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Brenda Walker

An extract from Crush

In spring, black men see boronia in the city. Their faces are solemn, unreadable. Take the boronia and it makes a pungent shape about you, separating you from the shoppers. If you open your fist a little you see that the paper protecting your hand from the stems is familiar, disconcerting. Toilet paper.

Walk on up William Street past the Arcane Bookshop and the Limbo Dance Club. There are travel agencies, their signs snagging at the memories of exiles from the Middle East, the Far East. There is a large brothel, bland and cream. Side streets have shadows where young girls go with derelicts for flagon sherry and a little money. Occasionally one commits a spectacular mutilation and heads turn, turn back to their own business and forget. You walk on past grey houses, pegged together with Victorian economy. Here and there fresh paint marks a middle class colony but some of these houses are too dim and low for rehabilitation.

Somewhere in this area is the shabby office of Tom O'Brien, solicitor, barrister and Proctor of the Courts. He listens to clients, rehearses defences, writes pleas in mitigation.

Not far away is L'Alba Cafe, where you can sit for hours with a newspaper, listening to Elvis sing 'Love me Tender'. The roller skating waiter speaks nimble English well back in his Belgian mouth. Pirouetting, he brings coffee for the art students, the drunks, the renovators, for Tom O'Brien, sometimes for me.

You can find me in Alice Street, a blunt narrow road with cars parked on the footpaths. Kids chase one another through the bumper bars. Two steps down from the footpath and you are in the front room where I sit with my manual Olivetti on my trestle desk, a mattress on the floor behind me.

The house is clean and bare, curtainless. When Tom O'Brien moved in he had a bonfire. He cleaned the faces of the Portugese angels and shored up the hall arch which they decorate. He took out the monochromatic canvases, the chairs which smelt of mouse piss and old horsehair. He dragged out a rug and found a trap door. He lowered himself into the floor and passed up buckets of old newspapers, burnt spoons, smashed china, syringes. He burned these in the back yard, under the Cape Lilac. He scrubbed the walls with sugar soap. He advertised the front room. I came, I had been watching Tom O'Brien. The house, too, was familiar to me.

Past Alice Street is Hyde Park. Here, old men argue about politics in central European dialects. Buddhist, Muslim and Orthodox children swing and squabble. At night gay lovers meet and part under the Moreton Bay figs. There are clipped lawns and flowered borders. The central spectacles are the lakes, the long promenades on their banks overshadowed by great plane trees. There are islands, distant from the shore, where growth is high and dense. Black cockatoos sweep across the islands in flocks, tearing at the coral trees. They are dusty from wintering in the desert. Shot, they disgorge nectar copiously. But firearms are never seen in the park. ... Tom O'Brien tells me nothing about himself. What I know about him I discovered, for myself. He's a good advocate, or so they say. His room contains a single iron bed and bookshelves made from planks and bricks. He reads about constitutional law, logic, ethics. He reads the philosophy of David Hums, again and again. He plays backgammon against himself. ...

I pay my rent, sometimes we eat together. Once I told him it was my birthday. I imagined him leaning across and kissing my mouth, firm and dry. I would have got up and walked away, leaving him still on his haunches in the dust, the perfume of the Cape Lilac heavy about him. Better that we live like animals of a different species, without history, without passion. If I could believe this of us

I sit here from eight o'clock in the morning in my jeans and the white T-shirt I sleep in. I have my pot of tea, my special pen, I open all the louvres and the hot air pours down off the pavement. If I stand up I can see Alfredo in the garden opposite, slowly staking his tomatoes with strips of torn-up blue singlet. The louvres frame and segment my view. Most;ly my eyes flick between the hand moving across the white page and the black-eyed Susan which runs up the pavement. With their louvre borders, the orange and black flowers could be the entire run of a Margaret Preston print, laid beside and above one another.

The words come, or no words come. My right ankle itches, the tea cools in the pot.

Sometimes I walk to the park and find a space on the water's edge. At exactly the same time every day two men in their fifties used to take the air, arm in arm, their leashed schnauzers pacing with dignity at their heels, then one disappeared. Often I look for the patterns beneath the reflections and cigarette butts. There are turtles in the lake, they tip the surface with their nostrils. You can trace them down, the long supple necks and the vague shape of the

shell. They rise and drift for their own reasons, but they can be swift. They take cygnets and ducklings, snap and drag. I don't stay long in the park, I'm back at my desk in the afternoon, reading my sentences, listening to some music on the radio.

I didn't plan to be like this. I wasn't always like this. Once I wanted more than a room, some clothes folded into a cardboard box, paper, a typewriter and a distant man, sighing as he turns in his bed at night. But something rose up, inside me, and I changes.

Once I had friends, a lover, a sense of direction. There were others like me. We read, argued, danced, drank together. We must have been alike.

I used to live in an Art Deco apartment on Beaufort Street. It was marked for demolition so the rent was low. The panelling inside was stained to a deep, still, blood colour. ...

The neighbouring flat was inhabited by a saxophonist who called himself Laminex Dan. He had a ukelele collection behind a pink kidney-shaped bar. He stacked Dean Martin records on top of the bar. I could hear him through the wall, singing about Houston, Chicago and Californiay. He owned a row of conical goblets in metallic colours. He drank chilled sherry out of these, when he could be bothered pouring it from the flagon. He trampled his dirty laundry in the shower cubicle. ...

Dan introduced me to the man who was to become my lover. His name doesn't matter. One day he appeared at my door with a handful of roses. He taught print-making at the Art Institute. He had a taste for the cheap Egyptiana which was fashionable in the thirties. He told me that he collected Depression prints of ruins and endless dunes. ...

I began to visit his house, to sit with him in front of the television. He liked the sound turned so low that all you could hear was a white hiss, like wind over clay.

I started to be sick. At first I was tired, but then I began to sweat and vomit. It took from me all my will and energy. Each night I lay very still under the sheets, under the mosquito netting, and listened to his smooth even breathing. I could hear the mosquitoes, but I wasn't sure whether they were inside or outside the net. ...

I come from a time and place where the universal cure was considered to be the intimacy of women's friendship. I decided to visit my old household and talk to Zora. ...When I arrived she was sitting up in bed in an old tracksuit. I made a pot of jasmine tea and carried it in. ... I tried to talk but there was a lump, a real lump in my throat. There was a cat in the bedroom which I held on my knees as we spoke. It reached up and clawed at the plastic brooch I was wearing at my throat and the plastic furrowed like soft toffee. ...

I went to a doctor at the local medical centre. ... She pressed cool fingers into a body which had suddenly become mine again. I explained about my throat. She looked at me. I waited for diagnosis and medicine. 'Perhaps you're trying to say something,' she said. 'Your problem may be one of utterance.'

I walked long distances at night with my jacket flapping and my hands in my pockets. In the striding darkness I passed between the lakes and islands of the park. I heard the shuffling of bats and parrots in the branches overhead. I heard the urgent voices in the shadows, their enticing or involuntary sounds. I saw no bodies, human or otherwise. I maintained a pace and rhythm without climax, without interruption. It was impossible to believe that the muscles could fail, that the step could falter or the ankle turn. But it must happen. The body, like any story, must come to its irresolute conclusion. We imagine a narrative following a death, a narrative of difficult justice, to spin movement and morality out of the pooling veins, the eyes milking over, the silence, the silence.

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Poems

Angels

angels without portfolio
Miroslav Holub

it's the little things you notice
they wear ordinary clothes
but hum next year's hit song
sometimes forget about gravity
stepping too lightly from the kerb
they may have difficulty with
the concept of money
giving the shopkeeper change
or speak a language you've
never heard but somehow understand

angels can't drive
or remember jokes
they have trouble with shoelaces
and instructions on the backs of packets
they may compliment you
on your shoulder blades

some gone feral are sleeping rough
and hanging out on street corners
talking tough
helpless as dumped kittens
they kiss like Brigitte Bardot
and follow you home
but you can't keep them
not even the fallen ones

Hotels

arriving late
you're steered to a room
alive still with the smell of urine
and cigarettes

the shower's a drizzle
and the towel abrasive as steel wool
on the bedside table there's
an ashtray stolen from another hotel
an electric jug and tea-bag
but no cup
the TV bolted to the wall
has one fuzzy channel

the bed's a squeaking valley
 the three tissues in the dispenser
 will be counted in the morning

bored, you read the Bible
 at least there's still a Bible
 though someone has underlined passages
 and torn out the Song of Solomon
 the closest you were going to get
 to sex or poetry

at five in the morning
 another argument in the next room
 above the noise of the plumbing
 you lie back and watch the moon
 white against a winter sky
 same moon over a house you left
 where light will soon
 spill from a kitchen window
 tea leaves cast a sodden arc
 onto a rose bush
 and a table cloth float down

another breakfast and early departure
 back on the road
 past the unopened shops
 and into a flatness of paddocks
 that will come to midday's
 shimmering ambiguities
 as if uncertain what shape to take

you will enter them freely
 losing yourself
 thinning to air

Skin

skin the brown snake left
 a lost stocking on the road

skin of the leopard
 its spots dark lipstick prints

skin of my father
 the crude tattoo he hides

skin of the water
 rounded in my drinking glass

skin of the garfish
 soft blue metal

skin of the bee
 a small suede pelt

skin of the peach
 cousin to the bee

skin of the rose
 your curved lips pouting

we come to each other
 in the skin of animals
 someone else inside us

Saints

to Saint Casper
patron saint of those trying
to start an old mongrel car
thank you

to Saint Julio
who watches over those easily
confounded by household devices
can-openers
clothes driers
vacuum cleaners
my usual blessings

to Saint Felicity
guardian of birth control
have mercy upon me
again

to Saint Ira
protector of matching socks
Saint Whoever You Are
responsible for warding off
traffic jams
broken laces
burst zips
I've invoked you all

but I'm caught here
shaving at the morning mirror
where there is no grace
no resort
or fallback argument
and of the armies of saints
none dares help me

how easily we are
ruined by mirrors

Plum

straight from the fridge
the plum softens in the bowl
blue as a bruise

a finger touched to
its frosted skin
leaves a purple print
between the lingering
jewellery of condensation's
beads

I roll its dark curve
across your own
before we bite
something's wet
and delicious here

part of it's not you

LETTERS AND DEBATE

letter from G.C. Beaton

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