

Story for performance #670
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Tags: [Iraq](#), [streets](#), [sexuality](#), [music](#)
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Twenty-seven minutes later he arrived at Ormond station. He liked the stations along this part of the line. After Caulfield, monumental red-brick structures that enclosed whole blocks gave way to smaller, more prosaic places. Ormond was typical: on the city-bound side, a cream-brick block with a thin eave (that did nothing to keep the dry heat away); on the other side, a small, jerry-built structure that looked like a bus stop. This is where the public face of the city was swept away, and where the full effects of its intense January heat smacks you in the face the minute the train door opens.

He walked down North Road and turned towards Joyce Park. There was no one around, and even the magpies had disappeared. It was just too hot, and this was the eleventh day in a row of it. The city hardly seemed to function when this happened, especially around here, where people had places to park their cars off the street. There was just nothing but bitumen, nature strips and fences. As he walked along Jasper Road he concentrated on the silence, especially the way that whatever sounds could be heard were warped or distorted by the heat.

He arrived at Jason's house at Chalmers Street. He was twenty minutes early, and the front gate was locked. It was going to be a bit of a wait, and he wished they'd organised the park as their meeting point instead. At least there he could sit down in shade. Here, water-filled soft drink bottles lay around to stop dogs shitting on nature strips, and they made him feel uncomfortable. He didn't know why heat-stained plastic bottles filled with discoloured water were preferable to dog shit. Especially in this heat, when there seemed to be no dogs around.

He waited. He leaned against the fence, and tested how long he could stand the stinging sensation of the hot Colorbond; he leaned against the 'Give Way' sign; he sat on the cement, unable to lean against the fence because the Colorbond was searing. The waiting made him nervous, or at least he became more aware of his nervousness as he waited. He fiddled with his Ortlieb bag and found his Stuyvos. It seemed that the whole package leant itself ideally to smoking, especially the heat. He had come to love smoking in the desert wastelands of the Middle East, and smoking had by the end become essential to the experience of it. Initially, smoking helped to alleviate the impossible boredom. But it came to serve other social and personal functions; the course of his friendship with Jason, for example, was punctuated by cigarettes. So the feeling of hot air and hot smoke became

in the end synonymous. And this synonymity remained. If he closed his eyes while he smoked, he could be in Al Muthanna. It felt good.

He also opened the small notebook in which he jots down lyrics for the songs he sends to his American friend, whose band has just released its second album. His friend likes what he has to say and how he says it, and his band's latest album includes a track that draws on lines he had written a few weeks after arriving in Al Muthanna. He hadn't been altogether comfortable about this, since the lines—written as a description of the boredom of regular and uneventful foot patrols—formed part of a verse that ended with the line 'weez rock-hard and fully stimulated'. For him, this sounded like a tired cliché, even if sex and drugs did become part of his experience of the Middle East.

He made a few additions and alterations to a list he had been working on over the last week, a list of words associated with the phrase 'my message is redemption'. He thought that in the end his American friend would probably repeat this phrase, as in a chant or a chorus. And he was black, so it would take on a range of other, wonderful associations. He also made a few quick sketches of an image that came to mind as he worked on the list. The image was of a long line of personnel carriers travelling along a road on its way to Camp Smitty, like some Crusading expeditionary force. During patrol and piquet duty, he and Jason had often spoken about this analogy and the way that Bush had so stupidly invoked it in his descriptions of the war; they resented the analogy, but also saw how, troublingly, it somehow made sense. He wished he had written down those conversations; there had no doubt been many good song lines in them. But they were moving further and further into the past, and their details were becoming more and more like the sounds making their way through Ormond's heat haze.

His backside was by now sweating against the cement, and the back of his neck was getting burnt. He put the notebook down and lit another Stuyvo. And then, finally, a sign of another life. Two young girls in bathers ran across the intersection just as Jason's blue Mazda turned into Chalmers Street from Jasper Road. He felt a kind of ecstasy at seeing the car, and jumped up from the cement, shoving his notebook and pen into his bag. It was quarter passed two. There were at least three hours left.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Shaune Lakin.