

The Lake That Got Stolen

I was looking out the window when the waitress came over. Sucking down some much needed caffeine before taking the walk round the lake, or what was once a lake, now a dried-up, crusted and cracked memory of rain. Boathouses stand out from the bank, arranged on stilts to be laughed at as yesterday's folly. In the café, in a former boathouse we are thirsty, drinking uneasily as we register what could happen if this drought never breaks. It's hard not to let the mind drift to deserts: Sahara, Mojave, Ballarat.

Ballarat used to be called Ballaarat, I thought at first that was German, Scandinavian, possibly something to do with sheep. Now, after walking round the lake-bed, I know it's the noise we make when we're desperate for a drink. Aar, aar, aar. Loch, the Scottish version of lake, sounds like a long sup of good dark beer in comparison. Loch, loch, loch. Wipes lips. Aye lad, it sure rains a lot roun' here.

Pondering all this, when I got the incredible news that the lake – which has a 6000m diameter – was given away. Drains into it had been turned off and, due to the drought for the last ten years, people around the lake were being allowed to use bore water to water English country gardens.

The lake stopped filling.

People bored holes and forced pipes down into the earth, pipes lower than the water level of the lake.

The lake waited.

People attached sprinklers and hoses to the pipes.

The lake waited.

People, worried about how to save their roses, switched on the pumps. The sprinklers whirred into life, beating out the rhythm of water like helicopters in attack formation.

The birds on the lake didn't notice the water drop a little.

Elsewhere, away from the lake, excited councillors watched a machine crawl across the earth in a housing development. It inched forward to the juiciest spot. It turned its back, almost as if it wanted to hide its eyes as its jaws sliced and butchered the earth. Biting at the flesh of the world.

The birds on the lake heard nothing.

On the machine crawled, gorging itself forwards, eating in circles; as the sprinklers sweep and swathe water from their helicopter jets, the machine eats a new lake out of the earth.

The councillors rub fat hands.

The birds hear nothing but one steps out of the lake onto an island, standing next to a sign telling it that the island was designed to provide refuge from the cats and dogs that prowl the shoreline. Does it know that the water has receded too far, that this island is now part of the shore? What happens as night comes and the predators lick their lips at the sight of the emptying lake?

Sprinklers whirl and roses flourish. Far away, past the shortening edge of the lake, past the dry flats the children used to know as the shallow end, a councillor nods. A hydrant is opened, the last vein to the lake is tapped: a transfusion willingly given to people who pay 'good money' and 'build communities'. People with vision. The new lake fills, smaller and deeper so that the expensive houses round it never have to see the insult of the cracked earth.

The birds move together, their horizon sucked in by the approaching water's edge, a lasso on their mortality. Lakeside gardeners look out and thank God for the gift of bore water. Look what happened to the lake.

The heat of the days is rising.

The birds start to fight as their beauty is undercut by a raging thirst, an unquenchable desire for the last of the food. The sprinklers go whup, whup, whup. The new lake for the posh houses fills, the water silently rising in line with the property prices.

The councillors dance with glee. Someone asks about the lake. 'It's beautiful', they cry, 'who wouldn't want to live there.' But no, the questions are about the old lake, the memory, the empty one, where scabbed-eyed birds peck forlornly at muddy puddles. The sun rages, the last of the water turns to dust.

Don't worry, say the councillors as their sweaty laughter becomes fixed and forced, it will probably rain tomorrow. Next week. Sometime.

And the heat of the day rises.

I look out at a circle of desert, a scar across a once beautiful city. The waitress notices me looking at the cracked earth outside. 'No one knows what happened to the lake,' she says, 'it just disappeared'.

I look at her as she says it. For the first time I see how she has to narrow her eyes against the harsh horizon.

Lake Wendouree
Ballarat
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