

A Gentler Horizon

(a short fiction on bringing the inner out long before I was called to undertake the same task for Laleima, culminating, as it did, in *The Taste of Translation*)



You could hear the dark rumble, the evil gargle of thunder from beyond the far ridge as soon as they arrived. As soon as the car pulled up beside the hole in the fence, shiny in its newness, bought to be a workhorse but treated more protectively than that in these early days of bright chrome, plump seats and too few scratches, the call of the storm, its sing-song ‘heigh-ho I’m on my way’, was more than barely audible.

Is that thunder? she said with surprise as they alighted onto the grassy paddock which doubled as a driveway out front of the hole in the fence. There was no reply. Just a look to the west and a sniff of the air, as if her words were their own answer to the question, homage paid to the brevity of response, briefer still the thought it accompanied.

The children didn’t notice, didn’t care, didn’t mind. The excitement of the journey, the arriving, the pulling on of socks and boots, and running down through the gloom of the forest to the dam, a wide expanse of water trapped on all sides by trees – it was the routine of the extraordinary which thrilled them.

The dam brimful after weeks of heavy rain. At times like this trying to encroach on its leafy fence, lapping the trunks of nearer trees with a seductive smile. Sometimes the temptation to water-dwell grew too strong and certain of their number fell under the simple spell, the languorous kiss of flooded roots eventually inviting the grim reaper to their bedside with a gnarled twisted grimace. But more usually the forest threw back its watery neighbour, sending it instead over a far lip of earth, a fragrant rushing spillway, a frothy torrent of fresh thought and leaf litter, off to explore fern fringes and mossy corridors in the rainforest gully below.

To this landmark the children ran. Sturdily booted, their feet pounded the earth – one two one two – down the roughly etched path. Sticks were cracked, leaves scuffed, and tall grasses swished by their passage. Wallabies looked askance at the intruders, ears twitched to sense intention, while black snakes slithered to cover, a retreating tail into a burnt-out stump the slim evidence of existence. Yet kookaburras called welcome to the two, bright-eyed city dwellers that they were, here to revel in their own piece of sweet-

aired paradise, to take home tales of wombat burrows, bandicoot diggings and spawning frogs to doe-eyed friends whose weekend achievements were measured in Nintendo levels.

The thunder maintained its irregular tattoo and the sky grew ever more blackened on her own walk down to the dam with esky and folding chairs. I'll have some lunch first before I get onto that gate, he'd said, planning to make the hole in the fence a more regulated opening, satisfying, as it should, neighbours' sensibilities about new settler etiquette. And so, directly, she set about making sandwiches, the children's source of excitement now the old laminex table shovelled into the car boot for its journey to a new home. Arriving intact, save for some chipboard flaking from its bowels, it now perched tentatively on levelled-off dirt under the holey tarp erected during a previous visit.

The four made a point of sitting at the table to eat their sandwiches, drink their juice, such was the novelty this piece of civilisation introduced to the natural landscape. Their meal conducted in silence, to a backdrop of rustling leaves, the shy calls of an observant bird, and the occasional plop of frog into water. There was an expectant hush from all in attendance, as if knowing the sky would soon erupt to drench dreams and wash clean dank thoughts.

Better get this gate in, he said, rising and stretching.

She looked at him in surprise, seeing anew the tautness of muscles and angular jawline full-stretched in a yawn.

What? he said defensively, feeling her stare, as if he stood naked before her, soul exposed to her inspection.

Nothing. And she returned to her sandwich, chewing methodically, while trying to remember why she had looked at him at all.

He picked up some tools, went off up the track, scuffing deliberately, noisily, to drive snakes and like creatures from the path well in advance of his arrival. The children soon left the table as well, back down to the dam's edge with sticks to poke and prod at lily pads, reveal creatures in hidden depths, eels and yabbies along the muddy verge. Their high-pitched voices chattered excitedly (did either one listen to what the other ever said?), were lifted up into the air and sent skating to where she stood, clearing away the remains of what she'd made.

The sounds of banging and hammering from up on the road reached her in the same moment. The gate was going in, just as the first big drops of rain hit her nose and hair. She looked up into the sky, and the turbulence therein met her gaze with equanimity.

Come on you guys! she called and they looked up in bewilderment from flat-footed squats. It's starting to rain, she explained. We'll be better off in the car. The tarp was holey, after all. And at that, they heeded and walked on up the path ahead of her as drops splashed down, carving patterns in the dust and rivulets between the rocks.

He was still hammering as she and the children ran past to the car. Come on, leave it! she called.

His reply, a grunt or snarl or some comment about this being her idea not his, was lost on the wind and she ensured the children were well settled in their warm nest before going back to implore him some more.

Nah! he yelled. But this is going to be a doozy of a storm. You better get the rest of the gear into the car.

And with such direct instructions, she stumbled and tripped her way back down the track to the tarp, grabbing esky and toys, taking down the tent poles and pulling out pegs so it would not rip further as the rain smacked her face and smeared her clothes with chill amusement.

The animals had all gone, out of sight now, to shelter in burrows or hollow trees or the thick weedy fringes of the dam. And we're supposed to be intelligent beings, she thought, as the first chunks of hail hit and rolled onto the ground. Great, fucking great. Teeth clenched, she quickened her pace, heavy-laden as she was, and with bruised knuckles squeezed tight around parcels.

By the time she reached the hole in the fence, he'd retreated behind a tree out of the way of the hail. Huge stones hurt and numbed her.

Here here! he yelled from his shelter, but she thought instead of the children, safe in the car but alone, the sound of ice smashing against glass rooting them to the floor, carpeted and smudged by tears.

She reached the back door through a seeming glacial wall, flung it wide and dove inside, slammed shut in one fluid movement. The children she hugged and comforted, and they used dry towels to warm chill bones and mop at streaming hair and eyes. On the hail went, a continuous thrumming on doors and roof. The car rocked with each new wave of wind, fierce virile gusts, so exposed were they there on the ridge to this onslaught from the west.

It was then she saw him, running through the wildness, coming to huddle beside the car's leese. It's Dad! It's Dad! the children cried and she moved them away to the other side, reached over to the door handle to let him in.

It wrenched away from her in his and the storm's fury. God! he screamed at them all. God! And his eyes were wide. I could have been killed out there! And indeed his head had been cut, his shoulder too, pierced by the hard stabbing ice-picks which would have shrugged indifference if shown, any notion of pain caused an optional extra.

They tended and nursed him. All the while he maintained a steady stream of words – it being her fault they'd come here today, the gate having to go in then, why then?, on and on and on, while the storm continued to trommel the car in a performance worthy of the Edinburgh Tattoo.

The children didn't flinch. They were used to him debasing the myths their mother told, late at night tucked up in bed, about the beauty of the bush, the things in it and of it, the new life they would live in the country. It would not take long to forget the joys of running swift-footed to the dam, the echo of their shrill voices playing ping-pong in the valley, and call instead for a new computer game, city treat or movie outing.

And yes, she too sort of knew how it would proceed while the storm raged outside and the hot breath of his complaints fogged up windows and mirror. She sort of knew it would continue until she gave in and gave up. Until he held her again, as he would not do now, and say: See? It would never have worked out, that silly dream of yours. She sort of knew, but it still didn't stop her sliding under and into his view of the world. His the voice of reason, hers the irrational babble.

So she sat – not listening any more. No need – she knew it all by heart, how each action could be justified, how each claim had a counterclaim to prove innocence over guilt. So she sat and thought instead about the invisible line, the line of control that once crossed could never be clawed back, that of the women she'd known who'd crossed it, all had ended up in divorce courts as a natural consequence of their actions. But how to know where the line was located was the thing that frustrated her. A moving target, there seemed to be different thresholds to the amount of power given away according to time, the insignificance of the

request, or even the number of fucks in a week. She could go along thinking everything was fine and then out of the blue one thing would trigger it. All past boundary movements henceforth subject to renegotiation as he grabbed back at territory, sovereign ground. Her place a wasteland no man's land (oh, so aptly named!), where there was nothing to do but wait, blinded by tear gas, flailed against barbed wire, at any moment receiving the bullet to pierce memory. Prayers offered for its swiftness.

As she thought all this, hot tears formed behind her eyes and an incredible vice gripped the crown of her head. I'm sorry, she said, retreating from the boundary. You are right, it is my fault. Look how it has damaged the car, she said, for by now the storm had passed and they were standing in a field of ice as the children ran up and down the paddock, whooping and giggling.

You were the one who wanted this frigging car too, he said.

She sighed. Yes, and I'm sorry for that as well. She stood, numbed, her body inhaling hail through cold wet feet, setting fast her face and making swollen and chapped her eyes.

She tried to remember when it was that she had crossed the line, whether her retreat now would be acceptable, whether out there on an icy paddock her fate was already sealed. Had it been when she returned to full-time work, or when she'd asked that he take responsibility for contraception now they had agreed to no more children, or when she'd suggested a holiday in the bush rather than at the beach and had come across this place for sale.

She couldn't remember anymore. Too hard. And the line invisible, after all.

As they stood there, the ice began to melt, dissolve into the earth. She watched vapour from the steaming ground be caught and tugged away by the breeze and, in the moment, it seemed clear to her that a separation of parts had occurred, a splitting of atoms before her eyes.

Can you see it? she said, squinting with concentration. Can you see how when it melts, one part becomes water and the other vapour? See the mist that rises? It was once part of the ice.

Looks great, he grinned, forgetting before, forgetting everything except the calmness of the scene, a sea of melting ice and two squealing children with red feet and hands running excitedly through the puddles and the mist.

I am the vapour, she said, remembering the whole of it. I am the vapour and I am as light as air.

He snorted. God you talk shit, he said.

It was time to go home. Bundling the children into the car, they drove off, back to the city, the hole in the fence still a hole in the fence and the chattering in the back seat all about the storm.

Comforted and justified, he sat silent, reflective, watching the road. Hey, pity about the day, he said, patting her knee. She knew he'd want to hold her tonight, her place confirmed in the neat and structured order of the household. When she didn't answer, he said: Never mind about the car, we'll just claim it on insurance. But there was still no need to answer.

Once home, the children set to drawing and writing about their day in the country. The fact that the storm recorded most mentions, implying its significance despite her own recollection of events, was confusing. She tried seeing it through their eyes – the storm was out of the ordinary; unusual in its coming and what it left behind really was the more memorable event. And she went to make herself a cup of tea so that she could sit and remember it all the more clearly.

That night she had a dream. Here, said the doctor. Here's a pill to help you get up in the morning.

But what if I don't want to, she said.

The doctor sighed. The pill will help you want to get up in the morning, he explained. He held it out to her, a little blue and red jewel.

She took it gently, thoughtfully studying the marvellous invention that could replace her need to think or make decisions about the future.

This pill can help you, he repeated.

She popped it into her mouth and felt it melt, fuse into her, then separate out into liquid and vapour. Light as air, she watched her pain float away, and wave a mournful farewell as it crested the horizon.