



The 2018 Stella Prize Shortlist

Extract

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The Life to Come



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THE HOUSE BY THE RIVER belonged to an old man whose relationship to George Meshaw was complicated but easily covered by ‘cousin’. He had lived there alone, with a painting that was probably a Bonnard. Now he was in a nursing home, following a stroke, and George’s mother had taken charge of the painting. It was her idea that George should live in the house until it was clear whether or not their cousin was coming home. She had flown up to Sydney for the day, and George met her for a late lunch. George’s mother wore a dark Melbourne dress and asked the waiter for ‘Really cold water’, between remarking on the humidity and the jacarandas—you would never guess that she had lived in Sydney for the first thirty-one years of her life. She bent her head over her handbag, and George found himself looking at a scene from childhood. His mother was on the phone, with the orange wall in the living room behind her. As he watched her, she bent forward from the waist, still holding the receiver. Her hair stood out around her head: George saw a dark-centred golden flower. He couldn’t have been more than six but he understood that his mother was trying to block out the noise around her—he folded like that, too, protecting a book or a toy when ‘Dinner!’ was called—and that this was difficult because the room was full of the loud jazz his father liked to play.

Over the years, George’s mother’s hair had been various colours and lengths, and now it was a soft yellow sunburst again, still with that central dark star. She produced a supermarket receipt from her bag and read from the back of it: ‘Hair Apparent. Do or Dye.’

‘The Head Gardener,’ replied George. ‘Moody Hair.’

They were in the habit of noting down the names of hair-dressing salons for each other. His mother said, ‘Also, I saw this

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in an airport shop: “Stainless steel is immune to rust, discoloration and corrosion. This makes it ideal for men’s jewellery.”’

George and his mother had the same high laugh—*hee hee hee*—and otherwise didn’t resemble each other at all. The Bonnard was beside her, done up in cardboard and propped on a chair. When George asked what it was like, his mother said, ‘A naked woman and wallpaper. He needed an excuse to paint light.’

The house by the river was spacious and built of bricks covered in white render. It was late spring when George moved in, but the rooms on the ground floor were cold and dark. There were mortuary-white tiles on the floor, and the lights were fluorescent tubes that looked as if they would be fatal to insects.

They had to be switched on even in the middle of the day. George remembered that his mother had described the house as ‘Mediterranean’. Ridiculous second-hand visions—a turreted pink villa with terraced gardens, a bowl of red fish at a window—had opened at once in his mind.

He had been back in Sydney for four years and still swam gratefully in its impersonal ease. In Melbourne, where George had lived since he was six, he had wanted to write about modernism in Australian fiction for his PhD. After some difficulty, a professor who would admit to having once read an Australian novel was found. At their first meeting, she handed George a reading list made up of French and German philosophers. When George settled down to read these texts, he discovered something astonishing: the meaning of each word was clear and the meaning of sentences baffled. Insignificant yet crucial words like

‘however’ and ‘which’—words whose meaning was surely beyond dispute—had been deployed in ways that made no sense. It was as unnerving as if George had seen a sunset in his east-facing

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window, and for a while it was as mesmeric as any disturbance to the order of things. When despair threatened, he transferred his scholarship to a university in Sydney. There, George read novels and books about novels and was wildly happy. He taught a couple of tutorials to supplement his scholarship. Recently, with his thesis more or less out of the way, he had begun to write a novel at night.

A loggia with archways ran along the upper floor on the river side of the house. That was where George ate his meals and sometimes came to sit very early, as the park detached itself from the night. Koels called, and currawongs—the birds who had whistled over his childhood. Fifteen minutes by train from the centre of the city, he lived among trees, birdsong, Greeks. The Greeks, arriving forty years earlier, had seen paradise: cheap real estate, sunlight for their stunted children. Fresh from civil war and starvation, they were too ignorant to grasp what every Australian knew: this was the wrong side of Sydney. Where was the beach?

There were mornings when George left the house at sunrise, crossed the river and turned into a road that ran beside the quarried-out side of a hill. The sandstone was sheer and largely obscured by greenery: giant gum trees fanned against the rock, and native figs, vines, scrub. Brick bungalows cowered at the base of the cliff and skulked on the ridge above—it seemed an affront for which they would all be punished. In the moist, grey summer dawns, George felt that he was walking into a book he had read long ago. The grainy light was a presage. Something was coming—rain, for certain, and a catastrophe.

Opposite the quarry, on the river side of the street, drive-ways ran down to secretive yards. They belonged to houses that faced the river, with lawns sloping down to the water. A sign warned that

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the path here was known to flood. But bulky sand- stone foundations and verandas strewn with wicker furniture soothed—these houses were merely domestic, nothing like the foreboding on which they turned their backs.

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