

WELCOME ! WELCOME !

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The Verge

When I was growing up our house was one of a flat-nosed row on the east side, the river on the west, and just the Pacific Highway holding us apart. Back then it often felt like that unwavering black strip was the only thing stopping our cluster of 60s' brick monstrosities from just giving up and throwing themselves into the Clarence, lemming style.

They used to call it 'The line' up that way. It was a Godless thing, mad as all get out. You only had to listen to it.

Our Dad was petrified of it. "You cross that line by yerselves, you'll know all about it," he'd say, as much to himself as to me and my brother, Mick.

There'd been four deaths on the highway since '62. Kids mostly. Pete Coznic's little brother, Gus, had died on the Highway. Pete'd go apeshit if you ever mentioned it, so no one did. Pete was big.

But there was so much on the other side of the line. The lure of those Turner twins, drifting for whitey's in Cullock's tinny (with porno's stashed in the bait box) and ciggies in the smashed boathouse.

The old man did take us across on rare occasions, each of them a solemn affair. 'Do not let go,' he'd order, gripping our little wrists firmly as we crossed our bindii-eyed front lawn to the Highway verge. You'd have thought we were all off to the bloody gallows.

The times he did get us across, Mick and I would tear off as if we'd been locked up our entire lives. "Be careful," my father would yell, his voice often lost in a siren or a mess of gears crunching down.

Dad always sat right where we left him on the roadside, waiting in amongst the empty chip bags and shards of tyre rubber, unwilling to chance us making the return dash without him.

Whenever the urge to make the solo dash across the line got strong (summer was the worst), those deaths would return, clinging, holding me back. I'd think about that Coznic kid.

"He just wandered into a semi," Dad told me once. "He was always wantin' to get over to the birds. Loved birds, that kid."

"Birds?"

"Birds... on the river," he said, flicking a finger out towards it. "Frank said he was nuts for 'em on the TV, too. They got the first colour telly around 'ere...so he could watch them wildlife shows..." Frank Coznic lost the plot after little Gus went, and it wasn't long before the whole family upped and left.

That's when the flamingos appeared.

We all went down to gawp at them that morning – wire and concrete statues, all painted pink, in a cluster on the verge.

Mick and I had already started for home when I noticed Dad wasn't with us. I turned and there he was, stuck still in the fumes and the stinging early sun; just my father, those four timid flamingos, and the unstoppable screaming road.

- Stuart Spence

A New Call

It started a month ago. Richard woke up frantic after being stirred from his sleep by a birdcall that he couldn't place. He couldn't ascribe it to any bird that we knew of in the area. We talked through the possibilities of the coming of Spring, including the Common Koels and Channel-Billed Cuckoos. It was a new call, and every time we heard it in the morning, we sprang from our beds and jumped on to the veranda wearing towels and bath-robes, twitching agitatedly, pointing at movement in trees and shapes that turned out to be shadows and empty chip packets and not birds at all.

You stay in one place for a while and you start to feel its rhythms and attune yourself to its sounds like a composition on 24-hour repeat. We have the Illawarra to Bondi trains and vice-versa rattling away at a fast, regular pace from four am to one am, on top of a persistent succession of coal trains from Wollongong which rumble a deep bass, syncopated with vivid shrieks of metal on metal through the night. From six am the airport comes to life, but we are spared the flight path of Tempe and the 'Marrickville Pause'. Richard hears the plane engines being tested, but I can't. I hear the hum of Princes Highway in the background all the time. He insists that the sound of aircraft idling on the runway can be distinguished from this and I am glad to be spared the discrimination of such fine-tuned ears. I do hear the young men in low-slung Holdens screeching around the winding corners of the underpass beneath our house on the weekend. I also smile each morning when the broken-down ice-cream Transit van honks La Cucaracha on it's way off to peddle trans-fats to kids, and give another for the guy at night who sells milk from a truck with an orange flashing light (like it's an official council vehicle), ringing a hand-bell when he stops in every street.

But back to sounds that are not man-made. The new call is not Willy Wagtail, not Wattlebird, not Superb Fairy Wren, not Butcherbird, nor Magpie nor Black Cockatoo. We checked. It isn't the Currawong that sits on the neighbour's aerial, nor the ape-shit squawking of the hundred Noisy Minors in the giant fig tree across the road. It isn't the New Holland Honey-Eater. It isn't the chirruping and squabbling of the Flying-Foxes from Wollie Creek. It isn't the monotonal "Maouw" of Solly the cat sitting on my chest, nor the gentle "Purrroooo?" of my ginger tom Drazic responding to my touch in the same questioning way he has for fifteen years. The new call is temporarily frustrating us. But we're pretty certain it comes from the mulberry tree on Knight Street. It's just a matter of time before we catalogue it and incorporate it into the Banksia soundscape, on daily rotation.

- Bec Dean

Purlieu

It creeps, one toe eating into puckered soft mud. Divots in ripened earth, forward through spiralled, terraformed vines. Luncheon mouth gaping, matted-mange fur duvet brushing ancient, nutant leaves. This is to be home, now. Always was until.

Feline shapes dance shadows, cat howling in rafters, domestic finials moving, high, up high. It avoids. No deliverance of the aggressive needed. A meal is required. This one is aware, knows teeth and claw. It is aware.

Houses are plucked from ground, dappling flattened suburbia. Newfoundland warren, vermin sub-terra, excluding the present.

Its infrared eyes scan out ahead, twitched and triangular radar dishes triangulating. A whoop, distant but.

The whoop continues, car lightshow corners flashing trill orange, whoop, screaming out for assist, whoop, pitch changes. Three whistles, sequential. Silent. It treads out further, open ground, killing zone. Smells of scorched woodchip dance beyond, carried on slow air. Meat tinges, cindered. Condiments. Sounds of the voice, lulling in and out. At once a chink of glass. Roaring. Bass notes. No silence.

Such gatherings are to be negotiated. Our fox stumbles, nothing more than a prank, before dashing beneath one of the four-propped shelters that might at once sing. It is safer to be under, not exposing. It is hungry.

She has three cubs, made fuck with male foxes, one of which claimed her, victorious. It is dark. They are loud. But they are distant.

Ahead, twin biped humans walk. She is young enough, mid teens perhaps. He is thrice, age and build, heavysset. Dark eyes swing rapid past wheel, follows the target. Activity follows, hand grabbing, mouth cupped struggling. Clothes scrape to ground. It is late, vixen retracting.

She is on the floor, movements increased, restrictive, pressed heavysset weight downwards, dragging, bush-destined.

It retreats, ant-dashes to the next haven, further away, spies atramentous bags on the floor nestling dustbin towers that come forward to streets bi-weekly. It is the best harvest. Wants to investigate.

It is hungry. The bag invites, snacks and calories nestled within, cannot yet reach it. Polythene protects stale carcass, fruit bone medley, humanic shits and effluvia. The risk is great. She waits. The girl is raped without intervention.

- Nathan Hill

We rode the train to the end of the line and walked back through the suburbs and along the freeway. A prefabricated rock face edged the freeway and was replicated for miles. We stopped at a nature reserve between suburbs, cooked beans on an kerosene camp stove and listened to the drone of traffic in the tunnel beneath us.

- David Mutch

Notorious. The go-to word used then and now to describe my childhood suburb. Its very name capable of invoking shock and awe when revealed as my origin. Populated then by Aboriginals, Islanders, working class Aussies, post-war European migrants and ten pound Poms. The optimism of early development stymied by the heavy hand of the Housing Commission, sowing the seeds of stigma in a vortex of disadvantage. Good kids from poor homes set on meagre educational pathways leading to early parenthood, Boggo Road or a violent end. The Olympic pool filled in to better serve as a parking lot for yet another mall. The library banished to a redeveloped civic centre trapped next to a freeway five-ways, unnavigable on foot. Street signs outnumbered by surveillance cameras.

When opportunity is eroded, assigned social status is taken on with a vengeance. The cocky, futile swagger of reputation becomes a substitute for real achievement. The civic gateway sign in gaudy high school colours on the main road proclaims defiance instead of welcome. Insiders only. Those who make their escape are not fleeing mere middle class ennui; they are seeking enfranchisement otherwise denied.

My old neighbours have now been joined by refugees from modern wars, exchanging one heart of darkness for another. Baking under the harsh glare of the sun and merciless public opinion, exploited by tabloid TV and lampooned by larrikin film makers. The residents pushed down by welfare, goaded by capitalism and fed hope by Christian Outreach Centres. Council billboards abound with absurdly feelgood slogans conjured by FIFO spin doctors with no connection to the place. Yet to this day the suburb I knew from the inside and its people represent the most egalitarian, accepting community I have experienced. Respect.

- Robert Lastdrager

Surfers Palms

Surfers Palms. It sounded like a tropical oasis where palm trees swayed gently in the warm breeze, adorning golden sands. It sounded like the kind of destination where you might snooze in a hammock, or sip on a piña colada as the sun fell into the ocean. It sounded like the carefree attitude of tourists on vacation.

It could have been any of the above descriptions, and more...had it not have been built as a low-income housing estate in Benowa on the Gold Coast in QLD.

Eighteen units arranged sequentially, littering a horseshoe shaped driveway filled with broken dreams and disadvantaged single parent families. I spent my formative years swimming in the highly chlorinated pool; cartwheeling on the barely tendered lawn near the main road; and playing on a tennis court with no racquets or balls, just a tattered net and faded white lines.

We lived in number twelve. There was nothing special about number twelve. It was exactly the same as every other even numbered unit, except our backyard was flanked by the local nursing home, which is where my mum worked. Her days were long and extended well into the night, so I found myself under the care of various neighbours, befriending their various children.

I loved the boy in number six. Our bedrooms were the same shape, so naturally I took this to mean that we were meant to be together. We biked down to the sports oval, throwing rocks at ducks and small children, enjoying what was supposedly the most magical time of our lives. Everyday I watched the clock at school, wishing three-pm would come, so number six boy and I could resume our adventures in the Bogan wonderland we called 'home'.

One evening, around seven-thirty, as we sat under the spider-infested gazebo next to the letterboxes, he kissed me. As he pulled away, his saliva dribbled down my chin and I quickly absorbed it into my sleeve, vowing to never again wash my pink Best-and-Less long-sleeved top.

"Ha-ha, that was gross," he exclaimed, as he pushed me off my perch, bursting the blissful bubble that encased me after my very first kiss.

Everything changed after that night. He started hanging out with the older boys from number four who had bigger rocks and pocket money to spend at the local seven-to-seven. I retreated into number twelve to eat my feelings and watch Channel 7's popular afternoon kids game show, *A-maze-ing*.

Walking home from school everyday, I dreamed of moving into the peach-coloured townhouses across the road. Surfers Palms Plaza: it sounded like a new beginning, a second chance for a better life.

- Marion Piper

It stretches about you from one horizon to another, one house after another, one yard after another, the streetlights like jewels on a string. I didn't grow up here. Where I come from fences are barbed wire, the dark is true, water isn't plumbed. Suburbia was a place of dreams: teenagers climbing out of windows; streets paved with concrete for roller skating; parents returning from work in the near dark. It was the place where something would happen, a slumbering giant waiting to wake.

It is dog shit and nature strips and bins out on Monday mornings, gardens of roses and rosemary, a tumbling of jasmine into bluestone alleys. It's peeling bills and graffiti. It's the violence inside, so neatly shuttered. It's a territory, marked and re-marked, claimed and named and contested.

It's an underworld, the only world for some. The vast swathe of us are caught between the towers of the city, that small epicentre, and somewhere, out there, beyond all this, the country, the wide, empty space. A million people dreaming separate dreams, together.

- Dove Rengger-Thorpe

STRANGE NEIGHBOUR

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