

blindness of traditional criticism and the uncomfortable truth it allows us to ignore about our city.

If you smoke, you can't blame the movies, or celebrities lighting up. That's just wallpaper and noise. Clusters of smokers are now outside every office building, shivering or sweating, depending on the season. Inside might be the cleanest working environments in the history of capitalism and there they are, powerless to resist this trace-memory of our industrial past, turning themselves into smokestacks.

It's not that you have the habit. You are, in fact, a symptom of the city's addiction. Melbourne remembers, and the smokers play out its past.

I will explain how the city fits together: how its cogs and gears and cars and pigeons all mesh together and move. I won't sell you superstition. I have spent months in Melbourne, observing, making notes, killing time, perhaps. I've stayed out in the streets, trying to come inside only to sample cocktails and eavesdrop more easily.<sup>7</sup>

From above, Melbourne looks like a cancer, small enough to fit cupped in your hands. It's not something we were ever meant to see. A hundred years ago,

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7. Also to use various inspiring bathrooms of tall buildings. Ride the elevator in the Sofitel on Collins Street. Go into the men's bathroom. The enormous window that takes up one wall offers a good view, but a better metaphor. If you're a man the very architecture encourages you to piss on everything below.

anywhere in the world, the only way to see something from above was to conquer the nearest mountain. To own it, and look down on your neighbours. The race to own the tallest building in Melbourne continues even as I speak. Imagine a song. The song builds: the peaks and troughs of the music rise, building atop one another, more highs than lows, until reaching a climax and falling again. The city is a song like this but one that never falls. You might have the tallest building, but sitting in an office somewhere, stamped for approval, there are already the blueprints for the building that will beat you.

Like any race, there's cheating. Thin spires are attached to roofs, desperately begging a few extra feet. Most think these shouldn't officially count. Church spires do it, too, to try and cheat their way closer to God.

If tragedy brings out the best in people, proximity brings out the worst. I have had strangers glare at me at traffic lights for pushing the WALK button when they've been waiting longer than me and must have already pressed it themselves. I have also stood with a handful of others, trusting their basic human intelligence, and when the lights changed there was no WALK signal because not a single one of them thought to push the button.

Precisely that, is to live in the city. Any city.<sup>8</sup>

Cities gather. Cities coalesce. They concentrate, good and bad, crime and disease and, yes, idiots. Melbourne is full of mirrors; our tallest buildings show clouds in their windows, looking like the sky but divided into a uniform grid. It reflects what we bring, and organizes it as vertical monopoly, ground to sky.

It takes a certain kind of person to live comfortably without ever walking on something softer than concrete. In the course of my interviews, I stumbled across people who moved to Melbourne for every possible reason – fame, boredom, et cetera. No one seems to be born in Melbourne. They move here from Canberra, Geelong, or Adelaide. Sometimes from places you can't find on a map, and sometimes from places you can *only* find on a map. I'll explain. Maps of the exact same countryside are necessarily slightly different. They have to be checked for copyright, correct? So mapmakers invent tiny, backwater towns and slap them in the corners of their work, to make their maps unique.

Once I became aware of this trivia, I received new responses to my study. Men and women who shuffled in place. Not nervously; more like their feet didn't fit on the ground. They claimed to come from these copyright towns. It's absurd, obviously, but it comes with a coincidence. I can prove that every one of these men

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8. There's a myth that open spaces mean high morals and meaningful relationships. If you want to make easy money, write a television pilot about disgruntled city folk finding new life in the country, and the public will eat it up.

and women works at one airport or another. Not as pilots or flight attendants. They sell coffee or duty-free perfume to travellers before they walk through those big metal doors and fly away. All told me that airports are the only place they feel at home.

I admit that when I first met the city I was reluctant to participate in its rituals. Now I've tried every cocktail it has to offer in the name of research – not in the one evening, of course, but spread over many months and sensible tips for taxi drivers. I learned that there are only so many ways to combine liqueurs, but a thousand, thousand ridiculous cocktail names to make us buy them, in bars that change their names more often than their drinks do.

The city has a system for keeping what works and discarding what doesn't. That system is the delicate balance between profit and loss. Melbourne's city grid fits neatly on a spreadsheet. Certain squares are, for want of a better word, *cursed*. Money cannot be made in them. Customers can smell it, and when they peer in through the window, they're already imagining the words CLOSING DOWN written across the glass.<sup>9</sup>

The exceptions require that you train yourself to look up. It's true that we haven't evolved that way

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9 I spoke to one business owner with the promise of anonymity – a major franchise store with international prestige – and he assures me that he's caught his stock actually marking itself down. It wants to be on sale. He explained that it's not that the merchandise isn't quality; just that it wants to escape out the door, and off the property.

– the city insists on eyes kept down and kept forward for a studied lack of confrontation – but if you look up you'll notice Melbourne's secret economy. It sells faded silks and old stamps and hats I have never seen anyone wear. Decade-old signs sit in their windows as their only advertising.<sup>10</sup> These stores earn immunity by never coming in contact with the ground, like something out of an Elizabethan fairytale, where a mortal's feet hover inches about the earth.

Obviously, if you want to be alone, the city is the place for you. One bedroom. One bathroom. Individual servings. Convenient handles.<sup>11</sup> It's a miracle. None of us ever have to walk more than one hundred paces to buy cigarettes, as long as there's no one getting in our way, or impatient queues, or groups of friends who've never developed the right radar for urban navigation and walk three abreast, all elbows and excuses, completely ignoring the crowd bottleneaking behind them, in a hurry, with places to be.

Cigarettes in one hundred paces is a miracle. Everyone managing to get out of my way is another.

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10 When I purchased something, the store owner looked at my colourful, plastic notes like they were covered in spit. They'd rather accept chunky silver coins with queens long forgotten stamped on their faces.

11 Buy McDonalds cookies and you will notice this label: CONVIENIENT HANDLE. Is this just arrogance? That the box doesn't just point out that this is, in fact, a handle, but that it is convenient? There's no arguing the point. Fizzy drinks point out that they are refreshing, right there on the bottle. You consume, and you have the appropriate response. No need to think. Convenient, isn't it?

Convenience stores appear overnight, no painting supplies or scaffolding required. A man, seemingly, sets of some kind of small, prepackaged bomb in the middle of an empty building, pulls the pin, and by morning it's filled with condoms and energy drinks.

Look at the enormous pits dug into the earth where buildings used to be. We don't just knock failures to the ground. We dig down, removing all the earth contaminated in final-day sales. Just in case.<sup>12</sup> The cancer is gone. Things end. Eventually, those peaks must crash back down. Please tell me it doesn't come as a surprise that you're all going to die. You're all going to entirely fail to become ghosts and haunt the living. If we walked, right now, out that door and to the nearest graveyard, I have no doubt that the mood would become sober and silent – out of respect, of course.

But remember this: someone's heart has stopped over every piece of earth in this city. I find it helpful to imagine the white markings used to outline the position of a dead body. Abstract, angular shapes, flattened and final. Imagine if they never cleaned them away. They'd overlap. Melbourne would be carpeted white, kept in winter, all year round, with death under our feet. I have seen shopfronts with doors that never open, their windows filled with random pieces of metal, old shop-dummies, one-wheeled bicycles. No price

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12 Where does all that dirt go? One failed stockbroker told me it's shipped out of the city, under cover of night, and used to fertilise suburban playground where flowers and children will never grow.

tags. No sales. No purpose. We say we want the dead to rest in peace; in the same breath, we say that no one is really gone so long as we remember them.

Cut them loose. Let them fall. Close them down.

A majority of relationships end in the springtime. You might have thought autumn instead – the ominous wind, corpses of leaves under your feet, emotional distance brought on by padded jackets – but it's spring. Everyone is looking for something better, something new. Melbourne offers too many variables to plan the perfect break-up. The weather will often coat a couple in irony as often as it does rain or sun. You might start your speech under a perfectly overcast, melancholy sky, and end it under cloudless blue. You mustn't take it personally. There are places in the city that seem to already be imprinted with heartache. I can't count the number of couples I saw sitting on a particular bench in Carlton Gardens, just off Nicholson Street, with the girl crying, the boy comforting, wondering how long before he could walk away with a clear conscience. Seasons change; fashions change; but there's always a boy there, and a girl, crying.<sup>13</sup>

I must admit to suffering through sudden bursts of emotion at certain locations. I reminded myself that relationships don't end because of architecture.

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13 Other locations include the gutter outside of Hungry Jacks, corner Bourke and Russell, and, for some reason, the toy department on the 6th story of the Myer city store.

If you're happy and in love, you'll now avoid these locations. Just in case. I could tell you it is all coincidence, I could refute this superstition with statistics and pie charts, but I've already failed. If love was rational, why would so many of us end up crying in public?

Look at graffiti for proof. We can divide it into categories. There are personal notices ('for a good time call') and music reviews ('Band X rocks'). There are names in giant bubble font, well documented as a kind of territorial marking system. I'm more interested in the single words. Fuck. Dyke. Cunt. Combinations of the above. A lack of imagination, perhaps, but also lack of context. No object. No direction. Just the word sitting alone on a wall: *FUCK*. Externalized. It can't be kept inside. It leaks out of black markers on to city walls. There is also the outpouring of early romance. X loves Y.<sup>14</sup> I suppose it comes from couples too afraid to get tattoos of each others' names, but happy to let our architecture take the risk. It's wrong.

How many perfectly good songs have been ruined by their association with painful memories? Bells to Pavlov's dogs. The city is the same. Perhaps we should treat those zones of anti-romance and heartbroken girls with the same cold eye of urban economy. We could use those single, furious words as targets. If a place is too painful for too many we should simply

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14 Forever, of course. Have you ever seen graffiti that reads X loves Y right now, but suspects that it will end within months?

excise it. Raze the building to the ground. Move the earth far away. Start over. Imagine never having to hear those songs again.

I also discovered another kind of graffiti; a system of scrawls and markings and casual swearwords on our walls that means more than teenage rebellion.<sup>15</sup> Melbourne has its own set of symbols that won't translate between cities, but the same idea is spreading...

Melbourne is a maze.

It's not a metaphor. It's not as obvious as saying it's easy to feel lost in a big city, or as trite as saying that we should all stand serenely in swaying green fields. Instead, I want you to imagine an immense, endlessly complicated maze. There are a handful of people inside, trying to make their way to the exit. There's no way to tell if they've walked this twist or turn before, or circled back on their own footsteps. These lost souls meet. Share maps. Make conversation. They must rest, just for a day or two, building shelter up against the walls. Months pass. Years pass. Children are born into the maze, and in time, these children have children, and so on. They all grow weary, and in time, they all forget. Soon enough, no one is looking for the exit at all.

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15 It's as though I went to an art gallery and realised that each Jackson Pollock was a map to buried treasure.

Beyond it, outside the maze, there is something else. Something new and, presumably, wonderful.

I've managed to piece this together from faded scrawls and stencils and a certain look in the eyes of believers. You can recognize them by the way they avoid mirrors – because they're used to confuse, as they would be in a funhouse – and their left-hands are often filthy, from trailing the palm along left-hand walls. They're always alone, half-homeless, and never standing still. I found one of these believers, quietly crying sometime between midnight and dawn. I sat down with him and feigned sympathy. He showed me something in his fist: a note written on cigarette paper, rolled up tight to be easily tucked between bricks. Unrolled, it was mostly symbols I couldn't understand, but between it spelled out:

*I AM LOSING YOU.*

Relationships between believers never last. How could they? It must be difficult to know that if you find someone to love, all they'd become is an anchor, holding you down, making you content in what passes for a city. If you're happy, or happy enough, why would you keep looking for the exit?

The council cleans Melbourne's streets of graffiti. I sometimes wonder if I should stop them. It's like watching telephone lines bulldozed, or cave paintings erased.

I think it's for the best. For example: say I've been having some kind of romantic affair and it has gone terribly wrong. Our partners have the first webbing of lies becoming visible in their peripheral vision. There would be half a dozen places around the city tainted with invisible monuments to the memory of us kissing when we shouldn't have been kissing. A café where we held hands under the table for fear of being seen. Where we saw a movie, pretending to be friends in the dark.

By way of goodbye, I am given a book.<sup>16</sup> Written on the first page is a tiny note from my lover that says *DON'T FORGET ME*. I'm so worried about being caught that I tear this page from the book. It would be a battered, second-hand copy anyway, but now there'd be the tiny trace of ragged leftovers down near the spine. Once a year, on this anniversary, the ghost of that page wouldn't reappear and fold itself back into the book. It wouldn't knock itself off the shelf and land open at a meaningful passage, and when it was picked back up, it wouldn't be supernaturally heavy, or hot to the touch. It doesn't matter how badly things ended, or how badly I might feel. The book would remain unhaunted.

I used to be nervous about walking into a city clothes store if I didn't feel correctly dressed; too nervous about my clothes to buy new clothes. Now, after careful study of statistics, I can stand next to a stranger with conversational gambits at the ready. After watching

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<sup>16</sup> It is, say, 'The Outsider' by Camus. That brings with it the requisite backstory of loneliness and angst.

Melbourne's patterns of movement, eye contact, and urban navigation, you could drop me into a crowd and my internal compass would not flail and I'd move swiftly to its edge with only a minimum of apologies.

It's not enough. It's still superstition. I can blame Melbourne for preserving bad memories, but it's not the city, the sounds, or the music. It's the *people*. What these lost souls in their so-called maze need to understand is that there's no need to look for an exit. Higher ground will do. Far enough above sea level, any maze just becomes another puzzle printed on a placemat in a restaurant for children.

No needless clutter. Without us clogging the streets, it's all clean lines, smooth curves, and simple grids.

The right photography, taken at night, from above, can almost make Melbourne look this way. Real estate, waiting to be bought. Pay the fee. Own the land. Find the exit. Live alone. This is the Melbourne I dream about.

I'm sorry you can't all join me.

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