drive and Forrest Drive, back on the carbon-fibre horse, round and round, a compromise for her nerves. In a pagan prayer, she asked this place to hold him, keep him, heal him. She had never been more grateful for its size and proximity and diversity. There was usually a pocket of cold air in the dip near the hospital, he told her, but the current would warm up as he made the ascent up Forrest Drive.

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The year before, she had left the country to bury her father on the other side of the world. On her return, as the plane slid in from the Indian Ocean, she looked to her left and saw the vastness of the park; a dark smudge garlanded by glittering amber streetlights. A strand of yearning and recognition wrapped itself unbidden around her, bringing her back, accepting her. *I'm home*, she thought, and wept with relief.

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She drives her daughter and friends to climb the DNA tower at midnight, hoping for a rare southern aurora. The futility is immediately obvious, for the horizon glows instead with far

too much light from human sources. But the trip is not wasted. She listens to the twin teenage fizzes of optimism and sarcasm, the easy chat, the in-jokes, the strange global slang and the explosive, bonding laughter. There is a particular marri tree nearby where the spiderwebs are iridescent at sunrise, where gum that once oozed liquidly down the rough bark has now dried to a deep, flaking red. She thinks about this tree as they all climb down the steps, wordlessly acknowledges it. Within months her daughter will throw away her L-plates, and the next time they come to the park together, the daughter will drive them both.

Makuru

When the rain came she liked to put on all her waterproof gear and follow the unpaved trails in the cloudy dawn light, sloshing through the coursing water that washes fat swathes of sand and tidemarks of mulch towards the culverts. She listened for the wagtails and the wattle birds. Sometimes the rain fell loud and angrily onto her shoulders and she could not hear her companion's soft voice from underneath her hood. Sometimes it fell softly, and the smell of the petrichor and the sight of double rainbows over Lovekin Drive made her feel that nowhere was more beautiful. When they had walked for an hour they would sit on high stools under the heaters at Koorak and drink mugs of coffee with foam etched like banksia leaves.

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It's the third WA lockdown, probably only a few days this time, although the State border is still clamped shut. The park is unusually full, but only with people who live nearby, frowning and stomping in pairs. Coffee is sold only from kiosks. There are no coaches in the almost-empty car park, but the flame still burns over the pool of reflection. A man shouts at her as he approaches: *Stay two metres away!* – he yells.

The trees push up towards the plane-less sky and their roots ease downwards to reserves of damp sand. On the other side of Winthrop Avenue, people queue for tests and vaccines.

Djilba

It's twenty years since her first visit. Back then, there were still roses, and she never stopped to wonder why. Now though, cottonheads and Qualup bells are planted by the café, and

wattle trees drip golden catkins onto the bark chips. Last year there was an orchid thief, yet this year there are more orchids than ever, as if they have been willed into existence. Or perhaps now she knows how to find them. How to see them.

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She walks to work for the last time along the Western Path, inhaling the peppersweet scent of creamy freesias. They are weeds, she knows this. They invite her ambivalence like the bullying kookaburras and rainbow lorikeets.

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This place has burned itself onto her, and into her. She is older and her bones ache. At night, when she cannot sleep, she mentally revisits the paths that lead around the scarp. Eidetic, she summons silver drooping bells and velvety *eremophila*. She touches a flower of the rose mallee, its perfect cone lid nudged aside by the warmth of a new morning, its gold-tipped magenta fronds opening triumphantly towards the bees. The geometry of the grass tree, its lines lasering through space, calls time on the last rosebush.

The park is already strung with ghosts. Above the trees, subquantum legacies of her distant thoughts drift across to the river, understood only by the birds.