



Source: Declan Walsh, 'War stalls Beirut's rebirth as young seek better life elsewhere', *Guardian Unlimited*, 30/08/06.

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I'm in Broken Hill for only a week—a tourist travelling inwards from the coast. I thought I was here to soak up the atmosphere of the place. But you can't soak it up—it's too dry, too dusty, to seep or flow or be mopped up into anyone's soul.

Broken Hill is red rust and brown. It is flat and hard and its streets are named Oxide and Chloride, Cobalt and Iodide. They are the substances that romance the soul out here.

This town is hard, and I feel soft in it. So delicate. My skin is pale, and it feels like it could simply dry up in this dry air. And this hardness, it gets at your soul somehow, and the tough, flat streets make you feel like reaching into your self and pulling out a soft down pillow on which to rest your head. It's been such a hard, hard year, and this town seems to rejoice in hardness, like someone mocking me.

This town has a park, a green, green park. Sturt Park is soft. In it grow Canary Date Palms, Pepper Trees with their magic smell that my husband loved as a little boy and still loves now, and always reminds me how much I love him. There are Eucalypts and rose bushes. There is shade and the grass is cool. This is where I come to think, because I am a coastal dweller usually, and I like the illusion that there might be water in reach, sustaining this patch.

In Sturt Park, a park where the grass is incongruously green against the rust orange and brown of the town, and the trees are large and generous, there's a monument to the *Titanic*. In this dry, dry town I wonder what sort of connection the people felt to the passengers sucked down in the icy cold water of the Atlantic. This town gets seven inches of rain a year, and what's good and glorious and bountiful never comes from the sky. It came from the earth.

What did they think when they heard, when the news passed down the sweaty queue of miners ready to go underground? Could they imagine that iciness, that frozen mass of water? Did they wonder, with dust in their lungs and the ground about to swallow them up for a long day's work that it might be a lovely way to die? If you have to go, might it be nice to be wet, and frozen.

Corrugated iron is everywhere. There are yards full of the stuff in the streets—like badly planted iron grey and rust coloured plants. Hard plants. At first I wonder at these people, leaving their gardens deadened and ugly by these ugly monuments—old sheds, bits and pieces. But soon

enough, like an art critic seduced, I see the attraction. I see how a cup of tea out amongst the dead tree stumps and rust could make you feel alive. I imagine how I'd feel my heart beat and my skin react to the cold of the desert morning.

From streets all over the town, I can see the heap of useless rock discarded in the process of digging riches out of this earth. A dirty great heap, in the true sense of both words. A hard pile. There's a restaurant on the top of it now, a sign of the times. I remember not to order the Barramundi, like the coastal girl I am.

More monuments. Nearby Broken Hill is Silverton Cemetery, where people finding treasure in the earth laid after death. Its dry orange earth is filled with headstones, brought here from Adelaide. They are randomly placed by the chief grave digger, Bob the Finisher, who, the signs says, used to jump on the coffins in the graves he'd dug too small, to make sure they'd get down in the ground. I look round this poor little place and I think that this is a cemetery that makes sense. It is hard, and the salt bush clings to the ground for dear life, ready always for the dry earth to give it up. This earth lets people know that death is here, it doesn't try to cover it up with pretty flowers.

And yet poor Amelia, buried here at the age of seven, and the three Irish brothers, and the mother buried with her baby, came from a place where the soil underneath them was fecund, and the grass was green and rooted strongly in the ground, so that when the wind came, it simply waved and bowed. And rain fell on the soil and things grew and felt firm and old and cold and damp. I wonder about their poor white skin in this earth.

Silverton is a ghost town, filled to the brim with nothingness. There are a few crumbling buildings, a church, a Masonic hall, a gaol. Some of the buildings are galleries now. There is such a strong sense of loss, death. For a girl struggling with depression, it feels quite homey, in a difficult, weird sort of way. They built up the town before Broken Hill, and many many people came but there wasn't enough, enough in the ground, enough water, enough sanitation. Those who could went on to Broken Hill.

And eventually, eventually, they built a patch of green, and cried tears for those pale pale passengers drowning in ice.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sophie Townsend.*