



Source: Phillip Coorey, 'Stop this terrible waste, grieving mothers tell Bush', *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 16/05/06.

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Bargelt noticed it when the wind blew sand across it, and bent to pick it up. The little plastic sleeves all held strangely chaste waist-up snapshots of topless women. They didn't look like professional porn, as far as Bargelt could tell, more like the private collection of a breast fetishist. Breast fetishist, he said to himself a few times, and laughed softly. Bargelt was desiccated, the rectangles of flesh—offered up to their photographer with attitudes from slutty to matter-of-fact, from proud to shy—elicited no twang of desire. In fact he could barely remember desire. Bargelt had known for a while he was in danger of going guru: he'd seen it happen, men and women gone so far beyond any residual connection to the flesh, they'd start seeing visions, go charismatic, lead people into a sandstorm. Once he'd passed a rough enclosure where a haggard old prophet sat in the middle of a circle of wailing acolytes; Bargelt hadn't been able to tell whether it was a man or a woman, but whichever, was beating his or her own back raw with a tangle of wire. Not enough blood, he'd thought at the time. There'd been others: cackling wanderers in rags and stiff-backed types with followers marching two by two in patched-together uniforms, trying to hold it together. Bargelt thought the fantasies were trite, and it was too hard to march in the sand.

So Bargelt kept to himself, stayed away from anyone who might glimpse transcendence in his deeper-set eyes, or follow in his lighter and lighter footsteps, or who might tempt him to lead them. He kept to his way, walking, foraging, finding shelter from the sandstorms, staying wary of others, amusing himself with an occasional interior monologue, wit dry as the sand. But he slipped the wallet into a pocket, kept going, trying to remember all the words for breasts. Tits, boobs, teats, orbs, rack, set, pair, shelf, chest, hooters, mounds, bosom, bazoom, various fruit including melons, cantaloupes and coconuts, also tomatoes, jugs and milk jugs, any other milk container, bodacious tatas—wherever that came from, pillows, mountains, volcanoes, bazongas, funbags, yams, cupcakes, sweater kittens and shirt puppies, bikini stuffers, muffins, zeppelins, headlights, norks, noogies, knockers. Pontoons.

Bargelt had learned to stretch things out, and if trying to remember every euphemism failed to titillate him, he didn't get bored, either, but it only lasted a little while. He recalled that desire had used up time well, especially when unrealized, but by now his priorities had changed, and he could barely picture the sex act, let alone any partners he'd ever had. Still, the wallet was burning a hole in his pocket.

Bargelt had turned right in what he was sure had been Texas, and headed north. He thought he might be in New Mexico. As long as he could remember, he'd been heading for the Panama canal, or whatever was there, now. In the east, he'd heard stories of food growing in the south. He'd

learned that wasn't true, but determined just to go on. Recently he'd begun to feel less resolved. This amused him, because the resolve required to do something entirely pointless seemed so ironic in the first place. And it alarmed him, because his resolve might be drying up as his body dried out. Bargelt worried that as he became lighter, he'd become lightheaded, float away from himself. So he turned north, because he wasn't sure what would happen if he went to Panama and there was nothing there, no barricade across the other side, no people, and because he wasn't sure what would happen if there were people there. Would he wander in from the north, a sexless cackling prophet? Of course, he'd never really believed there would be anything or anyone there, which made it all the more irrational and frustrating. Nihilist existentialists, he mused, trudging north, weren't supposed to be sure what would happen.

At noon he came across the remnants of a six-lane freeway, and started eastward along it, picking his way through the rubble. Bargelt took the first exit ramp on the north side, thinking if he couldn't find anything else he'd make a rough shelter against one of the still-standing pylons, to see out the sandstorm. But he saw structures a few hundred yards away. Soon he was crunching across a layer of sand and broken glass covering what had been the asphalt parking lot of a big-box shopping mall, the ruins of which loomed ahead. Bargelt knew well to be cautious near large structures, which might house all kinds of new social arrangements, as he called them. He thought he'd make a stringy meal for cannibals, but preferred not to test the assumption.

Bargelt slipped in where a loading bay had collapsed at the back of the building. He made his way carefully through piles of smashed drywall, wood and glass, upended slabs of concrete where the floor seemed to have erupted. He tossed pieces of junk along blind corridors and into dark spaces once occupied by chain stores. Satisfied as well as he could be that there was no one around, he made his way into one of the store spaces to find somewhere to rest. He found a rough niche in the rubble to lie down in. Wrapping his coat around himself, his hand brushed the wallet, which he pulled out and let unfold. Pontoons, he thought. And: oh, fuck. As if he were a nervous 12 year-old, he reached into his trousers for his penis. Cock, he said, cock, dammit. Clutching the wallet to his chest with his left hand, his tentative fumbblings had coaxed him into semi-tumescence, when an old man pushing a shopping trolley filled his field of vision. He held his breath in shock. Welcome to Wal-Mart, creaked the old man. Bargelt exhaled, grabbed his coat, leapt up and ran full tilt, stumbling wildly through the detritus till he hit the parking lot, and kept going, headed south.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Frazer Ward.*