



Source: Clancy Chassay, 'Alarm as Lebanese army urged to resist Israel', *Guardian*, Reuters in *The Age online*, 20/08/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [chance](#), [politics](#), [storytelling](#), [corporeality](#)

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This morning on the radio*, she says, a commentator is making noises about who will write the 'winning narrative for the new Middle-East.' Will it be 'a tale of harmony after centuries of antagonism' or 'Islam under attack'? Once there's an investment in this world narrative, they're saying, things will fall into place. Anything that doesn't fit will be ignored. Who will write this story, she wonders.

I hail from the south, she says, and though it irks—all this hierarchy of North/South, Reason/Passion—I wouldn't count on anything very useful coming from the Antipodes right now. Down here, everything is bloody story! What's your story, people ask, meaning who are you, where do you come from or what's happening? Having gorged on stories—our own and other people's stories, Australian stories—the populace sleeps, bloated with indigestion, suffering only occasional rumblings of disquiet and bouts of angry dyspepsia.

Now and again, something stirs: a good idea surfaces, some shy, discursive narrative starts to emerge, only to be abandoned as too complex. The short-sighted plot prevails. Yesterday, I heard there are schoolgirls who think John Howard is cute.

There are optimistic signs. I heard a well-known playwright invited some friends to dinner and cursed the war in Iraq while putting his mind to preparing Ferique and Faisinjan. Ingestion, he believes, is the only way to change the will of the West.

And then there was the radio piece. Some months ago, she said, she'd accepted an invitation from a writer who'd created a work for radio with her voice in mind. She was flattered and at the same time it started her thinking about the inner voice and the others that might be accommodated within it. She accepted the offer.

The piece had to do with an experience the writer had had as a child growing up in the south, the south-east of South Australia to be precise. A man had recently moved into the town. He was from Italy, had a relative in the area and worked at the local mill. One Sunday afternoon, he shot himself. Like everyone else in the street, she'd heard the sound. She said in her notes: 'Everything stopped and then everything went on again.'

The instructions to the performer were as follows: 'She starts quietly and slowly and measured as if answering a question, for example, where do you come from or what happened; gradually though 'south' talking takes off into a more stuttering and faltering and disordered kind of speaking. It will sound 'as if' it makes sense (and it does anyway) but the words will become themselves in sound and will not only be driven by 'story'...What she is trying to express is the 'something' that happened within her, when it happened outside of her. Something that having left her, she is bringing back; a feeling, a mood, a belonging, a knowledge; it's a space within which the sky

and the earth are linked; the horizon very close up, the heart.'

They had made the broadcast but then something happened to the recording and the program went west. Somewhere in there, she thought, was the winning narrative for the new Middle East.

Lately, she said, she had started to look for clues in her own life.

Stopped at a traffic light, she suddenly remembered one exhilarating day from her adolescence when she had felt that her body and the world it occupied were one and the same. Then, a breath away, she recalled the dark day she had spent dropping off forms committing her father, whose mind was unravelling, to a nursing home. 'How far up is up?' he asked one day. Eventually they were reduced to communicating one letter at a time, mostly O, O, O.

Three homes had to be chosen from a sad selection. The social worker at the hospital had instructed that the first one with a place to offer must be accepted. Her doctor tentatively advised digging her heels in. On this day, though there were dark clouds threatening, she decided, not purposely (volition seemed to have deserted her), to walk to the first institution. She pushed through the heavy weather hoping to feel something from the outside equivalent to what was happening inside her. She handed the soggy paperwork to the secretary and took an expensive taxi to the next.

Inside, a harsh word from an overworked nurse made her cry. Thea, the volunteer at the counter, took her aside and said, 'You won't get over this, but you will get through it.' She left and found her way to a café where the waiter placed the cup before her with more care than she had expected. When she took out her glasses, one of the lenses fell into her lap. Later in the day, an optometrist would fix it for nothing, touch her on the shoulder and ask her if she needed an umbrella. The world was lifting her up. She felt light. She called in to see her mother needing to tell her the deed was done and found her in a circle singing 'California here I come', accepted a custard cream from the diversional therapist and joined in.

Now, you see, she said, the chaos of this day of quiet desperation is already ordering itself into another narrative of everyday transcendence and the human capacity to help. And I know for a fact, she said, that last sentence belongs to another day altogether. What hope is there for the new Middle East! 'The world was lifting her up'. Maybe we should put our minds to that. And how far up is up?

* 'Background Briefing', ABC Radio National, 20 Aug 2006.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Virginia Baxter, with thanks to Linda Marie Walker.