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Shadow over Mount Barren

Bronwyne J. Thomason (Edith Cowan University, Australia)

YOU think that music anchors the soul in memory.

We bounce through the bush on a two trench track in our four wheel drive Holden ute. Banksia leaves scratch the sides of the vehicle with a satisfying, low-key squeal and we all know that the black duco will forever hold that memory in the form of a white thin line along the door. I look upward to see the sun setting over the back of the Barren Range, and silhouetted against the pink sky the weeping, thin tendrils of *eucalyptus sepulcralis*, sway. They remind me of lost, emaciated aliens that might wander along the horizon. Pillars of *Hakea Victoria* rise above the scrub-line; their layers of tender new-growth catch pale yellow and green sunlight at their core and they glow like lamps. Night is about to begin. Dusk has taken me home, floating down through me. Its warmth lets me breathe. I am here. Now.

And then. I watch from the back seat as the hand of our front-seat passenger reaches for the radio. I groan inwardly. The hand jiggers with the dial. Raw noise squawks out of the speakers, blurts blathered scratchy yelps of intercepted radio signal that slice into my reverie. Again, I moan. This time, audibly. The hand, dumb and oblivious, plugs one end of charging cable into the radio jack and the other end into a mobile phone.

You say that music anchors the memory.

So! Here and now is replaced with the dulcet tones of Cat Stevens and his Moon Shadow. I jerk back.

As if I needed that now! As if I needed to go home to my childhood.

Not that this isn't home. It is. Or it was, once, a long time ago. Home was the bush that surrounded me. It was silence. But now, thanks to the clumsy hand, I am transported to the inside place. Inside, where the sounds of Mum sweeping floors, ABC radio on country and western night, or bible-beatings, or signing around a guitar-playing dad would push outward, barricading us from the bush. Or was it Cat Stevens over and over and over? I'm being followed ...

I try to resist the words, the memory of the words, the tune ... moon shadow. Moon Shadow. Moon Shadow. Moooon ...*¹

The moon is not here today.

My partner, driving the car, speaks above the song. 'Did you think we were all talking too much?' I think I love him.

Our other passenger, sitting in the back with me, starts to sing along, like she's the only one alive and she wants it known, and she knows the words to all of the songs. In me, shudders of anger respond to the music, and so I look toward the window. I bite the back of my hand, enjoying the soft resistance of my skin against my teeth. My hatred eats at my own flesh.

Why are you here? Why are you HERE?

The music travels along with us. It goes on. It repeats beat, tone, voice. We have an endless supply of Cat Stevens. No talk. Branches and leaves slap through the open window as I strain against the brainwashing throb of machines and electronics and *people*. I listen for the sounds of birds outside. I hear only music. And the unabashed singing. And so on. My brainwashed head mimes the words. 'Thinkin' about good things to come ... the peace train ... take me home again.'

You make too many assumptions.

Permission for use of song lyrics has been requested.

A twig flicks in through the window. I shout and grab my face. It stings and yet it feels good at the same time.

‘Did you get hit in the face?’ Cheerfully. His hand rests on the gearstick.

‘Yes.’ Yes, I love him. My lip turns numb.

The cab pours music into the bush through the front passenger window, and the bush pushes it back in, through the back window. Into me. ‘Remember the days of the old school yard?’ I roll up my window and succumb to the enclosure of the cab; I succumb to the darkness in my head. My brain turns numb.

Finally, the orange road appears ahead of us. Vibrations from the deep corrugations travel up through the wheels and up, up into my chest. That is the sound of my childhood; once it signalled the homeward stretch from a fishing trip with Dad and triggered the anticipation of a hot bath, a smothering of Mum’s Olay Oil and then ‘tea’: a lamb chop, a pile of peas and dollop of hot mashed potato on a cold plate. And Slim Dusty, Elvis, or ... Cat Stevens.

Music anchors the soul in memory. Ha! You know nothing.

Deep inside my ears, I feel stabs of hot and cold. I tell myself the pain is because the cold wind that blows in through front passenger window has penetrated my ear canals, so I wrap my jacket around my face and hold my ears with hands that are dragged up inside the woolly sleeves.

At last the beat winds down. Moon Shadow stops. I glance at my partner.

Speak.

The oblivious hand reaches toward the back seat and exchanges iphones with another hand. In goes the jack. Out comes another anchor.

I look again at my stone-faced partner. His hands grip the steering wheel. His face reveals nothing.

Turn off the music.

So, it starts again. This music I don't recognise. She responds; she sporadically sings odd words beside me. To me, it is tuneless. Meaningless. Anchored somewhere else in some other time.

'Can we have some peace? Less music?' I shake my head in wonder at my own dumb words. *Less music?*

The music stops. My partner's face softens. The back seat passenger turns blank-faced and I wonder if she's deliberately refusing to look at me. She gazes outward through the glass.

A feral cat crouches near the road.

Vibrations of the corrugations creep up through me as I drift, drift drift. Off out through the window. Out into the black night. And the bush seeps in, like the warm, soft water of a bubble-bath. A kangaroo bounds along the road in the light of the headlights for a few hundred metres and then vanishes into the bush. The bush peels me back, opens me up. Mallee leaves reflect the headlights. I am able to breathe. Now I am. Now I am fine. Now I am here. Now, I am free. Now, I am adrift. Now.