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Remembering Remembering

Absentmindedness

You've always been a loser of identity papers. More often than not you're marked as absent from the role-call of the moment. You're always travelling or at least in that state of agitation to be gone. It's ecstasy if that is simply being out of place, out of time. You trip. You're gone into memories perhaps but more often into memory's holes: you fall through the gap of desire into something else again. Call it fantasy if you like, but it's in these little outings that you find your motivation: compensation for memory's accidents. You throw out the net of writing to invent forgetting, to activate the holes.

You're blinded, distracted some say, abstract, never really with them, you drop things, look the wrong way for the traffic, deliver to the lover at your side the answer you failed to find for the one so long before and then, your tongue takes you down that slippery dip again: into the Kindergarten. Literally, the children's garden, the green paradise of childhood loves, you snatch a line from Baudelaire, *le vert paradis des amours enfantines*, yes because childhood likes a foreign tongue, likes in your case Turramurra, Wahroongah, Ku-ring-gai, Woy-Woy.

They've watched you coming loose from the *you* they summon. But these days, after institutions, identikits and credit cards, after word processors and rock videos, you jolt back into place quickly enough. It takes less time than your average ad. Still you're not what anyone would call composed. Composure, self-composure might be an integration of all the socially activated selves, of selves fantasised, remembered. Composure depends on a certain style of remembering, a certain pace of fantasy, an access of the sentences linking you and me to the music of what can't be said, to shrieks and babble, to the magical onomatopoeia of the time when the mother tongue plumped out an eiderdown around you.

NOW NOW NOW SOON SOON SOON the world of the Futures Market says; this is the time of FLASH FLASH FLASH, this is the time of fast-cutting, of such fast-cutting that desire has no time at all to insinuate itself between the frames, so fast that desire itself is cut, sends you vaulting back: FLASH FLASH FLASH, quick indeed these flash-backs, quick enough to send the most polite brain waves into spike activity on the electroencephalogram.

I'm the little red rooster too lazy to crow the dawn . . .

Even that, the lament for the failure of prophecy, has an old-fashioned ring. No time for prophecy unless it's quantitative: *With the greenhouse effect, it'll be sixty-five degrees centigrade on this coastal plain; Tomorrow Ariadne will sell at two dollars ninety-nine a share and the All Ordinaries will come down two points; Tomorrow, tomorrow and tomorrow, we'll lose the equivalent of fifty soccer fields in the Amazonian Forest.*

Epiphanies, too, are a luxury remembered from modernist times: ah the flooding pleasure, the plenitude at the site of those returns, the objects of past love basking in the intensified aura which recovery gives. Proximity as effect of distance travelled, of time suppressed, brings its charge to what is close at hand and slack with habit. The metaphor as time travel was a transcendental encounter between different selves. Epiphanies cause some embarrassment now. They're archaic. Scenes replayed in slow mo. At best they're like nostalgia marketed for the commodity of now: antipodean Proustians can consume time past — when chooks ranged free and Mum was chained to the stove — in Red red ready red Rooster, feel the glow of the old FJ when they stare into the computer display of the Commodore Executive and biting into a Chiko, rediscover their adolescent libido.

After the first death . . .

You remember a time when you wrote yourself into amnesia, when you set about remembering in order to forget, to dream

perchance of something else, of some set of images not given on the autobiographical platter.

It began with what was missing. You looked again from Waratah Road down the stretch of Pacific Highway to Berowra Station. You tried to animate the returning father. So far, so good. You brought him up to the twelve-foot frontage of Fosters' General Store And Post Office. The red paint shed flakes onto the verandah boards and your toes curled with the rasping recall of dry woodgrain. The memory jerked. A sweeping luminosity expelled the colours, set the path of speech ablaze, denouncing the scene as pure projection and another daylight re-established dismissed him. *The father missing*. You tried and tried but the movements wouldn't come in that fluid continuum which might have said: *He's coming home now*.

You let your mother's memory light up one or two more reliable scenes for you. You wanted the icons to glow awhile, long enough for you to be iconoclast of this particular past once and for all. You didn't want to be determined by this material, this early half-orphanage. Your inventiveness had to meet the challenge of the world of FLASH FLASH FLASH. Your mother held up images in a gentle light but even in these blown up moments, you found his smile undirected or rather, directed elsewhere, at someone else. How could you dismiss what missed you all the time? On scrutiny you found time stagnating like fate already written in the fold of a collar, the unravelling stitching of a button hole. Black Joe, your mother tried again, the tom we had then, would ask me sure as clockwork to let him out of the kitchen door at six-thirty every night. Polite but insistent. In time for him to meet The Train from Sydney.

You sent Black Joe on his loopy journey along the honeysuckle laden pickets, weaving between the telegraph poles, then crossing the highway, padding softly on the clay path, catching the damp breeze up from the Hawkesbury Valley, over the railway line which would bring Him in. Sure as clockwork, once again, he'd make it and hide behind the red phone booth in front of Foster's.

You'd have him rattle the cartilage in his ear, manicure the claw he'd frayed, yes, playing nonchalant, self-absorbed, but really waiting just for Him. Since then, you realize, you've had generations of black cats keeping the trace of that wait alive. *Missing, feared . . .*

The footsteps of the disappeared echo forever but you made Black Joe time his pounce perfectly, once and for all. He sprang with a *chirpy prrrah and the returning father was amazed: Well, well, well old boy. What a welcome!*

Once, your mother said, there was a sight that brought all the neighbours to their front fences. We saw through the dusk this four-legged beast staggering towards us. It had stiff protuberances from either side. Like a petrified octopus above, and below, a strange spasmodic fluid thing. Well, it turned out to be him all right, your father. He'd found old Charlie drunk on the station platform and was helping him back home — you'd never know who he'd bring back for a feed — and the strange stiff outgrowths, they were lengths of timber. He'd had the cheek to carry them back from Sydney on the peak hour train. Can you imagine? He did *that night after night until the top storey was . . . well, practically built.*

Night after night, the plumber's kelpie came up the ramp, up the wooden steps to the practically built top storey, to howl. How he'd howl. Finally the plumber had to be asked to keep him in. Black Joe never asked for anything at six-thirty. He'd stare at the door.

The stretch of Pacific Highway from Waratah Rd to Berowra Station was the site of second comings. All missing men were your desire. You fell in love with the marks of absence. You accepted *vine leaves for genitals as the statues showed you, even after furtive sightings to the contrary and never questioned the sexual habits of the vine.*

On the day when the gentlemen in suits stayed for too long asking questions of your mother, taking notes, you and your sister saw

her face retreat. You ran outside and played in the mulberry bush where you laughed at last, the fruit squirting under your teeth, the juice dribbling down, *no Daddy won't be coming home*, and Violet The Goat swivelled her jaw on its hinges and ground her teeth, blinking mildly. That was a lie. Actually she had a temper.

A neighbour called: It's tragic, so tragic, she said. So young and gone like that. I suppose some people might say — not that I'd agree, mind — that's what you get for interfering with nature. But I'm so sorry . . . Oh well, your mother recalled saying, to shut this woman up or to put her at ease, she couldn't remember, oh well, she said, he saw death as a kind of adventure; he believed in something beyond . . . What rubbish, the neighbour said. What rubbish. We're just like so many chooks scratching around on the earth's surface. But since I'm here and I know things are going to be hard, the double bed, I was wondering, you won't be needing that now, of course. How much? How much would you want for that? And the cot, the pram, the baby's stuff . . .

You chanted the place names from around the line: Wollstonecraft, Turramurra, Hornsby, Mt Colah, Ku-rin-gai Chase, to bring the train back home.

You'd go down through the wild gully to Coal and Candle or Windy Banks. Rock wallabies paused tremulous on the granite masses, sheer waterfalls rippled the ghost gums. This was the place to be away from adults, as if all the world were orphaned. The vertical messages were letters home. The sky rumbled, cracked open and summer hail pelted the hissing rocks. It was good to keep chanting the wild names.

Their magic proved right. You crossed the Bight in the Himalaya. It met with mountainous seas. One moment there were racing skies through the porthole, the next the leer of a luminous whiskered fish. Your mother crouched between the bunks to catch the sisters as they rolled through the seascape. She smoked and fuelled the dual vigilance of grief and nurture. From the cabin across the passageway they alerted the stewards to the smoke. They broke down the door. Another hole opened up in memory and you walked into it with the steward holding your hand: Well, I

suppose candlewick is made for burning, he laughed. Laughing with him, you tossed your charred dressing gown through the porthole.

Absentmindedness, you began to share it with your mother.

You aligned your patent leather shoes with your sister's on the rail and watched your mother as the tug nursed the giant ship into the strange flat harbour. It's shallow, they told you later, it's a difficult manoeuvre: they have to keep dredging the sand to let the big ships in. Much later you were amused to find that the French for dredging, *draguer* means cruising. You'd finished cruising and you'd found no-one, no-one. There was just a gap which refused to close between the ship and the wharf. The writing on the sheds stayed blurred. The other passengers had gone. Just the three of you and a gap called Fremantle. Then a man in white with a metal bucket and a scrubbing brush walked up smiling: Fat chance you've got of disembarking this side, Lady. We've been berthed since eight. I'd suggest you go to the port side . . .

This flat place would have you grow up quickly. Your body stuck out. You had a different relationship with the horizon, with plants. You had to re-invent verticality. You called a little depression in a spare block *gully*, a limestone outcrop *cliff*, a trickle from the hose *waterfall*. You were no longer the midget incident swallowed in the depths of landscape. You were far too big. You had to find a way of shrinking. You did. At the age of twelve you were only four feet tall. You had to look closely, so close you'd find a huge scale in the intimate texture of things. You came eye to eye to eye to eye with the Banksia Man, every eye a mouth, your own mouth a wicked seed-case loosening its charred secret. You started to write large the tiny messages: scribbles of violet shadow within the salt bush, greys that throbbed with lemon, memories of green, of pink. The small scale bush on the coastal plain taught a subtle way of walking. You had to be careful: the grass trees, which they called blackboys, waved their spears insolently; at your back you could feel the whole Nullarbor tugging, having crossed and recrossed it each time your mother was summoned in the wake of another death: grandpa, pop . . . *After the first death, there is no other.* The site is just intensified.

The no-man's land opened up definitively in your little family. You became a greedy hoarder of small memories but when you'd met these men your attention had been a reckless thing. Names like Mount Pleasant and Wembley where these grandfathers disappeared refused to open up like Berowra where fires went windborne over the highway and swept the gullies, where lightning was a mauve fissure earthing the sky. He'd been a rainmaker after all. *Missing, presumed . . .*

In Perth, the patterns were predictable: summer drought and the attendant imagery of flyscreen doors, cicada drone and sprinkler hiss marking the site of bleached epiphanies in every second Western Australian story, including your own.

In memory's vacancy

These are nothing but the compensation acts of memory. The Western Australian landscape hasn't taught Europeans a subtle way of walking, a close way of looking. You, my alibi, whom I've sent through the cartoon frames with their vague thought bubbles, only ever had in retrospect a bush eden, a green paradise. Remembering those first charged memories of the Hawkesbury Valley seen from the Swan, I've had to plug my ears from the roar of bulldozers amplified from decade to decade, transforming land into real estate, to chase from the horizon a thousand cranes preying like mantises over the endlessly demountable city, to deflate in the sky the Bond Corporation blimp. This is a place that likes to forget, that evacuates memory as soon as the patina of time bleeds guilt.

Of the Old Barracks, emblem of the brutal beginnings of European settlement in Perth, all that remains is a solitary quotation: the entry tower, a simple facade whose back mirrors the front, denying depth. It's collapsed back on itself: the military arm of imperialism disavowed, the exploitation of Aboriginal and convict labour erased, the genocide accompanying development denied. Behind this derisory remnant you can see the neo-classical facade of the present Parliament House. Between them, in

memory's vacancy, is a multi-lane freeway, a trajectory not for remembering political subjects but for the driven citizens of FLASH FLASH FLASH.

Even from Willagee, the suburb where I live now, the syringe of the giant new Bond Tower brings the brutal fix of the present to memory.

Maybe I can't afford the luxury of private memory any more when we've done our deal with Pinochet to forget all those who've disappeared. Maybe I need to remember that fetishizing the personal is finally complicitous with the collective amnesia which our corporate style of government promotes.

After the first death, there have been too many others.

Marion Campbell