

## University of New South Wales

### Tiffany Hambley

#### **The lobby project: arrivals hall of the lost and uncontrolled**

Biographical note:

Tiffany Hambley is a writer from Sydney who holds an MA in Creative Writing from UTS. She has been published in literary anthologies as well as in the *Sydney morning herald*, *Time out* and *The big issue*. In 2011-2012, she was the recipient of a Prime Minister's Australia-Asia Award, which saw her based in China and Hong Kong. Tiffany is completing a PhD in Creative Arts at UNSW.

If your bags are delayed, try not to panic. (IndependentTraveler.Com)<sup>1</sup>

'Free newspaper?' the man at Central Railway asked you in the curt tones of the underpaid. He turned and spoke to his companion in Hindi as the newspaper passed between you.

Oh God. This is such trash. But your eyes are moving over the page the way an alcoholic scans the street for a pub. You are mesmerised. Pamela Anderson loves drinking espressos because it makes her nipples perky. 'As far as coffee goes, I'd say espresso gets the job done – it goes right to your nipples.' You pause, allowing for digestion of this news. What a whacko.

You continue reading. Your newspaper is flicking back and forth in other commuters' space, like the tail of an irritated house cat. What's that story? 'Baggage and how to keep it zipped.'

*People are wrapping their bags in binding plastic, others are using zip ties, padlocks, combination locks, zipper immobilisers, outer bags, nets and straps ... [W]e're looking at what is effective to secure bags.*<sup>2</sup>

'... people are coming up with systems to protect luggage', but 'you can never eliminate the risk – all you can do is take steps to mitigate it'. They held a 'security forum' in Sydney today. Such swashbuckling language, awash with undertones of catastrophe and danger.

You switch lines. You travel to Mascot Domestic.

There's no crowd to absorb you. At 8:00 in the morning on a Wednesday, the airport is seething with quietness. You are taken by the eerie green of the fluorescent strip lighting in the underground tunnels and the almost random appearance of large spaces with no one to fill them. The place feels like the set of a disaster movie.

There are huge billboard posters of Qantas kids in the subterranean spaces. The children wear white, as in a church choir, and their mouths are straining open as they sing their guts out in front of Uluru. When you get up close to the image, you see how contorted their faces are.

A puddle of noxious-looking water has formed here, underground, at a spot where the walls have crumbled. A dull, bleating orange in colour, the chemical soup has been corralled with bright yellow Accident and Emergency equipment.

Coming up from the station into the terminal itself, you are greeted by the undulating baggage carousels. *Carrousel* in French or *carosello* in Italian: these words mean 'tilting match'. They refer to a kind of tournament in which variously dressed companies of knights engaged in plays, chariot races, exercises and so on.<sup>3</sup>

What match is being played out here at Mascot's T2?

A portmanteau that now deals in travel baggage: this, you like. You are pleased that this word's history comes with associations of costume and of competitiveness. It is suggestive of a public arena where clothes were used to delineate identity and belonging in an antagonistic setting.

Clothing and antagonism are the key to airport baggage carousels, you think. Handing over one's bags to an airline involves letting go of clothes and personal belongings; allows them to enter a 'non-space', a 'neither here nor there'. Something of our selves has been ceded. This sparring match concerns the impersonal passage of the highly personal.

'Well, let's hope the bags arrive!' we say with mock humour, strolling away from the check-in counter as the whites of our eyes twitch like nervy horses' do. Our adversary, the airline, is vibrantly untrustworthy. We declare with bravado, 'Let the games begin!'

The void that the bags enter now is like the watery sac of the unborn, the black frontier of the grave. A space without clear borders, precise lines or any concrete address, a space whose only constant is motion. We fear our baggage might become detached, unhinged. Perhaps we fear that for ourselves as well. We might fall from the sky, lost and uncontrolled.

People come to the carousel at T2 in waves. The first passengers filter through and stand around as though stalking hostile quarry. Eye contact is studiously avoided. The conveyor provides communal distraction: people glare at the smooth rubber track as though it were a hospital monitor with their vital stats fluctuating in red lines and staccato flashes. The covered doorway into the void in which the bags lurk before they reach the carousel is labelled 'Restricted Area'. Eyes dart impatiently from the belt to this impassive mouth. Force of will is going to make these bags emerge: a small voodoo ritual is in progress.

Suitcases spin lazily on the big black belt: pieces of oversized sushi. You see that tiny talismans are attached to many: little hand-knotted ribbons, marking out one dark-coloured bag from another. It's like being in a church, or in a temple: little prayers offered up to unseen gods.

In the centre of each carousel is this:

SECURITY SURVEILLANCE SYSTEM IN USE Many bags look alike Please take care when collecting baggage
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Ah, the panoptic hub. We are told we're being surveilled, but we have no idea by whom or from where. Multiple cameras protrude from the walls and ceiling. Eyes on stalks.

Security officers in starchy white shirts sit in front of a door which reads:

NO ENTRY AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY
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Nearby, a large sign encased in Perspex says:

NO GO ZONE! Photo ID Required
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You feel increasingly nervous. An alarm sounds, high-pitched and insistent. An orange light, like those found atop police vehicles, is whirling. You feel you've set it off: *Security breach, Level One. Caucasian Female. Loitering.*

The only people who legitimately hang out here hour after hour wear uniforms and badges. To sit, watch, write and photograph, as you have done, is suspect. You are an outlaw *flâneur*.

Outside on the street, workers from Atlantis Line Marking are painting white blocks on black asphalt. You watch as their spraying machine fills the breeze with the chemical headiness of pulverised white paint. A zebra crossing emerges. Workers in fluorescent vests pull up the masking-tape borders, all that prevented white bleeding from into black.

So little separates one thing from another.

The stench of those diasporic paint molecules hangs rich in the air.

### Endnotes

1. 'Lost/delayed bags', *IndependentTraveler.Com* at <http://www.independenttraveler.com/resources/article.cfm?AID=18&category=1>
2. Sun, Matt 2005 'Baggage and how to keep it zipped', *MX* (Sydney), 31 August, 4
3. Speake, Jennifer (ed) 1999 'Carousel, noun', *The Oxford essential dictionary of foreign terms in English*, Berkley Books, New York