

## **Rambling from Stanley into Sussex**

Pedro Mairal - Adelaide, 2017

I'm going to translate this pure verbal enthusiasm into English. Can I try bombastic words in a Shakespearean way? Jack Kerouac knew how to do that. Lifting phrases up in the air in slow motion like a juggler of the invisible world. Trying words, letting them sound and float and fall in silent grace. I'm going to talk about little corners. That's what a place is made of, happy corners, horrible ones, grey ones, green ones, empty ones, silent ones.

The magpies of the Kentish Hotel came to visit my table and my Coopers Original Pale, under the trees, after the rain, before the night, on the corner of Stanley and East Pallant, where the fancy cars take a fast long curve speeding towards Melbourne street, among the ghostly old houses full of flowers. This city of secret gardeners.

What is the distance between the spirit and the soul? Why does the spirit lift up with a single beer, and why doesn't the soul? Why can't you get your soul drunk?

I look at the posters outside the pub. On October the 29th, if the two guys with the funny haircuts let the world keep on turning, there will be a Rolling Stones Tribute band playing in the Kentish, at 8 pm, and I will be just waking up back home in another antipodes, completely unaware. It's only rock and roll but I like it.

My random porn algorithm has gone crazy in Australia. (Don't say this, mate, you are 47.) Back in Argentina random porn takes me towards unsurprising videos of latinas, but here the triple x page opens up suggesting fantasies of women engaging in sex with Godzilla. True story. Horrible screams. Does the secret god of algorithms, that we call chance, think I am an Asian student? I wonder. Life gets more interesting every day.

I've been silent for a month and fifteen days, waiting to say these few words now. The trees are cracking with laughter in the wind. There was some heavy rain today. I smiled, completely soaked, riding the bicycle Matthew Hooton lent me. I want to write a poem for his bike. The afternoon is cold now and the sky is clear and turning dark as the thin clouds move over the hills into the dry planes of the River Murray with no more rain to offer.

There is a kindergarten on Sussex Street, maybe the prettiest street in the whole town, but I've never seen anyone walking by, never seen the children

playing, just the empty playground and their plasticised drawings hung up along the fence.

How long do you have to live inside a language before the strange words become familiar and start growing a thick emotional root in you? When does a foreign language make you cry? Claire read me something her brother wrote. He went with his 90-year-old father to the battle field where their grandfather had fought in 1914 in a place called Ypres, in Belgium. Thousands and thousands of teenagers and twenty-year-old kids who should have been horsing around back home were killed there. Claire's brother spoke about the blessing of living a soft life away from war. And I had a mini melt down. I suppose it's all about transparency. When words just become clear windows, when language doesn't stand in the way, something happens, something gets through.

One of the drawings on the kindergarten fence is signed Nikkita and shows a little girl smiling forever inside a protective circle of tiny hearts.

I'm whispering this to myself, making up short phrases among the flowers, the spring exploding in all directions, a cat not afraid of dogs... What are you looking at, Mr. Cat? I'm walking among the lavender and all these flowers I don't know the names of. There is a front porch with a lemon tree.

I'm new to the zoo of English's old invisible metaphors. I can see some of them for the first time: the ugly ones like butterfly. What does that flying beauty have to do with a fly in your butter? And the pretty ones like ribcage. Your heart like a red bird singing inside that cage that opens up when you finally go. Or nightmare, for example. How beautiful is that female horse galloping through darkness. Footnote: Mr. Google tells me the mare in nightmare is not a horse but a female evil spirit from the proto Germanic mare. I like the wrong horse theory better.

In 1927, when everything was about new technology and planes were trying to cross the Atlantic for the first time, a calm crazy Swiss teacher called Aime Felix Tschiffely traveled on horseback from Buenos Aires to Washington DC. It took him 3 years to ride through deserts, over mountains, across jungles and ever-changing Latin American revolutions. He did it with two horses named Mancha and Gato, one spotted and the other the colour of a cat. He wrote a book about the trip called *From Southern Cross to Pole Star*. Great title. I read it when I was ten. My first long non children's book.

There is an ocean between me and my family but I can see the Southern Cross here too. If you extend in the sky four and a half times the main axis of that cross in a direct line from its foot and then from that point draw a line directly

down to the horizon, that's your south there. You won't get lost in the starry nights of this hemisphere. If I look southwards and open my arms, my family is where my left hand is pointing. In exactly the same latitude. That's why we have the same weather at the same time, cold but not snowy winters, and 40 degrees at Christmas with the dehydrated fainting Santa Clauses in the heavy red suits, and dry but not desert valleys for vineyards and good wine, and eucalyptus or gum trees too, except we don't have so many species, and we don't find them forming these blue silver green forests. Seeds were taken to Argentina in the 19th century and now you see the gum trees growing in lines of simultaneous height.

Anyway. What does all this rambling mean? I'm not sure. But I saw three wild kangaroos last Saturday near a place called Nildottie. I got out of the car and walked slowly towards them. They looked at me, shaking the flies away with their big ears. They did a few hops away from me, I approached a little bit more. It was a big male with two small females. They weren't afraid of me. When I got quite close, a sweet voice warned me from the car: They can disembowel you...! I froze. The male stood up straight, taller than me. I walked backwards protecting my bowels, leaving their sacred aura alone.

I realize English and Spanish are new in these continents, and we live every day with the ghost of a massacre that happened just a tall tree ago. Sorry for suddenly sermonizing, but here at the end of this short walk I arrive at one of the main things Argentina and Australia have in common. Right there where I see empty plains with a few grazing animals, I'm sure there is a place full of lost unwritten knowledge, wisdom pushed away and silenced. Guilt is no good if you don't turn it into something. If I manage to stay quiet for a while and I unwind all the cultural anxiety and I let my curiosity overgrow my ignorance, then I might listen. Because I'm sure the music of the red rocks is still around.

(with thanks to Matthew Hooton)

## Sonnet for Matthew's bicycle

this sonnet should be a rounded shape not square  
it should have seat and handlebar and wheels  
a wind machine with pedals in the air  
that's what it is and that's the way it feels

two circles that can solve your clumsy road  
and turn it in to a thin delicate line  
oh rideable geometry in the cold!  
you're beautiful you're Matthew's and not mine

this metaphor of happiness downhill  
this exercise machine into the moon  
just look at it when moving and when still  
its shadow on the wall in the afternoon

a bike to go back home to flee to write  
to push your tired soul across the light

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## Melbourne St

I was walking Melbourne Street  
had to find something to eat  
found a Geoffrey tawny port  
oh this life! it is too short

nobody looks at your books  
(said the bottle)  
nobody looks at your books

found an open barber shop  
got a hair cut like a cop  
should of grown my hair long  
like a poet in a song

nobody cares about your hair  
(mate)  
nobody cares about your hair

Melbourne Street this makes no  
sense  
let me jump into past tense  
heard a beautiful magpie  
singing just as I passed by

you got a life with your wife  
(said the bird)  
you got a life with your wife

*I've been talking to myself  
and sky is falling in the river bed  
I've been singing to myself  
and wind says something that I almost get*

wanna drive around all Oz  
trying to find the magic cause  
I went biking down the sea  
this is what it said to me

you gotta rhyme your own time  
(said the waves)  
you gotta rhyme your own time

visiting Morialta Falls  
fell in love with koala dolls  
silver spirit of gum trees  
just protect us won't you please

you gotta find the songline  
(said the trees)  
you gotta find the songline

went for lunch with Nicholas Jose  
how's your poetry and your prose?  
I said they do not exist  
I'm a stranger in the mist

you gotta rhyme your own time  
(said Nick)  
you gotta find the song line

*I've been talking to myself...*

(song)

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