

Victoria University

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City ghosts

Biographical note:

Enza Gandolfo's novel, *Swimming* (Vanark Press 2009) was shortlisted for the Barbara Jefferis Award in 2010 and the ABC Fiction Award 2008. Her other books include: *Inventory: on op shops* with Sue Dodd (Vulgar Press 2007), *It keeps me sane: women craft wellbeing* with Marty Grace (Vulgar Press 2009) and *Love and Care: The Glory box tradition of Coptic Women in Australia* (Vulgar Press 2011) with Marty Grace. Enza has a PhD in Creative Writing and is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Victoria University, Melbourne. She is also the co-editor of *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*.

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You arrive at Parliament Station and take the escalators, two sets, the second almost vertical, from Platform 3 up to the exit. The first glimpse of the sky comes, as it often does on your way out of the city loop stations, with relief, as if there is a possibility that while you were underground the world might have disappeared or been altered in some irretrievable way.

It is early autumn, but the sky is grey and the air has a winter chill. You're wearing a jacket, tights and boots; layers of winter clothes. The first Melbournians you see seem to have stepped out of a tourism ad: two young women in flimsy sun dresses and strappy heels drink coke as they wait for the tram, a young skateboarder in a short sleeved surfer t-shirt, shorts and thongs flies around a gaggle of school girls their checked uniforms hitched up with belts. Blonde and tanned, they belong in the Australia of the popular imagination with its long hot summers, its sand and surf; an Australia, where you and your family have never belonged. But you smile as you walk because it's them and not you that look out of place on this cold Melbourne street, where the peak hour rush is a mix of races and ethnicities. Where the sun sets, and darkness hovers.

You have organised to meet an ex-colleague for dinner and a drink in café in Gertrude Street, where you sometimes had lunch during the 6 months you worked together. The café, a couple of blocks from your old workplace – a not-for-profit organization that was housed in an old, poorly maintained terrace – was where you built your friendship, where you came to know each other, where you critiqued the organisation and its management, in an easy camaraderie born out of shared left wing leanings. The organisation has recently lost its government funding and no longer exists.

But you're early on purpose, to walk. All day you've been sitting at a desk and this walk is your reward. No computer. No notebook and pen. No room full of books. No notice board pinned with reminder notes listing deadlines and obligations. No student work waiting to be read and marked. The mobile turned off.

Evening walking is in your blood. Your mother often talks about the pleasures of the daily *passeggiata* in that other, pre-migration life. A call from a friend or a cousin, a quick change of shoes, a coat thrown over a housedress, the excuse – the need for a ball of cotton or yarn, or buttons for the final touch on a dress – the linking of arms, the joyful banter as they walked familiar streets, stopped to talk or gossip with friends and acquaintances. After a long day indoors, the craving to be out in the world. Or did you inherit this desire from Virginia Woolf, whose writing you have loved since adolescence, who set out in London on an evening not unlike this one to buy a pencil. As you walk you hear her words: *As we step out of the house on a fine evening... we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers ...* Virginia longed for anonymity, your mother for friendly recognition, you long to escape, relief, but with every step, memories unravel.

From the station you head towards Victoria Parade and the Carlton Gardens come into view; the trees – oaks, cedars, elms and the Moreton Bay Figs. When you were an Arts student at Melbourne University, in the late 70s, on summer afternoons, when the sun was scorching, too lazy to go to classes and too lethargic to head home, you lay for hours under those trees. The large patches of shade, the sweeping lawns (no water

restrictions in the 1970s), and the fountain, water sprouting from its three tiers, transformed the city garden into an oasis. The Royal Exhibition Building, with its pinkish blush, then like now, was regal, but yet you, with your socialist, anti-authoritarian views, were drawn to it and you came here with books, with friends, with lovers.

The Melbourne traffic is building. Inside their cars, drivers are all bristle and spike, itching for a fight; unable to resist a man in a red Honda jerks out of his lane, ahead of him drivers close up gaps and refuse to let him in. There are shouting, horns blowing – the man in the Honda raises a fist out of the car window into the air.

In your childhood you made numerous excursions down this stretch of road by car to visit your mother's sister who lived in Abbotsford or to go to the Victoria Market where your parents shopped for vegetables and meat at least once a fortnight. Before the Westgate Bridge was built, Victoria Street (Victoria Parade between Spring and Hoddle Streets) was the main road linking the west of the city to the east. So most of your trips across the city, unless you could convince your father to take the punt, meant driving down Victoria Street.

Your father in his two-toned green Holden and later his white Valiant Pacer, was an aggressive driver, easily offended. He'd blaspheme, speed, swerve, cut off other drivers with the least provocation. Your mother's pleas that he slow down, that he remember he had children in the car, that it wasn't God's fault, did no good, if anything it fueled his anger, and he became even more reckless. In the back seat, you and your brother held on to your breaths and your seats – no seat belts in those days – as your small bodies swung from side to side.

By the time you arrived at Zia's house, your brother was car sick, your heart was thumping.

Zia's house was a single fronted cottage in a narrow street. From her front veranda, you could smell the brewery and watch the men come off their shifts in their stubby shorts and blue sweat-stained singlets; they wound their way from the back door of the factory to the front door of the pub.

'Do you think working in the brewery puts them off their beer,' you asked Zia's next door neighbor, Shirl, a widow, who was often sitting on the veranda smoking cigarettes. Shirl had bleached blonde hair that she teased into a beehive; it sat like a leaning tower over her head.

'They're a pack of drunks. If you let them, they would swim in the stuff,' she said and you noticed that her front teeth were yellow and cracked.

'She's as mad as a cut snake,' said Lucia, your oldest cousin; she had her own beehive and cigarettes that she kept hidden under the trough in the laundry.

You were only eight or nine and did not know about clichés. You had no trouble imagining pools of beer and angry snakes.

Zia's house had a long corridor that ended at the dining room where the adults sat around a table and drank weak coffee.

‘She doesn’t know how to make coffee,’ your father complained, ‘it’s like dirty water.’

The cousins, sometimes up to a dozen, would head out to the concrete backyard or through the gate in the fence to the laneway where you played games when you were very young, where you hung out and made fun of your parents when you were adolescents.

You loved Zia – she was your mother’s half sister, 20 years her senior. When the two sisters were together a look, a wink, could set them off into fits of laughter. Laughter that could go for hours, that could infect a whole room, that could drive the men crazy.

You loved her house. Three women – your aunt and her two daughters – lived there together and you envied them. Even though your uncle’s death of cancer in his 40s was tragic, you thought of them as lucky. No men. You imagined they lived a utopian life.

On the way home, on warm days, your father would stop the car at the gelateria at the North Melbourne end of Victoria Street; one of the first gelaterias in Melbourne. The man behind the counter took a small scoop from each flavor – orange, lime, chocolate, strawberry and your favorite – lemon – and built mountainous icy peaks. The whole family gathered around a table outside the café. Fingers sticky and sweet, nose freezes and laughter. You remember stains on new clothes and your father’s benevolence turning into rage.

Your father’s rage – here it comes again – in your memories he is in a constant state of rage, at other motorists, at cars, at the dripping tap, at the dinner, and of course at your mother, your brother and you. He’s dead now and your brother says, *you exaggerate*.

The stroll has turned into a stride, and you have to bring myself to a full stop before you can slow down. You have arrived in front of St Vincent’s Private Hospital with its solemn grey black exterior. Originally founded by the Sisters of Charity in 1893 to service the poor and disadvantaged living in and around Fitzroy, the hospital (now merged with the Mercy) continues to be run and operated by the Catholic Church. To you it has become a symbol of privilege now, your father’s access to it only afforded by his ability to pay a hefty private health cover.

It was here on the footpath outside this hospital that your father, an old man by then, due for one of his regular blood transfusions almost collapsed. Your husband, unable to find parking in the heavy midday traffic, dropped you off in front of the hospital so that your father weak and frail would not have far to walk. You and your mother took one arm each but his legs would not work, his knees buckled. You could not hold him. You scanned the street for help. Most people skirted around you. And then a man in blue jeans and t-shirt, his arms and neck a canvas of blue, black and red tattoos dropped the shopping bag he was carrying and slipped his body behind your father’s so that he became a frame, a chair, on which your father could sit.

‘I thought he was going to snatch my bag,’ your mother said later, ‘he looked so rough.’

Instead, he'd helped steady your father, to get him into the hospital and a wheelchair
'Thank-you,' your mother called out after him.

There was a band of tattooed fathers in your neighbourhood when you were a child. They worked in factories and building sites during the day and in the evenings they kicked footballs or played cricket with their kids on the street. There was laughter, but also plenty of yelling and swearing, and occasionally a fight or two, usually between the kids, sometimes between the men. You stood behind the gate that your father insisted on keeping shut so you and your brother would not run out on the road and longed for an Australian father who drank beer and not wine, whose arms were covered in tattoos.

Some of those men sneered at your father and called him a 'wog'. Your father somehow managed, at least when you were around, to pretend he hadn't heard or understood and to keep walking. The wives of these same men asked your mother to knit them woollen suits, and cardigans, but they never invited her over for afternoon tea. And their children did not have *wogs* for friends unless they did and then only one, *just you, because you're not like them, not really a wog at all.*

Your father's near collapse was only one of a series of events attached to your memory of his death at St Vincent's and your work at the research centre. As you walk to cross Brunswick Street, as you leave the hospital behind, the weight of those months, clings to you, and the associated anxiety, as if no time has passed between then and now, as if you were arriving to visit your father, who had not died, who you would find—cantankerous and demanding.

One morning, back then, he had laid out his shirt on the bed placed all of his belongings in the centre and then tied it into a swag.

'I want to go home,' he said when you arrived.

'Well, you can't.' This to and fro went on for several minutes; you could hear his obstinacy in your voice.

'I have to go to work,' you said and then you left.

Your father died days later. Earlier than his doctor had predicted. Partly you think because he no longer could control his life or his family's. You remember watching him take his last breaths, your father who had been dying for some 40 years, and you remember feeling both relief and disbelief – you had convinced yourself he would outlive you all.

As you turn the corner onto Smith Street, a father and son walk past eating ice-creams and you watch the way the son mimics the father. Walking fast to keep up, the boy is a small replica of the man, short pants, tee-shirt and thongs. He seems intent on becoming the father and you envy him his admiration. Did you ever want to be your father? Walk alongside him? Or in his footsteps? Or was your relationship always as problematic as you remember it? Whenever your brother and you argue, and he wants to get the better of you, he says, 'You're just like Dad, you know.'

Your father was never at home in the streets of this city and on the rare times you ventured into Melbourne with him, he was always a little lost. A peasant Sicilian from

a village in the hills where every cobblestone was familiar, every passerby related, he only ventured into Melbourne out of necessity – in the end a place for hospitals and doctors' visits, it would have bought him little joy. If he had been a young man now, and not in the 50s and 60s, when Italians were wogs and dagos, would he have grown more at home here, have come to feel part of it, to find joy in it, would have chosen to take an afternoon *passeggiata* through its streets?

It is almost 6.30 and you see your friend in the distance, making her way into Gertrude Street. She is riding a bike. You can't ride, you never learnt – faulty balance, you prefer to have both feet on the ground. When your friend told you, her father was a postman in Greece before he migrated, you said, 'So your love of cycling is inherited'. Your friend laughed. 'Yes. First, he had a donkey, and then a bike and then a scooter.' She had a better relationship with her father than you with yours but who can say why.

Research statement

Research background

City ghosts is part of a series of short but interconnected autobiographical pieces on the relationship between women and the city as encountered through walking. This series is inspired by writers who were walkers, such as Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire and Virginia Woolf, and women writers who challenged masculine notions of *flâneur* such as Woolf, Doris Lessing and Djuna Barnes. This piece is also concerned with the way people are excluded from the city, or marginalized within it, on the basis of class and ethnicity.

Research contribution

The philosopher Adriana Caverero argues that through the narration of our stories we might come to see who we are; this piece asks: who are we in this place? Written in the second person, it works to actively position the reader on the streets of Melbourne, in an exploration, not only of, the protagonist's identity and sense of self, but of the identity of the city. Melbourne has a diverse population, the city is in a constant state of change. This piece contributes to writing and storytelling that aims to capture that diversity.

Research significance

The series of which this piece is a part began with a blog (at <http://femaleflaneur.wordpress.com>) (no longer active) funded by a *City of Melbourne Arts Grant* – to open up discussion about the nature of contemporary women's relationship to the city, and the relationship between walking, memory and placemaking. The project has expanded in different directions, including several short pieces and a novel (in progress). It is part of the author's body of creative work as a writer and academic that explores issues of class, gender and ethnicity especially as they relate to the city.

Works cited

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