

Little Miss Empty

By Roxie Bowes ☺

When I awoke this morning, all the furniture had been moved out of my head

The removalists had been busy through the night.

Stepping onto Oxford Street, the glare spills into this vacated space, like cold milk, and I realise the inside of my mind, this cranial warehouse, feels pristine, even though the walls are still greasy and warm to the touch.

I have no memories, no past or preconceptions. For the first time in my life I don't have a thought in my head. I am a Zen teen in pink jeans. It's a strange feeling, like being brand new, or recycled anyway and knowing that nobody knows you. I am empowered by my anonymity, my blankness. This, of course, is just how I want to be. I think I am ready now.

Today I will be the perfect tourist.

I will look to the sky while all around me look at the ground. I will have a street map of Sydney tattooed into the palm of my hand. I will eat carbon monoxide and perhaps later, if you are lucky and I am in a good mood, I will fart the national anthem. But for now I am off to take a crash course in iridology, anthropology, criminology and urban poetics. I will become an expert on the disputed sciences. I will study skull shapes and the beds of fingernails. I will breathe this fine city in through the pores of my skin.

The drivers on Oxford Street are impatient and fearless, they over rev their cars and jump lanes. The traffic is blood in the major arteries. Waiting at the intersection, the other pedestrians and I regard them warily. Their tyres whisper on the macadam. When the light flips they slow and stop; and I can see them: youths with wide grins, flustered middle-aged woman with too much hairspray, one particularly humourless man morphs at the wheel, becomes a strange creature wrapped in his crazy car jacket, clown-like shoe.

Fumes swirls around us, warm and acrid in our throats and nostrils. A fat cockroach clambers out from the gutter close to my feet, twitches his antennae and disappears again. I look up and notice a young guy zip past in a new beetle. Of course: a small synchronicity. Cockroach, beetle, Kafka: if poor old Franz had been a Sydney writer he would have been transformed into a Volkswagen.

The fleeting shadow of a jet momentarily becomes into a flying dog. Michael Dransfield used to live in a backstreet loft not far from here. If I was at home, I would look up the address. I would find the place. I would like to steal his coffee table and set it up right behind my eyes, something to put my feet up on as I take in the sights.

The streets have a peculiar smell, rank but somehow refreshing. Cherubic girls dreaming of radium bouquets. I would set up a market stall, sell my organs, bones, teeth, toenails.

- I'll trade you a femur for a clever turn of phrase, or a joke with a punch line I can remember.

But it's not going to happen. I'm in a cage.

My skull is a cage. My ribs are slender fingers cupping my heart, lungs, liver, the whole bloody package. As I sit here, in this series of cages, a handsome man approaches. He has olive skin and a quizzical smile. He has eyes in the palms of his hands, each finger is tipped with little flames. He journeys deeply into my eyes,

- Ask me for my phone number, a telepathic plea.

He breaks his gaze and continues on his way. He saw my skull was empty.

An invisible post-it note on my forehead reads: *enemy of the state*.

I have decided to disrupt the space in my mind. One coffee table is not enough, so I have installed six televisions. Each screen is divided by mirrors. These televisions are the hearth where I will burn my textbooks if the weather turns cold again.

Historical events will be rerun for eternity, punctuated by occasion gunfire. There will come a time when we will reassess the ethics of serious crimes: Edward Kelly will be retried while his little brother blows away like cigarette ash.

Look: a whirling dervish in a darkened room, a pin turning on the head of an angel, a music box of sedge grass. I shall have one for myself, and keep it in a shoebox, taking it out only when I am suffering insomnia. My dearly departed grandmother's Tupperware burns candescent in the cupboards of the family albums. People are looking at me, I'm trying to install a bath in

my cranium. What does it mean when everyone I see reminds me of somebody else?

This is not what I intended. This place is beginning to absorb me. The suburb in which I was born becomes a distant nation, the country town where I grew up may as well be on the moon. I am learning that the most beautiful people are invariably the most damaged. Love is the miracle of the loaves and fishes. There is always a bed for the weary, always someone with enough compassion and love left to spare.

I too need a bed to sleep in tonight and my head is still so sparsely furnished. I will put it up the back where the light is low. It is now the question of feng shui, the careful placement of my Wayside bed and Dransfield coffee table.

People are machines. They tear at the seams, skin rips apart, bones break into pieces, fishhooks in scalps and faces, penises mutilated in zippers by their careless owners. How can people work here?

The smell is making me nauseous, I have to get out.

My head has just lost cabin pressure.

An oxygen mask drops behind my eyes and there is a sound like conch shells being held to my ears. I drawing the blinds. Can history sustain me in a time of crisis? Sydney once operated on a rum economy. Govenor Bligh hid beneath his bed. Can anyone tell me where Bungaree is buried?

Jam twenty dollars in gold coins between my braces and teeth and I will tell you our history, I will tell you how our city really thinks: this place is a seducer, always trying to sell you newer models of your same old self. She likes to flatter the eye and imagination.

They say that the city has a kind of centripetal energy. We are all tourists, we come to experience the intensity.

- Welcome to Sydney! Your bags are in Paris!

The suburbs rush in. A push and a shove and the Cross tips into the Pacific.

Mermen spruik passers by:

- Come on in, they say, the water's fine and sex isn't rocket science.

A pretty girl with starfish for eyes performs a striptease on the continental shelf. Its too much. I don't know what is happening to me.

My fingers are French fries.

I am, in fact, typing this sentence with French fries. Coming off the street is an anxious relief because the environment is familiar, but the lights are too surgical and cold to ever call it relaxing. The owners think tourists come to see the Cross and then come into eat at McDonalds. Do they have a suggestion box because I have a suggestion: *get a bloody toilet*. To sit on a clean toilet for two minutes is the contemporary equivalent to yoga, or transcendental meditation. McDonalds is about there always being someone to wipe the piss off the seat. Endless paper, soap dispensers and hand dryers that actually work. Good plumbing is one of the highest measures of human achievement.

Late afternoon now and the clouds are strewn high. The skyline folds me in, cool blue and burning. I needed this colour now, it soothes me like coming sleep, a paregoric absorbed by the eye. I have had blue wings tattooed onto my shoulder blades to complete my new self. I have bottle caps for eyes, cigarette butts for teeth, my tongue a treaty with no provisions.

Word Count: 1371