



Source: Greg Myre, 'Security force joins Palestinian strike over pay', *New York Times in International Herald Tribune online*, 06/09/06.

Tags: [Lebanon](#), [language](#), [home](#)

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In the doctor's waiting room, I read the spine of a *National Geographic*: Pandas. US Coasts. Rome's Basement. Dance across America. Human Body. Blackbeard.

On the spine of a *National Geographic* the world seems so knowable. List anything and you have control of it. I open the magazine at a random page, not knowing which article to choose (not really wanting to read any of them, but it's that or *Vogue* or a *Little Golden Book* or just sitting there).

I discover that Rome's basement, rather than the collective equivalent of a place where ski gear, boxes of school yearbooks, spiderwebs and abandoned woodwork projects languish, is a series of underground sites of historical interest: drains, crypts, foundations of buildings from thousands of years ago. They are neatly mapped on meticulous diagrams in double page spreads. In one, an aerial photograph of Rome today is compared to a computer generated image of ancient Rome. Numbered boxes mark the sites on the ancient city which have traces underground that still exist today. The article makes much of the fact that there is still so much more to discover, buried under the city.

I close the magazine and wonder what is underneath the doctor's surgery. It is an old inner city house, with loose, noisy floorboards in the hallway and small windows. Taking the building away and searching through the earth underneath would probably yield nothing *National Geographic* worthy, although the piece of earth I am sitting on is just as old as Rome.

When I asked Lucas what Petersham used to be like before white settlers arrived and started fencing it, he said it was a forest where Aboriginal people hunted kangaroos. Nothing around me retains any sense of this: all Hills hoists, bricks, roads, fences, lawn, magnolia trees. This is what our lives are now so there's no sense in feeling too sad about the past. The forests are gone and the pavements slowly crack underfoot as I walk back and forth down Crystal Street.

It changed so quickly from forest to suburb but now

things have slowed again. Subtle changes to the buildings are soon forgotten, I squint my eyes and imagine it is 1974 and manage to fool myself. Of course, I am imagining something I never experienced in reality. But strip away the details and ignore the streamlined modern cars and I'm sure that it looks more or less the same.

Lately I have started to imagine how it could be destroyed.

It started one day about a month ago, when I bought an oregano pizza from a Lebanese bakery. I walked in and interrupted the couple who worked there as they were watching television. The woman's eyes were red like she had been crying as she turned to see who had come through the door.

The television showed images of bombed city streets. The text on the screen was in Arabic, so I couldn't read it, but as this was during the time of Israel's air strikes on Lebanon I could only imagine this was what they were watching. The man was standing behind the counter staring at the television with his fists clenched.

I felt like I had interrupted something private. My oregano pizza was such a petty thing, but I know that this is the way the world goes. As I eat lunch and catch trains and send poetic text messages and think about what kind of underwear I might buy tomorrow, terrible things are happening the world over.

I paid for my pizza and they resumed their positions in front of the television as I left the shop. I let it hit me—how would I feel to watch Sydney being bombed? If I were in another country watching images of the streets I knew so well being destroyed?

I started to cry.

It doesn't mean much until these moments, when something makes you understand it is real, happening on earth as old as Petersham, as old as Rome.

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