

untying the old school

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— NO THRU ROAD (PRIVATE PROPERTY)

There's a strike on, so my train has been re-routed. I don't recognise any of the stations.

It's already mid-afternoon. I would have liked to leave earlier but some things needed to be negotiated first. I had to call the school. The Headmistress was unavailable, so I got her PA. Joy was her name. Elocuted. A woody voice. She was circumspect, to say the least. 'What manner of research, exactly?' She interrogated me for ages. Repeatedly I told her that I was an ex-student of the school. An Old Gell, in her terms. I wanted a couple of hours access to the grounds. To take notes and maybe some photographs. The headmistress knew me. Ms G—knows who I am. But Joy was not interested in negotiation. 'You'll have to wait' she tells me. 'The headmistress will have to be consulted. We'll get back to you in the next couple of days.' Then she hung up.

When I got off the phone I felt sick. A vague, nervy kind of sickness. Sick and indignant. And angry. Angry at Joy. That impostor. That burglar, trying to lock me out of my own house. How did my status change, without me noticing, from (albeit reluctant) resident to intruder? Being denied access so glibly felt like a kind of psychic theft. So I got on the train anyway. Joy had her responsibilities, I acknowledged that. But I have my imperatives too.

I spent four years at that school. Four years wearing their uniform, eating their food, sitting on their grass, hiding in their toilets, writing on their walls with white-out and *hating* them and that place with such vehemence it almost felt like love, the twisted intimacy you have with something you despise but can't escape. It's a small campus, immaculately manicured, just outside of Mittagong. It's a kind of Euro-Disney-like cultural appropriation of a 'proper

English' boarding school, a simulacrum of old-style awkwardly situated in semi-rural NSW. Monastic in design and highly conservative in politics, as is to be expected. It was adolescent purgatory. I left in 2000, quickly and quietly and out the back door with a backpack full of stolen library books and art supplies. It was never a place I had anticipated returning to, for any reason.

But you do return to places like this. Over and over. This is their nature. There is a word for this in classical Hebrew, *Anathoth*, a site of memory is repeatedly revisited, either physically or in thought and spirit. Perhaps this is the price of escape; you might be able to fight your way out of a physical space, but you can expect the ghost of that space to follow you around for a long time afterwards. Perhaps part of you even comes to love that ghost, or to need it in some way. This morning, as I was having a coffee and waiting for the train to arrive, I was flicking through a photography magazine. There was a series in there on Chernobyl. A Ukrainian photographer had returned to the blanched and abandoned city. The shots were eerie and incredibly beautiful: empty schools with children's artwork still on the walls, dentist's chairs, supermarkets, a lot of gruesomely peeled paint. There were a couple of portraits too, of the engineers who had accompanied the photographer, employees of the plant at the time of the meltdown, standing inside the control rooms where they used to work. It might seem like an overblown analogy, but it occurs to me that perhaps the gap between one kind of disaster and another is not as great as it might appear. The volume is different, but the dynamic is similar. You own a disaster, whether it's a nuclear meltdown or something tiny, personal, inexpressible.

Passing through Campbelltown, then Picton, then Bargo. Two women sit down behind me, one playing a Nintendo Gameboy, the other talking softly: 'I tell you, come the end of this year I'll be a new person. After Christmas, I'll be something new. Isn't it nice looking out at the scenery?'

My stop is coming up.

— MITTAGONG

It's chilly and the main street is practically deserted. I wander around for a little while, buy some film and a piece of fruit. I walk through the car park outside the Town Hall, then past the Lion Rampant Hotel, with its empty fish tank and its orange vinyl chairs, the same chairs you might find in a waiting room or a truck-stop. The highway slopes upwards, towards Bowral. I used to live at the top of the hill, in an eggshell coloured fibro house with my mother, in between the train line and the main road. Next door, there was an old petrol station, which, when I lived there, was half-way through its gradual demolition, which involved the careful de-contamination of the toxic soil underneath. It was dingy and beautiful. I loved that house.

I sit down in the door of the old butcher shop and roll a cigarette. Opposite, there is a fountain, with two sandstone lion's heads dribbling water from their mouths. One of them has been damaged: his furrowed brow has been knocked off, giving him an astonished and faintly camp expression. There is a little girl in a dress covered in lilac sequins. She turns her head over her shoulder to look at me as she passes with her mother, who jerks her arm sharply.

— MR COOPER

I've never been frightened of cliché and cliché has never been frightened of me. I step into the main quadrangle of the school, with its vaulted passageways and scorched oak trees, to the sound of the *Moonlight Sonata*.

The music is coming from the prayer hall. It starts, continues, then stops, then there is the sound of voices. Then it starts again, the same refrain repeated over and over again. My very last afternoon at Frensham was spent in the music centre, in one of the six practice cells, rehearsing exactly this part in the music. It wasn't that I was a particularly keen pianist; I studied half-heartedly for about five years, but only out of obligation to my mother who, having sensed in me some vague predilection for music, wildly projected (as was her custom) the possibility that I was going to make millions as a concert pianist. The reality of my relative lack of talent and even greater lack of discipline put her expectations quickly to bed, but I nonetheless frequented the practice cells. There were six of them, small and soundproofed cubicles with a piano and a small window. They contained within them a certain dream of seediness or corruption. I always thought so, at least. They represented, like a sex-booth or any other cubicle space, the possibility of sanctioned aberrance in an otherwise public area. And while I seriously doubt that anyone ever had it off in the practice cells, the point is that the possibility was there; you could (potentially) get up to anything in there. The dynamic would be similar, I imagine in barracks, convents, prisons, or anywhere else where the inhabitants are required to exist within a big, functional system, which, by its nature, denies privacy. In any such system there exists hidden pockets, burrows, hermetically sealed bubbles under the skin of the organism where something uncontested, un-surveilled, un-governed and personal can be momentarily reclaimed. I spent a lot of time in there, sometimes practicing, but more often than not simply hiding. If the door was ever unexpectedly opened it felt like a violent invasion, a rupture.

Today the awkward starting, stopping, fumbling, starting, fumbling of a student practicing is allowed to drift freely through the open doors of the prayer hall and into the quadrangle. I walk quietly past the back door and peer in. Mr Cooper is taking a lesson.

Mr Cooper was a deeply rooted element of the school. He had lost his eyes suddenly in a car accident in his twenties. Sometimes he wore his glass replacements, but most of the time he didn't, which meant his forehead sunk over his empty sockets, rendering the top

half of his face a shapeless mass of eyebrows and creases, except for the occasional glimpse of the tightly closed lids underneath, soft and wet with saline like the lips of tiny clams. He was a virtuosic pianist, and his aural sensitivity was freakishly overdeveloped. The grounds of the school were quite sprawling, and if Mr Cooper ever lost bearings he'd stop, extend his arm, and click his fingers. You would see him doing it quite often, and it took me years of guessing before someone explained what it was that he was doing. It was an inbuilt sonar homing device. If he ever got lost, he would find his coordinate by repeatedly clicking into the air, and identifying the particular resonance and pitch of the buildings that surrounded him. He'd pause and listen, trying by this makeshift but nonetheless highly refined method to find his way back to his house, a white clapboard place in the scrub behind the oval. He was trying and gracefully succeeding in extracting a new logic from a system which, on some crucial level, denied him access. In a way, perhaps, a poetic logic, in the sense that the structural rules do not, and cannot, apply.

— STEPH

One of the spooky and beautiful things about boarding school is the fact that you have access to the school grounds after dark. This is a time for ghosts, as well as a time for delinquency in the House of God. Institutional spaces, schools in particular, take on an alarmingly different character at night. Something quietly anarchic, Saturnalian; the lunatics, all of a sudden, are running the asylum. This was the only time when we could claim the space totally for ourselves, when we could appropriate it for whatever purposes we chose. This school was particularly suited to nocturnal wanderings; the particular style of the architecture was such that at night the atmosphere was not unlike a De Chirico painting or the set of Fellini's *Satyricon*. My friend Steph Wilcox and I spent many of our evenings marauding around in the dark. She was a boarder and hated the place as much as I did, and on long nights the deserted school grounds were the only alternative to the cloistered and torturously bitchy enclave that was the boarding house. Because of our night roamings, a certain reputation came to proceed us, which was by no means a conscious self-mythologisation on our behalf. It was just because we had a tendency to break stuff. Steph once knocked over a three meter cabinet filled with noxious cleaning products. I still have a scar on my right hand from pushing it through a window in the prayer hall. Steph heard rumour that vanilla essence had a 40% alcohol content, so she stole a 500 ml bottle of it from the kitchen and we sat in a wisteria bush drinking it until we both threw up. These were simple, unspectacular reclamations of space and autonomy, dumb and adolescent, but important.

Steph was Kiama-bred and the child of ex-hippies and was into fairies and flowers in a big way. For students, flower picking was not generally encouraged, and the picking of the school flower, the iris, which grew copiously all over the grounds, would incur a \$150 fine.

Steph would regularly come to class with pocketfuls of posies, and would spend most of the lesson absent-mindedly de-petaling and mashing them all over her desk. A particularly draconian English teacher, who also happened to be the head of the department, took a dislike to this. One morning, in the middle of a lukewarm textual analysis of *My Brilliant Career*, she unexpectedly snapped. She stood up, threw the book on the floor, and barked at Steph, 'Get out! Get out of here you filthy slut!'. Steph was accustomed to such outbursts from staff members and usually ignored them. But on this particular day she decided to retaliate. She got up, marched to the front of the classroom, pinned the woman to her chair and spat in her face. She was expelled that afternoon.

— THE BOILER ROOM

I emerge from the quadrangle onto an open plane of grass. For a moment, I completely lose track of where I am, and it frightens me. This is a foreign place, without a correspondent in the map of the grounds that exists in my memory.

It comes to me eventually. This is where the old science block once stood, along with the dilapidated shed that housed Darkroom and the ceramics studio, with its mammoth wooden kick-wheels and earthy smell. The ground has miraculously sealed itself, the grass has grown over the site of the demolition, and no record remains of the building that used to be here. There is only space, and beyond it, the gleaming new science block, still partially under construction.

The absence, however, has revealed an unexpected nook. There is a passageway behind the prayer hall which would have been previously inaccessible. The entrance is naked, revealed accidentally after the amputation of what originally concealed it. It has a de-naturalising effect on everything that surrounds it, and there is a sudden and palpable shift in perception. It's as if a piece of heavy furniture has been pulled away from a wall to reveal all the forgotten things that live behind it, that *have been* living behind it all this time, unbeknownst to you.

Just near the entrance to the passage, there is a small door. I push it open. The floor drops away, down about a meter and a half, to a muddy surface covered in broken planks of wood and newspaper. A small room, maybe 2 × 2 m. In the middle, there is an ancient cast-iron boiler. This would have been, I presume, how the prayer hall was originally heated. On top of the boiler there is a green lemonade bottle. By the look of the label and design, and anticipating when the boiler room would have last been used, it must have been sitting here for at least twenty-five years. I look closer, leaning in over the precipice, and notice that the dust-coated green glass retains faint, ancient finger marks. It knocks me out. I'm absorbed completely for a moment by one thought: this thing has been here all along, it has always been here. The same can be said of any of the older buildings in the school, but the difference is this object has a human history, an *unclean* history in the sense that it is unofficial. It

is a foreign body, a tumour, a waste object, but unlike most waste it has survived its own erasure and lived here, planted in the dark, a memorial to something human. A *momento mori*, of a sort. All archaeology is domestic; it doesn't matter whether it's amphorae or lemonade bottles, in the end it's all just old crockery. All archaeology is about uncovering what is human, and the fundamental realisation is the same: this thing, this mute object, has outlived me. It has been sitting here since before I was born, and long before I came to this place and claimed it as my own. Whatever experiences I had here, whatever I passed through, this bottle was always here, silent and hidden.

— ROOM 15

I'm pleased to find my old English classroom empty. I go in and wander up to my desk, in the far right hand corner, back row, next to the window.

This was Ms Ratzert's room. Renata Ratzert. She was my teacher. Not just in the sense that I had her for English. She was *my* teacher. As far as I was concerned, she belonged to me.

She was diminutive, under 5 ft Russian/German. Everything about her was flint sharp: her features, her accent, her intellect. She had a slightly awkward gait, the legacy of childhood polio. When she took class in room 15, she would usually sit on the desk rather than behind it. She had to, she was so short that if she sat behind the desk it would reach her shoulders. So she would just perch, gargoyle style, spectacles sardonically cocked. She was passionately devoted to poetry, and the self-appointed head of the school's unofficial poetry society. She made it her priority to take all the poor, suffering adolescent poets of the school under her wing. We had meetings, ginger streusel cake provided, in room 15 on Thursday nights. These meetings frequently consisted of only Ms Ratzert and myself, demolishing the cake, exchanging Dorothy Parkerisms or just generally talking shit. She was the first woman I ever loved. Still love.

To my disgust, the blackboard has been ripped out and replaced with a whiteboard, which is scrawled all over with what I assume to be notes left over from a PDH/PE lesson. Horror of horrors. Inscribed in the surface of the long bench that runs under the window, however, is a more permanent message. HI THERE has been jaggedly gauged into the wood, right next to the desk where I used to sit. I can remember doing it. I used a lino carving tool. I run my fingers over the grooves.

It's often assumed that writing is about posterity, about recording things. This is true for the reader. But for the writer (I speak for myself here, at least), writing is a form of exorcism. I write in order to expel what I can't contain. It has been suggested that every work of art is an uncommitted crime. Considering this, a poem or an essay is not dissimilar to simple message, hastily dug into a benchtop. They are both desperate attempts to impose something of yourself on an abstract system that imposes everything on you, to cast a message

into the Nothingness. Perhaps that message will be received by someone, perhaps not. Perhaps the only person to read and understand it will be you, a later iteration of you, and the discovery itself will be a fluke. I've been wandering around for hours, and I think that this, however ordinary it may be, is the connection I've been unconsciously looking for.

— THE NORTH ROOM

'I didn't recognise the name at first. Well, I recognised it, but I couldn't ... I couldn't place it. Then I remembered.'

The headmistress has asked to meet with me in the North Room of 'the Big House'. This is a restricted area. Even when I was student I never made it into the North Room. This is a greeting place for outsiders. The aesthetic is pure BBC. She is perched to my left on a low stool. There is something girlish about the way she sits, nervously fingering her craft-statement scarf. Her voice is surprisingly soft, and she tends to focus her gaze either on the floor or out the window. Rarely does she look at me. I spread out on the moss green couch and cross my legs.

'We've all been trying very hard to figure out what exactly it is that you're doing. You were seen this morning taking photographs of graffiti at the bus shelter ...'

I fumble around for a condensed explanation. The piece is going to be about memory, I tell her, and about institutional space, about the many ways that we might write ourselves into a place like this. She nods and responds eagerly:

'Yes, well there is also the issue of public and private.'

I'm surprised. It seems for a moment that we might be on the same page.

'That bus shelter is on public land you see, and unfortunately the public can do to it what they will.'

I was wrong. It's clear that we are speaking different languages. I nod anyway and she seems satisfied.

'Do send us a copy when it's finished? and perhaps you'd like to come back and speak at one of our career advisory nights?'

Perhaps, I say, before taking my leave. My train will be coming in soon.