



Source: AFP, 'US leads call for action against Syria', *The Age online*, 23/10/05.

Tags: [dreams](#), [dystopia](#), [disease](#), [evidence](#), [sex](#), [streets](#)
Writer/s: [Ross Gibson](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Detective Gleeson remembers that case about the unchaperoned schoolgirl running round the athletics track. And a separate rumour: boats are ferrying little hostages back and forth across the harbour.

It's 1946.

He remembers how the war has altered everyone's definition of 'obscene'. One day the newspapers shout about a welterweight champion whose eyes have been cooked by acid thrown in a theatre. There's a hazy detail that Gleeson can almost recall: the pug's nickname is.....'ShadowWeight'! Next day there's a kerfuffle about men who've been paid to damage the daughter of the mayor.

It's a world fully agog. Bleary codgers tell stories in pubs about girls—never more than 15 years old—who've learned to expect sex 'in the American style'. On ferries to the North Shore, these girls get tutelage off rec leave sailors from San Francisco. Or when circumstances give more privacy, there are devices involved—electrical things sometimes requiring the cooperation of partners.

In fob pockets, ex-soldiers carry formaldehyde phials entombing puckering Japanese thumbs. Other veterans sit in churches and sob, keeping the pews empty all round them.

Near a bend in the river, on the far north side of town, there's a foster home for children called 'half-caste' and 'brindle'. It's full of expectant mothers, unmarried.

Back in the tenement districts, soiled underwear is found everywhere—discarded beneath grandstands and runched under seats on the upper decks of late-night buses.

Down in Chinatown, you can buy potions and powders to combat lethargy and dismay. There are opium houses—trouble whispering to relief in the language of smoke. Blue haze breathing in: grey exhaust going out. He remembers travelling salesmen mingling there with the Americans. The salesmen are local men who are here one day—charming and mercantile—then gone elsewhere the next. The goods they have for sale, even the policemen have no idea where the stuff comes from. But people will pay with whatever loot seals a transaction.

He remembers a sudden theory flaring around the bushland suburbs: monks are concealing a man who lays

eggs. Also, there's whispered talk of a youth who's been found in a locomotive workshop, all wrapped in rubber. And a lout is discovered crouched in a farmyard, naked, chained to a bullock. Then a toddler appears in an Anglican sacristy, the word MERCY on her skin.

Does all this amount to a pattern or maybe it's just luck-weather? Have the fiends formed a confederacy and started upping the ante?

He's with the water police one night when they catch a shark in the harbour. In its belly a man's hand clasps a red gun. The next morning they find six horses swimming near the Overseas Passenger Terminus. Out front of the horses: there's a long-necked animal from South America. What can these creatures tell him? What questions to ask them?

On land, another time, he picks up a vagrant with a cash fortune in his pockets. The man's muttering only one thing: there are messages from God in the names of movie houses and ships.

A rash of graffiti appears all over his beat. It's 1946! Funny to think it, graffiti back then. It's painted with a big house-brush and proclaims that the dead have banded together to send dream messages to the living. He finds it splashed upon bridge pylons, in bus depots, the aerodrome. Often the text rattles with a juvenile spelling. Something smeared by a kid. But can a kid think like that? Is this a kid's composition, or is it some delegated dictation?

Whatever Gleeson knows about kids, it comes from overhearing them in trams. His opinion: they've all become trainee Americans. Wolf-whistling and bluster. It's because of the US GIs everywhere, so glamorous, so ardent and empty while overlaid with chocolates and gum.

He has to decide if the graffiti contains clues. Or is it just no-account glimmer? The same with the horses and the alpaca. And the memory of that schoolgirl running round the athletics track.

It's been just one more week with his badge pinned on top of his heart.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ross Gibson.