

Sorties



Mark Young

sorties

2004 - 2011

Mark Young

Sandy Press

Contents

The Solitary Busker	5
The Flights of the Pelican	7
The Dead Presidents	8
A note on the seasons	11
turtle dreaming	12
A response to an email from Richard Lopez	14
& then went out into the wilderness	18
Tawny Frogmouth is not the name of a porn star	19
The re-discovered first pages of a journal	20
Now be clay in the ground	21
<i>La Dolce Vita</i>	24
Driftglass	28
a mild attack of nationalist fervor	31
More Meanderings	33
Ostriches but no grandmothers	36
sortie	37
Double U	39
Woken once again	42
A consonant avowal	42
Latitude	43
episodes	46
Mundanity, birds, The Magnificent Seven, & a handful of songs	48
There's nobody here but us	51
Up close & personal,	52
The birds, the birds	54
The last cat	56
Words, as catharsis	58
	cont'd

Living in a place	59
This place's / saving graces	60
really bad movies, really good movies, & some other things	62
Crocodile Rock	69
Give me a ladder, anytime	71

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blogs but have been significantly revised &/or updated for any subsequent
publication. The dates given are those for the original appearances.

The re-discovered first pages of a journal

I am writing this from the n th floor of a hotel in the Sydney CBD. I am writing it on a laptop, balanced on the bench in front of the mirror, next to the hotel brochures & about a meter or so from where our bags lie, one open, one closed.

I am writing the record of a journey, 2000 kilometers by road but shorter by air, hours instead of days. I should have written it on the plane, during the trip, words reflecting the clouds placed below, at arbitrary intervals, like dots in a sand painting. I should have written it as I went; but notebooks for me, when I use them, are things that you scrawl in, fray, return to cross things out, doodle in, scrawl all over.

But I am scared of this one with its pure white pages. Maybe I should have left it in the sun before using it, to cure, to temper, so the pages become yellow & I would have no qualms about soiling them with words or scrawls or squiggly bits. This notebook has the unfortunate quality of having quality. & so you approach it as you would a tombstone, something to be worked on after the act, when you've got all your shit together. Put it down somewhere else, the plasma screen, click & drag, copy & paste, until it's ready to roll. Print it out, go over it again, revise. & then enter it in the journal, into this notebook.

Or maybe I am lying, have taken the plunge & am writing directly into the book, ten thousand meters above a point on a line between two inland beacons, the true journey, move in from the coast, move back out towards it. & instead of working in retrospect I am working towards some point in the not too distant future when I shall sit down at a laptop on the n th floor of a hotel in the Sydney CBD & work my way through these notes. Perhaps revise, perhaps just transcribe. Or maybe I won't sit down with it at all, but abandon it for a while, somewhere in the sun, to yellow, so I can face its pages at a later time, without fear.

March 28, 2005

Woken once again

by birds, I realize I haven't written about them for some time now. They are still there though, their multitude, the changing varieties.

I give them names, especially the ones that wake me. The whirlpool bird, so-called because its song spirals downwards as it dies away. The shriekers, those crows & white cockatoos, raucous, demanding — I would throw rocks at their noise though not at the birds . . . though perhaps the crows. The bebop bird.

Their prevalence or their singularity changes. I haven't seen a pheasant coucal this year, nor have I heard the owls at night, boobooking, mopoking away. There are more pelicans in the local lagoon which still has water unlike some others around. Rainbow lorikeets are everywhere, either getting drunk on fermented fallen mangoes, or performing their acrobatics in the trees, orange breasts moving amongst the green as they eat the flowers. I have seen a white-browed woodswallow for the first time — or maybe it's always been here & I've only just come to recognize it. But, for the present, the small birds are not around.

A pair of kingfishers prowls the pool fence, flying away when I come out. A kookaburra remains on the clothesline, head cocked, watching the ground, watching me as I hang out the clothes a meter away.

The seasons change, but we have given them European names & durations, & overlook their subtleties. The earth changes & I do not recognize it. Obviously the birds are aware of both, & their comings & goings reflect it. They have an innate knowledge where I only have a potpourri of impressions. They live, not by rules as we do, but by symbiosis, living with, not on, not off, the land.

February 11, 2006

Up close & personal,

the fun of poking fun at conspiracy theorists fades. Though, to be truthful, this was not so much a contheist, rather someone who had joined the dots in a correct order, but had managed to mix the puzzles up from which they came.

The theory involved a significant site, or maybe two; it was unclear & engaged in a bit of spectral shifting. On one there was now a power station. The other, or maybe the same site, was a hill of black stone that, iceberg like, was mainly beneath the surface but was now the interest of mining interests. A "Martian Meteor" that had not left a crater; a dome concealing a "planetary intrusion", which, if even just the top was mined, would shift the balance of the Gaian system that was this Earth of ours. The indigenous people knew of its power, regarded it as the head of the Rainbow Serpent, used the surrounding area as a burial site. & yet — a contradiction since the oral tradition is extremely strong in the indigenous peoples of this land — such knowledge was now lost to them.

But not to the theorist, who even knew the name they used to call it by. Buddha, spelt out for reinforcement, so that there would be no mistaking it for a homonym. & the fact that the top of this black rock had been mined — again this spectral shifting — was the cause for all the Islamic unrest going on.

The conspirators? As Claude Rains so famously said, round up the usual suspects. State & Federal governments, the mining companies, academia — especially the scientists — the indigenous people, the population at large, singular highly-placed individuals within the population.

& the contheist? A man in his late thirties, well built, casually dressed in pressed jeans, sandals, & a bright yellow shirt of the kind now called hi vis wear. Well spoken, telling his story in not so much a practiced way but rather with the familiarity of something he has lived with for a long time, has labored over, like a poet who has been working on their major work for years, who can recite it from start to wherever it's now up to & include all the references, recall the bits left out, identify the bits brought in. A man who brought his ten-year old son along with his revelations. A son who was embarrassed by his father, who shook his head in sorrow, kept moving away, who had heard it all before & feared the outcome. Any outcome. Every outcome.

How they had arrived at where we were I do not know. Maybe seen the quasi-official sign on the building or even on the floor where we were. Had entered

& felt that maybe we were the ones who might manage to do something. Who wouldn't listen when I told him that we weren't in a position to, who overtalked me, voice growing louder until someone in the office hearing the rising voice & having experience of someone else coming in & becoming destructive, rang security who, because they are several kilometers away, rang the police because "they'd get there quicker. "

& I, not knowing this, finally talked the man into leaving, leaving the notes he'd made for us of what he considered the salient points. He wasn't to be seen in the corridor when I went out for a cigarette a few minutes later.

I caught the lift down, exited to be met by three security & five policemen. They were getting into the lift I'd left just as the man & his son got out of the other lift. I have no idea why they'd taken so long to reach the foyer; perhaps they'd stopped off on each floor to see what other offices were about. The father saw the backs of the police, then saw me & paused to ask if there was a terrorist threat. I smiled & told him that there wasn't, that someone had rung the police about him, & he'd better disappear quickly. He shrugged, walked quietly out of the building & off round the corner. The police & security reappeared a couple of minutes later & headed off in the same direction.

I do not know what happened from there on, was horrified that the response was so overwhelming for what was essentially a harmless act. Thought to myself that the only thing that the presence of so many armed & uni(n)formed men would do was to provide further evidence to the contheist of the conspiracy that is actively trying to silence him. Felt sorry for the son. Resolved to look further into it & see what the dots are made of. Another Ka'aba? Or just another seam of coal?

January 3, 2007

Living in a place

where there's next to no creative activity, where fishing, prejudice, bad driving & assaults on humans & animals seem to be the way of life for much of the populace, I found that, after the initial new place attraction wore off & familiarity crept, too rapidly, in, the only way I could seek solace &, sometimes, stimulation was to take off driving around the countryside, the hinterland.

Lots of little things to see, to discover, much unexpected. The wildlife — wallabies & kangaroos grazing by the side of the road, cautious, watching, as was I who usually only saw them as roadkill, run over by some long haultruck charging through the early morning, dusk; broilgas dancing; a jabiru balanced gracefully in a lagoon; small birds rising up like dust from the grass at the side of the road. The not so nice — an ostrich farm neglected to the extent that there were ostrich carcasses in the yards, with crows feeding on them. The delicate — pools of water lilies. The commercial — salt pans stretching out, the stockyards, the meatworks. The humorous — coming across stretches of sealed road a kilometer each side of the entrance to the properties of someone who had some clout in the local shire. The landscape seen from different points of view, refreshing it.

Now that I've re-retired, I was looking forward to retracing my steps. But it's been raining &/or flooded for most of the two months since I stopped working, & most of the roads are unsealed, & my little 1.8 liter hatchback isn't designed for that sort of thing. So I've been pretty much housebound, & I'm going stir crazy. Can't open the house up because of the smell of rotting vegetation from the flood, can't potter around in the garden because it's so bloody humid that you have to change T-shirts after every time you go out because they're drenched within minutes with the sweat of doing nothing, don't feel like writing, don't know if I even could if I could bring myself to sit down & try.

August 17, 2008

Mark Young's *sorties*

A sortie is a military manœuvre, “an attack made by troops coming out from a position of defence.” In Mark Young’s prose, the citadel is the home, or else the inside of his head; while the sorties are mounted against the land and city scapes of Rockhampton in Queensland, where Young lived in the earlier years of the 21st century. Or against the past. It wouldn’t be right to say he takes no prisoners. Birds are his constant companions, however; and the past, while certainly over, is sometimes close behind. These are intelligent, humorous, precise and well-informed observations, largely autobiographical, but delivered without any attempt at the construction of a narrative or of a unitary self. Mark Young, who gave up playing the double bass because he couldn’t fit the instrument into a taxi before or after a gig, now makes use of the keyboard, with its black and white registers, colored all over, to entertain, to perplex and to delight.

— Martin Edmond, author of *Luca Antara*, *Isinglass*, and many other books.

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