



Source: Russell Skelton, 'Rescuing Wood 'put off to save ransom'', *The Sun-Herald in Fairfax Digital*, 26/06/05

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I had arrived in Cyprus to work on fragments of fresco from the ancient theatre at the same time as a friend, barely fifty and at a peak of her scholarly research in my university in Australia. She was fading slowly from a pitiless lymphoma. Her work in geo-science linked the digital maps of satellite remote sensors to the actual vegetation of the Willandra Lakes system in the western plains of New South Wales. She walked the land, marking specific trees and collecting the categories of vegetation, tying tiny details of plant growth to great cosmic maps. The process is called 'ground-truthing' by geographers.

During the construction of yet another concrete apartment building in Paphos, not far from the theatre site, a dark hole appeared—they'd broken through the top chamber of a tomb. The museum officials co-opted five people from the theatre site to do a rescue dig. The gaping hole in the forecourt of the new building was an embarrassment to the developers, pressed for time—obviously holding things up. The workmen stood around the black gash, smoking and looking uneasy.

When we arrived the street was ordinary—nondescript apartment buildings of two and three stories, with older shops, a laundry, some restaurants aimed at the tourist trade. A village woman in a scarf hurried up the early morning street, with laden shopping bags.

It is an uncanny feeling lowering oneself into a rock-cut tomb which has been closed since the second century, like entering another age—yet quite intimate once one was there, with three stone sarcophagi the size of small beds. I went to help the photographer in the awkward space. So quiet and damp, about three metres square, and just high enough to stand up. Filtered light came through the jagged hole at the top. Women had been buried here, as evident from the fragile glass perfume vessels, a gold earring, and a tiny gold ring so far discovered. Fragments of plaster still adhered to the rough surface—had the tomb been painted? The air was dense and moist, with crumbling surfaces, pockmarked ochre sandstone and a faintly unfamiliar smell, earthy, but as though strange substances had gone into the making of this specific atmosphere. I remembered stories of people going underground to search for treasure and dying three days afterwards of poisoned air. The perfume vessels frequently had their lids off, it appears, so that those entering the tomb to place another body would not be troubled by odours of decomposition. Heaps of yellow and crumbling bones had already been removed by the time I arrived, to wait for further examination in the museum storerooms. To experience the freshly discovered tomb is to be in an entirely unfamiliar atmosphere, and to feel like an intruder.

After so many centuries it was absurd that suddenly time was short; the tomb must be excavated rapidly so that the building construction could continue as soon as possible. An entrance of sorts would be left so that it might be

re-visited, a concrete trapdoor, looking like the entrance to the city drains. In the irregular space of the small chamber I assisted the photographer in the faint light and watched the museum archaeologist excavate the sticky clay at the entrance. Again and again he scraped at the resistant ground with a sharp pick. Suddenly he stopped and handed through to us a fragmentary piece of painted plaster about the size of a plate clearly painted in terracotta red on cream. Above some lettering was a sandalled foot, and two birds' feet. In my first astonishment I read the word MHTHP 'mother', flaming out of the dirt, not read since the second century.

I was transfixed, bent over in the tomb, by this painted word held out in the hand of the excavator, 'mother' or 'mater' appeared to flash in the dark space of that moment of discovery like a sign from the dreaming unconscious. The ostensible fact of the inscription from the plaster fresco indicated that 'Demetrios' was perhaps a family name of those buried here. The elegant letters with their pronounced serifs date the writing to the second century AD, or later. But to me, the visual impact and freshness of the red painted word with its pristine letters was like a spoken sound, giving a voice to the unvoiced, a sibyllant breath of 'mother' echoing around the tomb.

I heard that Toni, my sick colleague, took Mary a younger friend aside for an hour last Sunday and talked to her about the work with plants at Lake Mungo. She told her about a certain tree she should research, and asked her to get the important book on the vegetation of western New South Wales from her office. Mary told her she would put the book back as soon as she'd looked up the reference. 'No', said Toni, 'You keep the books, they are for you'. The work is passed on to a younger woman.

Toni's death haunts me. In the middle age of my life there is so much busyness, and it is so necessary not to let the demands become overwhelming, to put the real priorities first. A modest individuality might really be all we have, but adjusting, making space, a little fertiliser, some kindness, can allow a flowering.

I thought of the arduous work of my friend documenting the patterns of growth in the old soils and algal crusts of arid Lake Mungo and relating them to the evidence of the vast satellite maps taken from space. Classical archaeology identifies the objects from tombs on to chronological maps, deduced through a web of literary and textual fragments, and through precise charts of drawn artefacts. This grid of references is not unlike a geographical metaphor of place. It was here underground in the tomb of the 'mother' in Paphos that the evidence of the remote maps of ancient life seemed, momentarily, 'ground-truthed'.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Diana Wood Conroy