

Parramatta Sestina

We could smell the salt in the air at Parramatta, that's where the city began in those days. Then everything had a kind of sameness until we hit the city, everything seemed old and dirty, running beside the tram tracks. Newtown seemed particularly old and Redfern not at all red or fern-like. This was one idea of old, but not like the mountains which were ancient.

And in between this old and this ancient was European old and the ancient of the Mediterranean and Asia. But I didn't know that, it was a blank for me like Parramatta was till recently. And I never thought I'd find people I could like, not in the enduring way I loved the mountains and the city, where days counted for nothing against 'forever'. Bush love like bush tracks and city love I could trace back to Sydney's birth as a city.

My memories are my grandma's memories of the city and my mother's talks looking at the mountains, talking about The Ancient, about the beginning of the world like the 2001 movie track but more serious. And Dad feeling alien anywhere west of Parramatta or Broadway even. I felt his sense of relief on the days we came down to the city and he showed me what his Sydney was like. Where we saw salami and olives in shops I now realize were just like ones in Greece and definitely unlike the big Franklins in the city which sold DEVON (a word my parents pronounced like POISON). There were different city days with Mum, more anglo. Sitting in the Cahills coffee shop looking at the ancient Egyptian motifs etched on the amber mirrored walls. Stopping at Parramatta for a sandwich and having a talk about the Great Western Highway when it was just a track.

Just as Mum knew the mountain tracks, Dad knew the city tracks. Not just the steps and pathways around the Cross for example, but he had a mental picture like a map. The shortcuts all the way from the coast to Parramatta. Which makes me think of Sydney as like a middle eastern city, multi-layered and only really knowable by people with that ancient knowledge which is still applicable in the cleaned-up version of Sydney these days.

I had a dream of finding parts of Sydney I'd forgotten and rediscovered on summer days in the dust and heat. Suddenly finding a lane like a track leading between some buildings. But that's ancient history to me now, that personal approach to writing. Now I like to write about the things happening around me not to me. About the city. And I want to start from the centre I know and work outwards past Parramatta.

Even trying to avoid nostalgia, my childhood days seem ancient and thinking about them is like archaeology. Tracking down connections and making them till they stand out as strongly and clearly as the arterial roads between the city, Parramatta and the mountains.