

THEORY & PRACTICE extract

At the start of 1986 I moved from Sydney to Melbourne. I was twenty-four. The first thing I did in Melbourne was buy a vintage dress. The dress was made of lace, and had cap sleeves, an empire waist and a fitted knee-length skirt. It dated from the early sixties, when thousands of its kind must have been made. Now fashion had plucked it from oblivion and filled it with warm young bodies again. Powder-blue and rose and coffee-cream variants existed, but my dress was Intellectual Black. A university in Melbourne had given me money to undertake an MA in English. I turned up on campus to enrol and found two undergrads ahead of me in the queue. 'Be the one to break up,' one of them was urging her friend. 'Be the one. Be the cool one.'

The third important thing I did that week was sign a lease on a flat in St Kilda, a run-down one-bedder at the rear of a Victorian house. Since arriving in Melbourne I'd been staying with Lenny, a friend of Sydney friends. Lenny had a lectureship in Art History, and he lived in St Kilda in a flat overlooking the bay. He was a Marxist, like all the young men I knew back then. They were always going on about Late Capitalism, and I admired their confidence. How could they be sure that we weren't stuck in *About A Third Of The Way Through Capitalism? Or Still Just Revving Up Capitalism?* The women I knew described themselves as feminists, and so did I. In theory there was no reason not to be a Marxist feminist, but it was tricky in practice because Marxism in student politics was dominated by men.

While trusting in feminism's transformative power, I retained a stubborn, dazed belief in love. All through my undergraduate years in Sydney I'd valued it as a transcendent ideal. Then I read a letter that I wasn't meant to read. It was addressed to the man I believed loved me, and it was plain that his affair with the letter-writer had been going on for months. She was a smart, good-looking, outspoken feminist in our circle. Her name was Lois—yes, really! Did she call him Superman in bed? That was one of the enraged, feeble, anguished things I howled at the man. Afterwards I went to a park beside the harbour and lay on the grass. I told myself, Remember this, learn from this. Pineapple-syrup light dripped on everything and sweetened everything except my thoughts. The unpolluted blue overhead was interrupted only by a casuarina's smoky green.

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St Kilda was *the* place to live, according to Lenny. 'Always follow the junkies. They've got great judgment in real estate. And they frighten away the gentry, so rents stay low. There are heaps of affordable flats in St Kilda, and you've got the beach as well.'

The beach was ordinary after Sydney, but St Kilda wasn't an ordinary place. Having come down in the world, it made room for the delusional, the down-and-out, the sad. Late Capitalism preferred to shroud its facts in velvet, but here they showed brutal and plain. People sat blank-eyed in parks, walked the streets raging or muttering, queued at the Sacred Heart Mission for a meal. A woman shuffled along in nightie and dressing-gown, calling to Frankie—a passer-by said she'd been calling for years. The shimmer of disaster was always close at hand. Someone would scream abuse, a chair would hurtle through a window. Junkies shot up in laneways and sometimes died there; dawn's calling card was a siren. After nightfall, Grey Street and its tributaries lit up with sparkly eyeshadow and expanses of pearly flesh: people selling their only asset had to be visible in the dark.

Violent, and violently policed, St Kilda should have been depressing. But it lay open to sea and sky, and a sense of possibility flowed from that. When the estate agent handed me my keys, I headed away from my flat, towards the pier. Others, too, were walking out to sea in the carbolic summer light. We gathered at the end of the pier, where the breakwater began. My companions were weathered old men in shorts, copper statues with gnarly knees. We contemplated the water and the floating gulls, the distant music of trams at our backs. That salty blue water was full of life I couldn't name. I'd spent the past two years working for a market research company, where every nugget of information that could be extracted from a consumer at the other end of a phone was sorted, classified and assigned a numerical code. Knowledge was different: unbounded, endlessly renewed. I wanted the roll and slosh of its depths beneath me, the risk of drowning. I wanted it to carry me beyond the limits of myself.

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In a second-hand anthology of North American poetry, I came across a postcard of the Cirque d'Hiver building in Paris. It was marking the place of a poem by Elizabeth Bishop called 'Cirque d'Hiver'. I Blu Tacked the postcard to the peeling wall above my desk, typed out the poem and put that up, too. I added my poster of Virginia Woolf, and a quote from Gramsci: 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.' I was a feminist, and my morbid symptom was wanting Lois dead. Of course I blamed my ex, too, for our break-up, but not to the same ferocious, wounded extent. Who, among everyone on the planet, can we never forgive for a failure of protection? MOTHER. Everything follows from there. Feminism was delivering body blows to the patriarchy, but the new world of steadfast female solidarity was still struggling to be born.