



Source: John Burns, 'Saddam's former envoy speaks up for his old boss', *New York Times* in *The Age* online, 26/05/06.

Tags: [discomfort](#), [streets](#)

Writer/s: [Vanessa Berry](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Lights flash amber and the cars don't stop. For the first time in her life she wishes the police were around: an officer planted in the centre of the intersection, cars obediently halting at the flick of a white glove. Then she'd have some hope of crossing this road.

Where are the police? Shouldn't alarm bells be squealing inside the station and officers bickering about whose turn it is to direct the traffic?

*Let the murders and robberies and accidents take their course: come and make the cars stop so I can get to the other side.*

Her thoughts are hilarious and she's proud of them. They should be broadcast on billboards, on those strips of red text that decorate city buildings with stock exchange information. Yesterday she found out they are called 'zippers'. From 'those scrolling panels of text' (You know the ones? The ones in the city? That have the news? Like the bottom of the screen on CNN? And our news now too?) to 'zippers'. In this reduction, the world gets more and less precise and more and less interesting.

She zippers her thoughts over the tide of cars, imagines them reflected in the windows. Overlaying the pinched faces of crying backseat toddlers and the grimaces of drivers are her suspicions of why the police aren't around.

It's police picnic day. There're thousands of blue shirts in a meadow. They're playing frisbee with the drug sniffer dogs. They're polishing their guns. Female officers are discussing ways to pull their hair back into tighter ponytails. They're laughing at what must be happening in the city without them.

Like this mess.

On Parramatta Road the cars are endless. From her apartment the traffic noise is a comfort, like an ocean. When she cannot sleep she thinks of the people in the cars and where they might be going and what songs they might be listening to. Stoned boys in a 70s orange Volvo, giggling at Macedonian pop on SBS radio. A woman crying, driving to the hospital. Security guards with a truck full of money, talking about whose digital camera has more megapixels.

It's more romantic when she is lying in bed listening to the traffic. Now, looking over the cars, she can only imagine that everyone driving is desperate to get to the shopping centre. They have expressions as if there's a big sale going on and they're missing it.

Being stranded here has given her a chance to really examine this intersection. On the pole in front of her is an ad for a room:

Flatmate wanted. Located in the city very close to anywhere.

Hmmm.

'Hi, I'm ringing about the room?'

'Is it still available?'

'Great. I've just got a few questions about it.'

'In the ad you say it's very close to anywhere, yes?'

'Well I'm particularly interested in being close to Malta. Is the room close to Malta?'

'It's a country in the Mediterranean. An island.'

She doesn't know anything about Malta and this makes it very attractive. She likes to dream about places she has no mental images of. She imagines all the buildings in Malta to be made of crumbling sandstone, like they are constructed out of biscuits. There are parrots everywhere and all the inhabitants are over sixty. She imagines herself walking the streets with a bird on her shoulder as shopkeepers smile genially from doorways. At every corner are cafés that sell pastizzi and tiny cups of coffee. There are no six lane highways in Malta.

In Malta the air smells like pastry at sunrise and garlic at sunset. It is the opposite of this soupy exhaust that leaves her nostrils tingling. It is the opposite of grubby sticky tape wrapped around telegraph poles and bus tickets in the gutter and flattened cigarette butts.

The cars in the cross street are getting antsy, trying to push their way into the main stream of traffic. Angry faces balloon inside car windows. Hands bang the dashboard, turn palm up. The mess of cars and people's frustration have become infinitely more interesting than crossing the road. She notes how quickly things deteriorate. The inevitable honking starts up. A lattice of bleats and moans at different pitches. She watches a man in a truck crush his palm into the centre of his steering wheel to blare the horn. He does it passionately, as if he's just solved the 'Who am I?' on Wheel of Fortune.

That's it! For every car horn bleat, there's an answer to a question.

'Why did the lights fail? Yes, you in the navy Toyota.'

The man with the Disney tie and goatee says:

'Red and green have disappeared. They no longer exist. If you cut yourself, your blood will be grey.'

Oh!

'Why are you all so angry? White hatchback! What's the answer?'

The girl with acne scars and crimson fingernails says:

'There's a big sale on up at the shopping centre. Every item is five cents.'

Oh!

'Where are the police? Silver Service taxi—tell me.'

The grizzle-faced taxi driver says:

'They're out looking for red and green.'

Oh!

'Will I ever get across the road?'

Everyone in the bus pokes their heads out of the windows and says:

'No.'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Vanessa Berry.*