

THE QUARRY

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Brave New Worlds

(Winter)

My breath plumes and swirls in front of me as I tread the wooden boardwalk through the wetlands. The path I follow gives way to a muddy track. Like a serpent from the Dreamtime of the Boonwurrung people that hunted and gathered here for tens of thousands of years, it snakes its way up into the woodland. My hands are deep in my pockets, refugees from the burning cold, so foreign from the sub tropical warmth of Queensland's winter. Has it only been two weeks since we moved?

I walk. I feel alone in this new world. I crest a steep hill and between the naked trunks of Swamp Gum glimpse the Homestead to the south. It stands proudly restored, looking down through its iron lace fittings at the vineyard-swathed hills below. Did Emma Balcombe feel alone, I wonder? She who lived a farming life in the Homestead

until 1876. She too had moved to a new world with a young child. Perhaps she stood where I am now, shivering with cold and conflicted emotions. Do the soles of my new model sneakers tread the same path that her laced boots once explored? And, in turn, did her footprints fill the furrows left by the indigenous people before her?

220 hectares to explore, the Ranger at the Visitor's Centre informs me. 'All sorts of wildlife about, even this time of year.' He taps a finger on the photographic chart of flora and fauna taped to the wall. 'Wallabies, echidnas, birds — all kinds of birds, parrots. Might even see a koala or two if you're lucky.' I select a map of bushwalks from the brochure stand and study the hand drawn dotted lines. I decide to start with the Woodland Walk. It's a manageable two kilometres; a good starter.

Crunch. Crunch. Fallen leaves underfoot. I recall a line I once read in a novel whose title I no longer remember: *From the ground, it looks as if leaves die, but to the leaf, freed from a useless stem, it feels like flying.* I love that quote. I plunge my hands deeper into my pockets and adjust my beanie. It was a goodbye gift from my girlfriends. 'You'll need it in Victoria,' they said as we drank champagne in short sleeves under a Gold Coast sky.

They were right. I do need it. I also need to find a job, settle my son into a kindergarten, make new friends, and adjust to the cold. But that's okay. For now I am content to close out the anxious din in my head and replace it with the sounds of winter; wind song that tickles the boughs of banksia and wattle trees; the call of birds indigenous to the Mornington Peninsula, and the strangely comforting sound of my solitary footsteps as I walk between Jurassic-sized ferns and bracken under a shroud of mist.

(Spring)

My son's sturdy legs pump as he charges ahead. 'I'm the leader,' he cries to the Manna Gum that stands tall and dominant amid the open grassy woodland. 'I'm the leader.' He pelts down the path that heads to Balcombe Creek and a chorus of frogs, hidden among the reed swamps, takes up his cry. *Bra-arrk, bra-arrk, bra-arrk.* It's no surprise the traditional owners called this area *Tji'tjin'garook* — the voice of frogs.

‘Wait for me, Thomas.’ The creek is swollen with its cargo of seasonal rain, and rushes busily towards its final destination. It will eventually empty into Port Phillip Bay, the last unspoilt waterway entering the eastern side.

I hasten to catch up. Thomas is seated on one of the numbered benches that we use as our landmarks. We come here often now to walk, my son and I. He likes it as much as I do and I sense that it appeals to him on a more spiritual level as well. I start our usual routine: ‘what do you see, Thomas? What do you hear?’

As always, I marvel at his answers. His four year old mind coupled with sensory and neurological challenges from the fringe of the autistic spectrum brings forth a riot of colour and noise. They are the sounds and shades of spring. The scarlet breast of an Eastern Rosella. The canola yellow burst of wattle. The clamour of the creek as it surges over stone and sediment. A dart of cobalt plumage from a male blue wren. A bumble bee’s weighty drone. Buds and blossoms, berries and blooms. And underpinning it all, the faint hum of distant traffic as it snakes its way along the Nepean Highway that carves the Mornington Peninsula’s bay side.

I cry a little as Thomas swings his legs on the bench. It won’t be long before the toes of his shoes are scuffing the sandy soil below. My tears are not born from sadness, but rather the relentless march of time. It has been three months now since we arrived in Victoria. But for the change of season, it could have been yesterday.

I have sourced a kindergarten for Thomas. He trembled in my arms as I carried him into the brightly chaotic room filled with unfamiliar faces. He clung to me with beseeching, wet eyes as I lowered him to sit with the other children for story time. I watched from the back of the room and cried silently with empathy and guilt as my son bravely tried to interact in his new world.

We all enter new worlds at different stages of our lives. Spring time in The Briars is a new world again to the experience of winter. She is filled with an energy that promises forward motion, rebirth and development. The buds on trees and bushes are filled with their unfurled promise of beauty; nature’s harbingers of change.

And as Thomas and I cross the fire trail and head back through the woodland towards the car park, a gentle wind probes the canopy to give voice to the ancient language of trees, and they whisper their encouragement to me as I pass.

(Summer)

I check my watch; one hour until my shift starts. I've scored a job at the local Woolworths delicatessen. I don't like it much, but I'm thrilled to be working. There is limited employment in this regional area to suit my skill set, but I'm happy to be contributing to the household income again; feeling productive and interacting with people.

Summer in Victoria has teeth. Sharp teeth that bring forth rivulets of sweat that trickle between my breasts as I walk now familiar paths. I can complete the Kur-ber-Rer Walk at The Briars and be home in time for a shower before it's time to pull on the ugly hair net and weigh out silverside, salami and strassburg. Today, though, it will actually be a blessing to step into the air conditioned chill of the supermarket after the day's oppressive heat. Thirty-two degrees in Victoria is different to the moist humidity of Queensland. It is dry and relentless, and maintains its ferocity well into the evening hours.

It has turned the tall grasses along the Kur-ber-Rer Walk the colour of old bone. They rustle as I pass and unseen things (*snakes? lizards?*) flee at my tread causing the grass to ripple and sway. This walk of approximately four kilometres is named after the Boonwurrung name for the koala. I am yet to see a koala, but photographic evidence on display at the Visitors Centre confirms their tenancy. I wonder what the koalas are making of the heat, and can't help but glance up periodically. Maybe there is some truth to the drop bear mythology.

My brother, Karl, comes from Brisbane for a visit. He arrives on New Year's Eve, hot and sticky. I pick him up from Frankston Train Station. He is toting what he laughingly refers to as his 'man bag'. Inside is an impressive looking Canon camera with various lens attachments. The new hobby. He has recently finished a photography course in landscapes and wildlife. 'I know just the place to take you.' I say as we wash down wedges of camembert with crisp, cold beer while we await the arrival of midnight, and my husband's return from the bar gig he's taken to boost our income until his business picks up. Steve arrives before midnight and we toast 2013 together; eat cheese and talk of cabbages and kings. Karl comments how happy we seem. I smile around the neck of my beer. Yes, we are happy. This new world is starting to make sense.

The second day of January, I take Karl to The Briars. It is thirty-seven degrees. The strap of his man bag leaves a wet mark across his shoulder, and we haven't even left the house yet. In the car, I turn the air conditioning dial as far as it will go to the right and prattle on about the different walks we can do for the best photographic opportunities. A Ranger greets us at the entrance to the car park. 'No access today, sorry.' Dark patches spread from his underarms. 'Closed for total fire ban. See that?' He points to the crescent shaped Fire Danger Rating sign attached to the front gates. The needle has been swung all the way to Code Red, the Country Fire Authority's worst conditions for a bush or grass fire. I think of the grasslands turned to straw; and feel the heat in my nostrils and throat.

Mortified that Karl should miss my special place; my secret place, I decide that we shall instead walk the banks of Balcombe Creek that runs parallel to the long, winding driveway that leads back to the Nepean Highway. It is technically not part of The Briars, but the landscape and proprietary sense I have for it is comparable.

We set off. There is little shade away from the woodlands, and the sun's rays seek out our exposed skin and turn it pink. The Balcombe Creek is limp and thirsty. It has changed from spring's rambunctious surge to an obstinate trickle. Mosquito clouds hang thick above the shallows. Karl snaps off a few photographs here and there, but I know it is just so I don't think he is disappointed with the world I have spoken of with such fervour. 'It's a pity we couldn't have gone into The Briars itself,' I say. 'So different to this.' I slap at something that has landed on the back of my neck. Ahead of me Karl shifts his man bag to the other shoulder and arms sweat from his forehead. He drains the last of his water bottle. It's time to go. 'Come on,' I say. 'Let's turn —'

'Whoa,' Karl's awestruck voice sounds from around the next bend. I catch up. He is fumbling with lens attachments. 'Check it out.' He points to a thicket of withered bull reeds. There amid the tall brown-yellow stems is an orb of purple brilliance atop a thick sinew of green. It rises from the parched earth as if in defiance of summer's ferocity; it is a giant, alien amethyst-headed beast, standing over a meter high.

Karl works the shutter of his camera to capture every possible angle of the impossible Scottish Thistle. He excitedly explains how the heat has caused a natural shimmer to surround it; its own personal aura. We both marvel at its singularity; there

is not another Scottish Thistle to be seen, and to this day since I have not seen one in or around The Briars.

I smile. Karl snaps. We both sweat.

(Autumn)

I'm on the Wetland Walk which commences at the gate on the Eastern side of the Visitor's Centre. Once part of the farm the Balcombe family worked one hundred and fifty years ago, the area is now planted with indigenous species and incorporates several bird hides.

Autumn's glory is manifest all across Victoria, and The Briars showcases her seasonal beauty in a manner that is almost surreal. At times I feel like I may be stepping into a postcard, or perhaps the image that fronts a jigsaw puzzle box. One of the challenging ones with hundreds of pieces and colours that all meld and blend together.

The smells of faraway 'burning off' mingle with the earthy richness of decomposing leaves, and suddenly a poem I wrote in my early teenage years leaps into my head:

When brown and golden were the days

The days of ochre hue

Memories were trimmed with scarlet

Memories of you.

But now the days are cold and icy

They'll never be the same

As the ones of you, your golden warmth

And autumn was your name.

The sun's golden warmth lays her hands on my shoulders and ochre hues surround me. I smile at the memory of my poem. I called it *Nostalgia*, I remember, as I cross the Balcombe Creek floodplains and begin the climb towards the Wetlands Viewpoint. *Nostalgia*.

Is nostalgia what I am feeling now? Is my brave new world no longer new, and I'm able to look at my Queensland years with sentimentality and affection, rather than a longing to return to the safety of familiarity?

I remember the day Steve and I decided that we would relocate to his native Victoria and start our lives afresh. We were on burn out. Rats on the Gold Coast corporate wheel, with a special young son who needed better from us than exhaustion and stress. We would become regional folk, relaxed and grounded; Steve would start a lawn mowing business and I would write a best seller. Thomas would continue with speech therapy and eventually settle into a school that understood him. We would keep chickens. We would grow vegetables. We would ...

We will.

I decide to bring Thomas to The Briars tomorrow and show him autumn. I will recite *Nostalgia* as we walk.

(April, 2014)

Thomas flings his school bag and then himself into the car. It is 3.20pm and wave of green spills from the school gate as the children surge into the afternoon freedom.

'Mummy! Mummy, we're going on an excursion!' It is his first excursion since starting Prep this year. 'Guess where we're going?' I have no time to guess. 'The Briars! The Briars!' He is bouncing up and down. The car rocks with his excitement.

'We're going to *our* place, Mummy. *Our* place.'

Note

The Briars (Mount Martha, Mornington Peninsula) comprises 220 hectares of Wetlands, Woodlands, Bush Walking Tracks, and a historic National Trust listed Homestead that once belonged to the Balcombe Family who farmed the region of from 1846.