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Share

Written by

ANTHONY MACRIS

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WRITING NSW **FEATURES**

I left my home town of Brisbane in early 1983 after I received a late-round offer to attend Sydney University. I was 20 years old and desperate to give my life some direction after having left art school without completing a degree, then spending two aimless years, mostly on the dole, trying to decide what I wanted to be. I would be moving to Sydney with the grand sum of $250 in my bank account. This lack of money made me nervous, but I was still excited by the freedom and challenges that lay ahead. And the challenges were formidable. I didn't know anyone, I had nowhere to live, and I wasn't sure if I had the skills to cope with the kind of serious academic study that awaited me at Australia's oldest university. But the question that came to me over and over again was this: how could I belong in this new city?

We belong in many ways: we belong to places, we belong with people, we belong to ourselves. Belonging is a negotiation with things outside ourselves, things that provide the meaningful connections without which we can't develop or be fulfilled as people. Belonging is a slow process, an accumulation of knowing over time. Belonging requires give and take. But if belonging requires negotiating outside forces, there needs to be some core self that seeks belonging, or at least some semi-stable entity that interacts with the external world.

In some ways I was too confused to know if I possessed such a core. At this point in my life I was at odds with myself on many fronts. I was uncertain about nearly everything: my social skills, my ethnicity, the fact that I came from what was considered a backwater: Brisbane, in Joh Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland. I was also uncertain about how I could continue to be an artist, about what path my creative and intellectual development might take. But above all I was unsure about my ability to survive in this new city. I had been to Sydney before for short trips, but the thought of making a new life there was daunting and, when I dared admit it to myself, frightening.

I caught the overnight bus – a 16-hour journey – and made my way to where I was staying. The first trip over the Harbour Bridge was unforgettable: I'd never seen the city from that vantage point before. From the upper level of a double-decker train, I

looked down at the vast expanse of harbour. I imagined it was a thousand years after an earthquake, or some other cataclysm. A thousand years ago, this was an Arcadia: deep blue water, dense green foliage, cliffs of sandstone. Then the earth tore itself open, land crumbled into the sea, and the massive structure of the bridge rose, whole, gargantuan, rocks and debris raining down from its curved metals struts as it thrust itself to the sky. The Opera House arose too and here they stood, the bridge placid and strong, the Opera House a porcelain temple, keeping benevolent watch over the bays and coves etched out by the ocean.

But it was the Sydney light that amazed me the most. In Brisbane the light was subtropical, heavy. It hit the city with nuclear force and soaked into the bitumen, the mangroves, the muddy river. Everything felt swollen, slightly distorted, warped and cracked by the bouts of heat and moisture. The light in Sydney was different. It struck then glanced off, washing everything like rain, leaving it fresh and clear. I loved this Sydney light: it filled me with an energy that felt weightless, effortless. Yes, I thought, here was somewhere I could belong.

My older sister, who had a friend in Sydney, had lined up some temporary accommodation. Her friend lived in a flat on Sydney's North Shore. It didn't take me long to realise that I was there under sufferance. Barely five minutes after my arrival her friend took me aside and told me she wouldn't have time to show me around: it was a busy time at work. Her distant expression was all too easy to read: don't stay minute a longer than you have to. I also found out it wasn't really her place, as she'd led us to believe. She just rented a room there, and it was her flatmate who had the lease. He was in advertising. I'd be sleeping, she told me, in the living room on his brand new leather couch. I glanced over at it. It was a glaring polar white.

I met him a few hours later. He was a slight blond guy in his mid-twenties. Brief pleasantries over, he told me, with a forced show of reasonableness, to be careful with the couch. It's a special kind of leather, he told me, hard to clean. I assured him I'd be very careful, but he didn't look convinced. I decided I wouldn't spend a second there longer than I needed to. Later that night my sister's friend, thinking better of the frosty reception I'd been given, took me out for dinner. In the dim light of the pizzeria I decided her face was too soft for her multi-coloured, New Wave haircut, shaved close to the scalp on one side, a mess of teased layers on the other. In Brisbane she had a beach bunny look. We shared a pepperoni pizza and salad. She looked a little lost to me.

The previous five years had been difficult for me. I'd left high school at the age of fifteen because I couldn't take the racism any more. At Hendra High School in suburban Brisbane, every day for three years I was called wog: greasy wog, dirty wog, smelly wog, wog, wog, wog, wog. It was the verbal equivalent of constantly being spat on. It also didn't help that my parents ran a fish and chip shop. While my self-esteem was being systematically destroyed at lunchtimes, it went on rollercoaster rides in the classroom. According to my teachers, I had what they called 'natural ability'. Thus I found myself streamed into the high-performing academic classes. While it was ego-boosting to be among the brighter students, it made me a target in another sense: out amongst the herd, to be smart was nearly as bad as being Greek.

I also quickly found that natural ability only gets you so far. I had no back up at home – my parents had little or no formal schooling – so my grades were haphazard. So haphazard, in fact, that it puzzled my teachers, most of whom were convinced that I simply wasn't applying myself. Add to this some fairly fierce acne, a slight weight problem, and an emergent personality that could veer wildly between intro- and extroversion, and you have a classic recipe for adolescent dysfunction. By the end of

grade 10, the earliest point it was possible to escape this grinding torment, I wanted out. The school counsellor was bewildered: she saw me as university material. Sitting opposite her good-natured, crestfallen face, there was nothing I could say. University? Greek people from fish and chip shops didn't go to university. She might have well as asked me to plan a trip to Venus.

But what could I do? I didn't want a job, and with only a Junior Certificate my study options were limited. My certificate did, however, accurately reflect my strengths: English, Art, History and French. What could I do with that? My sister was at art school doing a Certificate in Commercial Illustration. The art school part sounded great: I'd always liked making things. The commercial illustration side? I didn't care. A lifeline was being thrown to me, and I grabbed on to it. I enrolled.

In many ways it was as if a magic wand had been waved. My acne subsided, I lost weight. For the first few months I dutifully did my assignments. I started to get what I realised I wanted so badly: tasks I could reliably do, and praise for being smart and original. It was a strange curriculum. One minute you'd be doing line drawings of kettles and ironing boards with a Rotring Rapidograph, the next you'd be learning about conceptual art. It was the obscure, the radical, the wildly imaginative, that caught my eye. Dada, Surrealism, Abstract Expression, performance art, installation. I begged one of my painting lecturers to allow me to transfer to the Fine Arts degree. I wanted to be a painter and conceptual artist, with a bit of performance art on the side.

For the next two years I applied myself to my newfound vocation. There were also sex, drugs (marijuana and hash), and music, a lot of the last one, not as much as the former two. I was too young for sex and drugs and the range of experiences I had, for the most part, didn't sit too well with me. By the time I was seventeen I realised that I liked to be in control of things, and sex and drugs led you into unpredictability: people had their messy personalities, spliffs and bong sessions left you addled for days. Art, on the other hand: well, that was where you reigned supreme, and it was where I was happiest: a boy king presiding over his own successes and failures, the stereo permanently on in the background.

Boy kings, however, have a habit of going off the rails. It's never a good idea to place yourself on a throne too quickly, especially one of your making in your very own fantasy realm. A career in conceptual/performance art was high risk at the very least, and it took me a while to realise that the act of painting bored me. There was stuff going on in my head that set up this permanent buzz, this permanent interference. The interference only really subsided when I read, or when I was engaged with ideas. In my spare time I read mainly novels and philosophy.

By the time I was eighteen I had dropped out of art school and spent a couple of years, to my parents' horror, mainly on the dole, hanging about in the State Library of Queensland reading ancient editions of Proust and Nietzsche. I knew only three things. I wanted to get out of Brisbane, I wanted to be a writer, and I wanted to get an education from a proper university. I applied across the country to wherever had entry programs outside the normal high school pathway. Sydney University accepted me to do two non-degree subjects: French and Fine Arts. If I did well in them I could transfer to full degree status. It seemed a good deal. So I packed my bags, and was on my way to glittering Sydney, that great southern city with its pokies and porn mags (both banned in wholesome Queensland), its Opera House and its dazzling harbour.

I'd never lived out of home and I would have preferred a place of my own, but there was no way I could afford it. I'd be living in Sydney on the dole. This was because I'd already used up my three years of government study assistance at art school. There would be no money from my parents, who were barely scraping by on the pension: a few days before I left, my father had brandished the telephone bill at my mother, castigating her for making so many calls. As if. My mother's lifestyle would have shamed a church mouse.

I bought the *Sydney Morning Herald* and went through the share accommodation ads. Houses were leafy, rooms were spacious, kittys were either a fixed sum or negotiable. Often there was an adjective for the type of person sought for: responsible, broadminded, communal. Some stated gender: mostly female. This wasn't looking good. I wasn't female, or particularly communal. With the aid of a borrowed street directory I spent my first weekend stumbling around the inner west, my poor sense of direction brought to the fore by Sydney's chaotic lay out. I barely got to share house interviews on time.

People were polite, even friendly, but ultimately wary. I was given tours of cell-sized rooms next to running toilets, kitchens with rusting fridges and designated shelving, living rooms with ancient sofas, the horsehair and springs poking through the frayed upholstery. It was nerve-wracking. I was inexperienced in spruiking myself to strangers, and I either talked too much, or too little. People I wasn't interested in living with seemed to take a shine to me, the ones I thought I might have some connection with couldn't get me out of the place fast enough. We'll decide by Sunday night and call, they generally said. At the end of the footsore day, living in mortal fear of returning to that ferociously white leather sofa that was so slippery it was impossible to sleep on, I wasn't optimistic.

To my amazement I got a call early Sunday evening. It was from the place I'd considered the most unlikely, a terrace in the tiny suburb of Darlington, close to the university. The woman who interviewed me had been shy to the point of unreadable, and I was out of the place in five minutes. But now here she was, ringing to say the room was mine if I wanted it. Great, I said, I'll move in tomorrow. It was a huge relief. I was no longer a sofa-surfing charity case. I was moving into a five-bedroom student household. The first hurdle had been cleared in the race to belong to my adoptive city: an address – 394 Abercrombie Street.

I had the ground floor room next to the front door. It shared a wall with the living room. It wasn't the worse room in the house: that honour went to the smallest bedroom upstairs, barely large enough to fit the mattress that lay wedged into the corner. No, my room was the second worse room in the house, or so I first thought. There would be constant comings and goings, and the living room right next door would host parties at any time of the day and night. But it didn't turn out that way at all.

My housemates were a quiet bunch, and seemed to spend as little time at home as possible. They consisted of a social work student, a science student, and a computer science student. The shy lease holder studied psychology. To create a bit of community spirit, I told everyone I'd be cooking some Greek food, if anyone was interested. Even though I'd been away from home for barely a week, I was missing contact with all thing Greek. I made *yemista* – roasted tomatoes and capsicum stuffed with rice and mince – and a large salad. I took great care with the tomatoes: I wanted the skins to have the caramelised sweetness that come when you bake them hot, but not too hot, and I was sure the oven, a battered gas-fuelled beast that looked like it had survived two world wars, was up to job. And it was: I fluked the perfect batch.

An hour later I served it up to my hungry housemates and I felt proud and happy as I watched them tuck in. It was a strange moment, to have that part of my identity appreciated and affirmed: it was barely five years ago that this generation had been my tormentors. But we weren't children any longer. We were now adults, trying to make our way in the world, and dependent on each other to varying degrees. It was a healing moment, one that went some way to helping me get over the earlier blows to my self-worth.

But making *yemista* was no substitute for the real thing: contact with Greek people. I had no Greek relatives in Sydney. I barely spoke the language: I was, after all, a product of the assimilation period. The language: perhaps that was a way I could re-engage with my background? If I did well in my non-degree subjects, French and Fine Arts, the next year I would be granted full-degree status, and could choose to do Modern Greek as well. That's what I would do: I'd add Modern Greek and Philosophy to my program. I'd meet some Greek people, and I'd get a real education at a real university. In this new city I'd reshape myself, become the person I felt I ought to have been, the person I should become.

We belong to people, we belong to places, we belong to ourselves. When you uproot yourself, when you decide to permanently leave somewhere, you are saying to your family, your friends, I no longer belong here. This is not the place where I can become who I want to become. You aren't the people who I can belong to. So you go and live somewhere else, hoping that's where you can belong. When you leave, no matter how amicable the terms of separation, you hurt those who you belonged to, and you hurt yourself.

Place also plays a role in this process, but it doesn't actively try to hurt you in your quest to belong: it's just curiously indifferent, monumentally there. You arrive, suitcase in hand, and try to find your space amongst the teeming horde. Place simply doesn't care how you feel about it. For example, I hated the terrace I was living in, but it didn't seem to notice. I had grown up all my life living in wooden Queenslanders. They were living, breathing structures fashioned from wooden boards, perched on stumps. Air and sound and voices flowed through them around them.

With its bars on the windows, its thick brick walls, its foundations deep in the ground, the terrace house in Abercrombie Street felt like a decrepit prison. Late at night, lying on my foam mattress on the floor, I'd stare up the pressed metal ceiling, listening to the late night footsteps of a housemate as they prepared to go to bed, and feel as if I was descending into the claggy earth under the floorboards. It was a feeling I hated: breathing in the still, dead air, trapped in a brick box between the metal ceiling, the damp earth.

I'd try to get to sleep, conjuring images of happier times: the rustle of the massive mango tree that leant precariously over the driveway at home, the favourite haunt of fruit bats; the small green frog that, one afternoon during a heavy storm, seemed to have fallen from the heavens and landed with a splat on the window glass. Such magical acts of nature seemed impossible here. I finally fell asleep, the image of the dunny lane at the back of Abercrombie Street stretching off into a grey, Dickensian infinity.

Because I'd been offered a late round place, and it had taken a little time to move down Sydney, I didn't set foot on campus until classes were in their third week. On my first day of attendance I was stunned that it took me barely ten minutes to walk there. 'Nearby' in Brisbane usually meant it took ten minutes to *drive* there. I couldn't believe my luck. No transport costs, and I could nip home for lunch.

I had completely changed the way I dressed. By the end of art school my clothes had become increasingly outlandish: typical post-punk art-school regalia, but pumped up to the max. By the end of it all I was wearing make up on a regular basis: my face was white, lips red, eyeliner to top it off. Red or black nail polish when the mood took me. My hair was cut short, but neat, to give the look a Teutonic cast. Given I was an Australian of Greek background living in the sub-tropics, I thought that was pretty funny.

The new me that fronted up to the wrought iron gates of Sydney University that morning was the complete opposite. A Bonds T-shirt, 50s-style jeans, black sandshoes. My hair was still short, but I wasn't fussy about it. That was about it. I didn't want to think about that stuff anymore. I was aware that this was a new affectation, the mean and lean, but I had given up the struggle against affectation. I was incapable of not adopting a pose. I could never get away from play-acting myself in some kind of theatrical production, the world a set where I had to, the best I could, plan out my moves in advance.

The new role was generic stripped-back young man, verging on the nondescript. The conceit lay in the fact that there was a ravenous appetite in my head, that I wanted to absorb as much possible so I could make great things, beautiful things, remarkable things that would stun the world. This is what I wanted to do. I wasn't at university to *be* anything. Not a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer. I only saw my future in terms of what I could *do*, of what I could *make* in terms of artistic objects, and artistic in the broadest possible sense. If the artefacts were to be made out words, so be it.

The most important thing for me was to feed the strange fever in my head, to enrich that perceiving machine so it could make remarkable things. This was more important than anything. More important than people, money, security. This was not a conscious choice: no one in their right mind makes such choice. The consequences of it were painful and difficult: isolation, self-doubt, and who knew what other afflictions. We belong to people, places, to ourselves. This was a path to belonging only to yourself, to locking yourself up your own prison and dying alone. Balance, it was all about finding balance. But trying to achieve that balance was like tugging at a steering wheel that, of its own accord, made you permanently veer off the straight path.

One sunny day, a couple of weeks into classes, I sat sprawled on a patch of lawn between Manning House, the main haunt for Arts students, and the rear wall of the massive Gothic building that linked the university to its greater Oxbridge pedigree. On the lawn all around me were other students in sun-dappled groups, a few strays among them. By this stage I could identify some of the main groups. Broadly speaking, there were the preppy, well-heeled Arts/Law students with an air of entitlement. There were the modest types from their modest suburbs, innocent and wide-eyed. There were the migrant groups: the Asians, the Indians, a smattering of Italians or Greeks or whichever minority was spurring its children on to upward mobility. Then there were the lone rangers, people like me, oddities of circumstance.

And as I sat there on the luminous grass, in the shade of the cool sandstone wall with its gargoyles, its lead lined windows, the joins in its masonry bleeding black dust, I thought with amazement: this is all pretty much free. Apart from the Student Union fee, a nuisance $75 or so which still managed to outrage everyone, and the cost of text books, going to university was free. There were none of the exorbitant tuition fees you heard about in places like America, none of the huge student loans you were expected to pay off for the rest of your life. I knew what we had in Australia wasn't really a level playing field; you could never expect that. But it was close to one. The most important thing I felt at that moment was that I had a chance. A chance to compete, to find out what I was made of, to show that I could be as good as anyone,

anywhere. I felt a surge of confidence, one that made me think I could face the challenges that lay ahead. A real chance: that was all I wanted. For ten minutes I sat sprawled on the sunny grass, filled with exhilaration and contentment, and allowed myself to think that Australia truly was the paradise it so fervently believed itself to be.

I needed that boost of courage: I found the enormous campus with its army of students alienating, and the first few weeks of academic study were difficult. The Queensland College of Art was a tiny, purpose-built campus where you knew everyone. Teaching was based on a studio model: sure, you had classes, but from the get-go you were encouraged to follow your own instincts, take charge of your own artistic development. First year Arts at Sydney University was light years away from this. The teaching mode was lecture and tutorial, and the emphasis was on learning a discipline about which you knew next to nothing. As experiences, lectures were interesting but remote, tutorials polite and boring. I liked, no, loved, what I was learning, but the atmosphere was stultifying. I felt I'd joined the ranks set on a giant conveyor belt that inexorably moved them forward, from first to second to third year, towards whatever middle-class job they may have hoped to acquire.

How could I be more than an ill-fitting cog in this massified machine? How could I bring university life down to a personal scale? The answer was to find like minds, friends, a posse to run with. An even better solution was to find a girlfriend, where a number of core problems could be solved all at once. But when you're building up from razed earth, you can't snap your fingers and make a thriving village appear, conjure up your soulmate on a whim. You have to wait and look, trust chance and serendipity, take risks and rejections and falls.

And none of this came easily to me. I was impatient, easily hurt, risk averse, prone to giddy triumphalism when things went my way, depthless sulking when they didn't. It seemed I had been purpose-built for maximum difficulty. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Bullshit, Nietzsche, I thought. It just makes you miserable.

Life in Abercrombie Street was surprisingly solitary, given the number of people living there, and the number of people that came through. The social work student was in the last year of his degree, and he was proud of the fact his studies into at-risk youth were now very much in the 'real world'. He was at the University of New South Wales and loved to have a dig at Sydney, its poncy rival. 'That shuttle bus from campus to Redfern station,' he'd snort in contempt, 'it's to protect the North Shore princesses from the Aborigines.'

One night I came home to find him in the company of several young people strewn about the living room. They were all completely silent, a bowl of some bean-based stew in front of them, untouched. One was a stunningly beautiful young woman, a girl really, with pale skin and short dark hair. She wore a skimpy black tank top and tiny black shorts. She had slash marks on her wrists.

Another evening I came home and camped out in the living room were the science student and her family. She had invited them over to dinner. Her parents and two siblings sat awkwardly on the floor around the low, ancient coffee table, in front of them a dish of tuna mornay and a large bowl brimming with steamed broccoli. I muttered a 'hi', stepped awkwardly around them, and went through to the kitchen. I listened to their laboured exchanges as I made my toasted sandwiches. They stayed about two hours.

It soon became clear that everyone else in the house was from Sydney, and already had established social networks. They trotted off to family events and caught up with old school friends as they went about their studies. I was in a different category. I was

an immigrant.

I was also a fanatic. The resources available at the university staggered me. It seemed to have everything. The massive copper cuboid that was Fisher Library, posing next to the sandstone Gothic of the main building in a standard juxtaposition of old-meets-new, seemed to me a bottomless treasure trove. It was said to have over three million volumes, and it stunned me that I could borrow virtually anything I wanted, that it was all just ten minutes away, that I could, in the comfort of my own room, binge-read myself to death if I wanted to. Rimbaud's visionary *Les Illuminations*, Apollinaire's smut-fest *Les onze mille vierges* (an accidental discovery in the stacks), Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*: it was all grist to my feverish mill. I worked hard on my essays, and when my first grades came in they were reasonable: this was an enormous relief. When I wasn't reading or doing assignments, I watched movies from the audio-visual collection. The French New Wave, all the Eisenstein films, sword-and-sandal epics: I force-fed myself in a blaze of gluttony.

All this bemused the science student no end. She may have been from the North Shore, but she was no princess. She was friendly and gently bossy and didn't suffer fools. I liked her. She fondly referred to the science student as that 'ranga with the mullet', which perfectly described his fierce auburn hair, cropped short at the front, all straggling locks behind. She had firm views on how to spend her time. She liked her studies, but they were a means to an end: she wanted to do something in the environment to help change the world. She also believed you should have a part-time job, be saving up for the next step in your life. It irked her no end that I studied French literature, to her the height of uselessness. And to watch French movies in your spare time? She looked at me as if I were some kind of simpleton.

She was, of course, right about one thing. Getting a part-time job. I was living on the cheap, to put it mildly. I bought generic brands from the supermarket. I hand-washed my clothes in the cracked laundry basin out the back. I made a bookshelf by scavenging house bricks and timber from the street. But I didn't care. I was free to think what I pleased, and was happy to live in my own head for as long as it took for the world to come to me. In the meantime, the closest thing I had to family was brief, fortnightly phone calls to my mother that neither of us could afford. Every time I reversed the charges, I hated myself.

In accordance with the natural order of things, the power in a share house goes to the person who holds the lease. A couple of months after I moved in, the shy woman with the lease moved out with her boyfriend. She asked me if I wanted to take it over. I didn't want the responsibility.

As it turned out, no one else in the house wanted the responsibility either. So when she advertised for the new person, she made any offer conditional on them taking up the lease. This suited the rest of us fine. Let the new person deal with the hassle of unpaid rent or calling the plumber at two in the morning.

The successful candidate was a guy in his mid-twenties, born in Australia of Lithuanian background. He was good-looking, tall with piercing blue eyes. Those eyes were moist with tears just after his delivery truck left. He had split up with his girlfriend, he told me in the hallway as he sat forlornly on a stack of cardboard boxes, embarrassed to have to explain, even though I hadn't asked him to. They'd been living together for two years, he sniffled. Then, fighting off more tears, he fled into his room.

It was a bonding moment of sorts. We started to hang out together. A few years older than me, he was a veteran from the age of fifteen of share houses and romances of varying duration. Why he had left home at fifteen I never knew. He was a third-year

Japanese major. His room, once he set it up, reflected this. Its oriental theme ran from the ricepaper lantern that cocooned the room's lightbulb, to the dramatic, single-brushstroke prints he hung on the walls. He also wore a short silk bathrobe, black with red dragons, to and from the shower.

Our time together was mostly spent in the living room. I couldn't afford to go out, and he was saving up his money from waiting tables two nights a week to go to Japan. He liked to talk about girls. He loved girls. They were so beautiful. Sydney Uni was bursting with them. One night he told me that sometimes on campus he felt like passing out, he found the presence of so many beautiful girls so overwhelming. He could virtually smell all that young pussy, he told me. It was intoxicating, overpowering.

I could never cope at the best of times with these kind of masculine exchanges, and there was something about his delivery that was a little weird. I wondered if he was on something, but he looked too healthy and robust for that. It was if a mask had fallen for a moment because, as long as I knew him, he never said anything like that again. It was a friendship of convenience, I told myself. There isn't always a fit between availability and compatibility. Circumstances had thrown us together. We would make do.

He was right about all the beautiful girls. Sydney University was wall-to-wall with beautiful girls. But it was wall-to-wall with good-looking guys as well. A rich supply of good-looking people on both sides meant it was a complex market. But looks are nothing without confidence, and this is what the Lithuanian guy seemed to lack: he struck me as one of those people who couldn't quite live up to what their physical attractiveness might have made available to them.

Still, they were all around you, these beautiful girls. They'd loll about in the corridors waiting for tutes to begin, their textbooks pushed up against their breasts. You'd be in the language lab, drilling the verb 'falloir', and in the next study space, the headset's microphone would be just millimetres away from plump, perfect lips, a cascade of golden hair, bobbing dark ringlets. The body, that total nuisance, all fire and ice, all fever and sweet release, you didn't want to know about the body, even though it never failed to impress its rages upon you.

No, for just a little while you wanted to be all mind, all concept, the only sensations those of words, or art or film or music. You wanted to puzzle out Maupassant short stories in the original. You wanted to look at reproductions of Diego Rivera's mural for the Rockefeller Center, and marvel at the circumstances that made it possible for a portrait of Lenin to appear in the foyer of a capitalist temple, even if only for a short while. You wanted to go to the mezzanine of Fisher Library where you could listen to classical records, drop yourself down into the deep well that is the opening of Beethoven's 9th Symphony, rise up with those strings stirring from the void. The body, forget about the body, except in its capacity as a perceiving, sensing machine that feeds the imagination. The body in all other capacities leads you to world of confusion and complications and instability, a world where you couldn't trust others, or yourself.

Late one evening a few months after the Lithuanian guy moved in, we sat talking in the living room. He was dressed in his short silk bathrobe, describing how to make tempura, the best way to get the batter light and fluffy, how hard it was to get the timing right. I said I'd never had it before. He offered to make some the next night. It

sounded all very cosy. Suddenly, he fell silent, then gave me a look I'd never seen before: it was kind of beseeching. 'Will you sleep with me?' he said. His words came out in a nervous falsetto. I hadn't seen this coming at all.

A rush of thoughts went through my mind. The first was: if you have sex with someone in a share house, you're creating a *relationship*. And you're in a share house because, by definition, you're *not* in a relationship. My second thought was: he only wanted to have sex with me because it was convenient, because I happened to be there, and I found myself somewhat offended. My third thought was that I admired him for taking the risk of putting himself out there. My fourth thought was: how do I say no without offending him? The longer the silence went on, the more crestfallen he looked. I had little experience in letting suitors down, lightly or otherwise, and a male suitor was outside the realm of my experience. Besides, I'd always been on the receiving end of rejection, or at least the few times I'd taken the risk, and I'd always felt horrible for weeks afterwards: pierced, wounded, dejected. How could I dole out that kind of punishment to another soul?

'I don't think that would be a good idea,' was the phrase that popped out of my mouth. Could I have said anything more stupid? The line between his lips settled into a hurt grimace. A long silence followed. He said good night and went to bed. Later that night, lying in my own bed, I wondered what his body might have felt like next to mine, what we might have done together.

I hoped that he wouldn't take it too badly, that everything would be okay.

No, things weren't going to be okay. For the next two days he avoided me. When I did see him again it was a quiet mid-week evening. No one else seemed to be home. I was in the kitchen making a toasted cheese and tomato sandwich. He came in, spied the remnants of a tomato on the cutting board, and walked over to the rubbish bin. He pushed down hard on the pedal and stared into the mess of food scraps. 'What a waste,' he spat out, picking up a slice of tomato and brandishing at me between his thumb and forefinger. This was the piece I had cut off the top of a tomato that had been in the fridge for a little while, the dried out wrinkly bit. I could never bring myself to eat it. I didn't think anybody ate it. Or maybe I had cut too thickly, thrown out too much good with the bad.

Now wasn't the time to ask: he was red in the face. 'You're wasting food,' he thundered in accusation. 'I think it's time you left.' The last words were delivered in a near-shriek. For a moment I thought he was going to fling the piece of shrivelled tomato in my face. Then he became icy cold and told me that his position as lease holder gave him the right to ask me to leave. I wasn't quite sure that was the case, but I wasn't going to argue the point.

I'd been ousted in a share house coup. I'd been banished over a slice of tomato. Despite the absurdity of it all, it hurt. Rejection, no matter how stupid or unfair, perhaps particularly *when* it's stupid and unfair, always does. The whole experience rattled me deeply. Had I failed my first test of belonging? How could I make sense of it all?

You can visit libraries and listening lounges and bookshops, but it doesn't mean you belong in them. You can participate in a tutorial, attend a lecture, but you don't belong in them. You can relocate to a city that's all spectacle – soaring bridge, spangled harbour – but it won't even notice you're there. You can live so close to other people you can hear their footsteps in the night – on the floorboards in the bedroom

above yours, in the dead air of the corridor outside – but it doesn't mean you're part of a community. You can lock yourself up in your own mind, but you risk tilting the scale into a lonely balance.

Sometimes you'll be offered terms of belonging that aren't right for you. It may come as a surprise, but there are always terms and conditions to belonging. They'll determine what you'll gain, what you'll lose, how long the deal will last. When you leave the world you were born into, when you move to far away cities, you have to negotiate new terms with new players. But what if you don't have the skill or experience or luck to strike a new deal? What if you're not even sure what you want? How can you always know what you want? And is this not knowing such a bad thing? Shouldn't you at times embrace instability, celebrate those periods when you have to leap and dance across a landscape that shifts beneath your feet? Even if it is a lonely dance? A dance just for one? It won't last forever. Surely it can't last forever?

It took a couple of days, but I found somewhere to escape. The Harold Park Hotel, on the far side of Glebe, was still within walking distance of the university, and had single rooms you could book at a weekly rate. It was cheap enough for me to afford until I found somewhere more permanent.

The night before I left Abercrombie Street, I lay in bed thinking. Or not thinking. There was a state of meditative intensity I experienced that couldn't be called thinking. It was something more embodied than that, something at the intersection of the mind, the body, the senses. There were oceans roaring in my blood. There were fields of twisted metal where angels whirled. There were riots at the corruption of world. There were golden pauses where I was becalmed. There was a universal language that I was yet to speak, that was waiting to be spoken, that could speak all things, that could make worlds that usurped the world. I wanted to find that language, make things out of it that dazzled, that stunned. When I belonged to myself, that's where I most belonged. In that mode of making. But I didn't have a clue how to get there.

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