

THE QUARRY

Anna Williams

The Officeworks Footy

Newcastle, 2012

‘Reckon we should chuck that footy out?’

Red, waterlogged emu egg. More a garden ornament than a toy. It’s quite a good imitation of an Aussie Rules Sherrin football and I feel a little guilty for having never kicked it, hoping the kid it belonged to didn’t go back looking for it in Throsby Creek where we found it long before footy season had even started.

‘Yeah’– James’s confirmation after he carefully finishes the last of his hamburger. I’m already onto my next train of thought, of how you don’t usually get all the salads on a chicken schnitzel burger. I thread back to my question. James licks the redness dripping down his fingers. I know with that kind of certainty that comes after five years that he won’t wipe the glob on his chin. I smile to myself. I’ll give him two minutes.

The footy waits in a triangular patch of sun, its orbit around our little square of backyard decided by an arbitrary toss during mowing. The brilliant red foam and blue Officeworks logo are foreign beneath the cavernous trees, lurid against the native

honeysuckle's white brush of spikes. Flick, kick, thwack. Rainwater shoots out against the sun chair's mesh. James wipes his bare feet on the grass and grins.

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Sydney, 2008-9

Two years of weekends in Sydney. James travels south from The Coast to visit me instead of north to Newcastle. Two years of parks. The names will be lost but the images will remain. Luscious greens against the exciting sparkles of the harbour or leafy Inner West substitute backyards. A picnic blanket and Triple J on the transistor radio. Canoodling like tiny plasticine park-goers in a Jeannie Baker book. And a footy, always a footy. James practises handballing, I fail miserably at drop kicking. We take more of an interest in each other's code of footy.

Two years of parks; moments of relaxation in the busyness of the city and life as a beginning teacher. But it will never be home.

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'You've got sauce on your chin.'

'Of course I do. I'm such a loser.' The usual self-deprecation.

'You're such a victim,' I continue the joke.

HOOOOG. You could easily forget that the harbour is just four hundred odd metres away. Not me, not when you've grown up in the western suburbs.

Two long horn blasts followed by one short. 'What's that mean?'

'It's overtaking on the starboard side,' James answers, self-conscious pride in his recent maritime education flashed in his direct look. I recall the same look, the one that listened intently above the pre-band din of the Northern Star five years earlier; the look that stuck around despite months of my refusal to have a boyfriend; my refusal to have someone to miss wherever post-university 2008 took me.

I think of James coming home to this cosy inner-city suburb, to the house we own, not borrow, hints of salt and grease in his tousled curls from a day skipping tugboats. But for now, we continue to mull over a working holiday in Canada— a 'Got to do it before it's too late'. Thirty lingers unreasonably close with a sense of

foreboding; that it is more than just the cut-off age for youth work permits. We are in the twilight of backpacking years, Settling Down is knocking. We know the horror of starting again, living at home broke and unemployed still sharp in our memory. On this day though, burgers in the backyard, we are unaware that ‘our’ house is to be sold. The Canada possibility will become a reality.

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Salzburg, Austria, 2010.

A Munich-sized hangover, one of only a handful we will suffer in our ambitious thirteen-week traverse of Europe, smothers our brains like the clouds that hide the mountains we came to see. In our hostel, Stella, fifteen years younger than she looks as a result of a horrific life, shouts us dinner, a ‘gift from the Victims of Crime agency’. Wiener schnitzel. We gratefully eat the veal, a nice change from salami and cheese sandwiches. Later, I’ll be glad to have eaten at least one local dish. And thankful for my safe childhood.

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I collect the dropped toppings of my chicken schnitzel burger onto the white paper bag. ‘Sn’ distinguishes it from the hamburger. I laugh.

‘What?’

‘That’s not how you spell schnitzel.’ I recall the uptight Viennese we had encountered. No doubt they would be insulted by the misspelling. It occurs to me that the American hotdog franchise Wienerschnitzel is much more offensive than the phonetic spelling born of a takeaway shop on Hannell Street.

James pretends to hurl the footy at me quarterback style then tosses it underarm instead. The gigantic stress ball lands at my feet like a soggy Newcastle Herald. Ironically, it hadn’t been waterlogged the night we found it bobbing against the breakwall. The night of the storm. A Monday night. I was tingling with wine and appreciation of my life as a no-longer-permanent teacher. Dinner was moved onto the deck to escape the heat of a February kitchen. As the flashes behind the wattle screen intensified we grabbed the red and ran out into the electricity. The barnacled stairs leading into the harbour tributary provided a front seat to the lightning show. For

awhile anyway, until our sense of adventure was swallowed by fear of electrocution on the metal stairs. We had left with a wine bottle and returned with a football.

I wonder where it came from. Had it washed across from the housing commission townhouses? Was its owner a kid escaping the recognisable uniformity of burnt brick and sick-coloured weatherboard? Or was it a casualty of the wind and a wayward kick on this side of Throsby Creek? A kick from a child on the opposite end of the socio-economic slide, their backyard the waterfront park skirting the artfully distinct terraces of the Linwood Precinct. Had the football come from Officeworks itself, or perhaps a junior Black Diamond Aussie Rules game? It had been a surprising find— any Sherrin, actual or imitated is uncommon in Newcastle, rugby league heartland.

I squeeze the remaining wetness from the cheap foam and think about the children who were discovered hand-sewing Sherrin footballs in Indian slums. Blue flecks of the Officeworks logo catch under my nail. On the reverse side a maze of cracks widen as I squeeze. ‘Probably from sitting in the wet grass,’ James tips.

‘Got to be the sun,’ I argue. The irregular islands in the splitting foam are identical to those of blistered land in the far west. Down the cracks, the foam continues its same tomato sauce redness. Artists call it cadmium scarlet. I would call it fire engine red or postbox red. The colour schoolchildren use for my hair in drawings. The eye-burning guernsey of the Sydney Swans, or ‘Bloods’ as you call them if they’re having a good season and you want to pretend you followed them in their previous incarnation, South Melbourne.

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Sydney Cricket Ground, 1997

A glorious Sunday afternoon in winter and a swollen crowd to watch last year’s grand finalists, the Sydney Swans. My brother, fourteen and myself, twelve. Mum or Dad, depending on whose weekend it is. My sister is older, eighteen and absent. She’s not a sports kind of person. We’ve caught the 6:30am train to nab the best seats in general admission. We still have to crane our heads though, to see the replays of Plugger’s marks. Later in the season we’ll be with Dad (luckily) when Plugger kicks his hundredth goal for the year.

Dad will let us rush the field with everyone else. I'll discover the Minties in my pocket gone when I am back on the spectator side of the advertising.

We've been enticed to the SCG with *Swanslink* tickets: return train travel and entry for a few dollars per child. My brother has been playing in the NAFL (Newcastle Australian Football League). Our family has jumped ship, burnt from the politics of Super League in the rugby league.

The V neck collar of my prized new Swans guernsey scratches around my neck. Beneath the leg of my jeans, a daringly large red love heart is drawn in permanent marker on newly shaved skin. It prickles into goosebumps as the ghostly 'Syd-ney' chant swims around the grandstands. Jarrod Simpson will never know of this adornment above my ankle. I have not and will not ever speak to my brother's teammate.

The permanent marker will outlive the infatuation. Red Artline chisel point—the family 'good texta'. Squashed but not destroyed under the sole of my sister's Doc Martens in what became an unusual all-children-present activity—the construction of our own goalposts in the backyard. Two long, two short. Narrow treated pine from BBC Hardware, before it was swallowed by the all-consuming Wesfarmers in the guise of Bunnings Warehouse. The goalposts will be a short-lived enjoyment for me as the two-year age gap between brother and sister becomes a merciless outmatching of strength and patience.

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Sydney Cricket Ground, 1999.

We are on the waiting list to become Sydney Swans members. We'll be accepted next year then leave in disgust nine years later after a hundred dollar price hike. For now, we make the most of the failed attempt to relocate North Melbourne Kangaroos to Sydney. My brother is a heated North Melbourne fan and infamous bad sport. I'm glad they're not playing Sydney.

Wet weather and apathy for the relocation has left the illuminated SCG largely empty. This thrilling clash against St Kilda will become famous in our family's lexicon for our appearances on the VHS recording. After two Quarters of rain, Mum stays under cover while my brother and I venture to the boundary.

His giant foam hand, all but the middle finger tucked down, will be easily spotted by Channel 7 cameras in the rain-abandoned concourse.

A tackle in the wet grass transfers the fifty-metre line to the seat of a player's white shorts. 'Stick a plug in it, ya girl!' a peer-influenced shout comes from behind us. My fourteen year-old ears burn scarlet in embarrassment, shame, indignation. I don't dare look at my brother. I try to forget my inability to use tampons.

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'Wanna go and kick the footy?' James handpasses the ball to himself, striking the base with his fist.

'I don't think my back's up to it.' I try not to feel sorry for myself or unfairly young to have back problems.

'How about a walk then?' he asks without disappointment.

We walk against the one-way traffic of our street, smiling politely at the resident longneck drinker leaning over his low fence. His intense stare makes him look creepy. He's probably just lonely. And short-sighted.

We wait for the lights at Hannell Street. The busy dual-lane entry into Newcastle is set to incorporate the aptly named Industrial Drive under a new name, James Hannell Drive, to celebrate one hundred and fifty years of local government. We cross the divide into rich Maryville. 'Rich' would suggest the other side is conversely poor. Many of the blocks are small and the miner's cottages peeling but the renovators are well on their way to gentrifying this mixed zoned suburb. Perhaps we have crossed into 'richer' Maryville. James Hannell, philanthropist and Newcastle's first mayor, would be appalled that his namesake now splits his beloved Maryville into two distinct classes.

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1944

Woolsheds instead of terraced houses along Woolshed Place. Wool, five bales high, sits patiently, waiting for the war to end. The grounds of James Hannell's Mary Ville are a fraction of its former twenty-one acres. The once dominant Moreton Bay Figs are long since demolished, for the sake of the

tramline. The trams will be gone in a few years, along with the grand two-storey Hannell residence; generations of memories reduced to a pile of bricks that will be used as foundations for the new petrol station.

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We consider stopping for a Slurpee at the 7-Eleven. Maybe on the way home. Instead we cross through the landscaped terraces and onto the cycleway that follows decontaminated Throsby Creek to the marina. The afternoon breeze creases corrugations in the gentle water. Salty air settles in the back of my throat.

A tinny rattle of mudguards approaches from behind. A retro fixie bike ridden by a suitably retro woman overtakes us. Somewhere along the row of terraces a screen door quivers open and snaps shut. The rider approaches the bridge to Carrington. Climp-clomp, climp-clomp. Her tyres pucker over the wooden underpass. Below, barnacles cling to the support stumps like a rock caught in an emu's throat. She weaves through the maze of fishing lines and their beer-toting owners and disappears towards town.

Historical information signs dot the waterfront. We stop to reread one a few metres from where we found the Officeworks footy. I've never seen anyone read them. Perhaps they already have, or don't want to break their run. Maybe they just aren't interested in the history of the place they use so often.

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The Coquun, less than 250 years ago.

Awabakal people dive for lobster and gather shellfish. Along the sandy shore, possums and wallabies are hunted amongst the honeysuckle. Not too far from the river mouth, Yohaaba, this sheltered position brings Awabakal and Worimi people together for corroborees.

Shattering events are yet to unfold for the unsuspecting groups. In three generations many will have died, the rest living out marginal lives subjected to assault and discrimination under strict government controls. But before that, Muloobinba is to be claimed as King's Town and used as a second penal colony for reoffending convicts. Many will try to escape. Some will live with Worimi

people who believe them to be reincarnations of deceased family. Others will be caught and traded for blankets and tobacco.

Later, Muloobinba will be reclaimed as Newcastle in a hopeful bid to discover coal like its namesake in England. Much later, Australia's largest KFC will sit, gratuitously red, over evidence of the oldest human settlement in Newcastle.

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I look to the retaining rock wall where we'd found the football and imagine it washed up on the sandy bank prior to 1804; a precisely shaped emu egg, soft but firm. A colour brighter than the reddest ochre traded from the Kimberley, deeper than any flickered *watja* light. Would it have been kicked and played with? Perhaps the Awabakal people too sewed possum skins into egg shapes to play Marn-Grook like in the south.

We wander further to the thin strip of sand (and shells, shoes, beer cans) exposed by the low tide. A couple sit on the edge of the path and watch their dog dig in the sand.

'If we were back in the Manc, they'd be sunbaking.'

James laughs. There's a sniff of warmth in the air; the perfect temperature for bare-chested Mancunians who, in Piccadilly Gardens, laid deathly still as though if they moved, the sun would miss their pasty skin. 'The Pod', our space-age apartment in Manchester was the first place we lived together. I check myself for the homesickness I felt for it on our return home. A whiff of fish guts floats over from the boat ramp. In the distance, twin white cranes straddle the Forgacs floating dock, my symbol of Newcastle. Home.

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A summer's night

The cycleway is all but empty. *Schhhhh*. Tyres grip and turn over the pebblecrete. Televisions glow behind glass. A plop from an unseen fish echoes across the still black. Beyond the twisting mangroves, orange lights outline the coal loaders. They glow in the salt air; friendly, mysterious.

We streak through the night; patches of yellow, patches of shadow, patches of yellow, patches of shadow. The dim lighting could be dangerous on foot. But we are pedalling fast, not our leisurely daytime pace. It's not spoken between us, we just know— in the dark, we own the night.

Bright red taillight flashes are left in our wake. We have helmets and the necessary lights but schooners of Old fuel our adrenalin. The cycleway is our path home— from the bowling club over the bridge that sent hand-written letters begging for patronage; or from a harbour side pub at the other end of the Honeysuckle redevelopment.

My faint headlight projects enlarged diamonds of my basket mesh. James's LED is much brighter; he should be in front. But that's not how it ever ends up. Later, when we make it to our empty, darkened street, I'll stand up like a kid on a bike with no gears, riding as fast as I can to our miner's cottage. The real threat of a car from a side street will be lost in the rhythm of tyres. Puffing, exhilarated in the disco blink of taillights, I'll apologise for taking off. James will grin. 'That's OK, I was riding in your slipstream.'