



Source: Bradley Brooks, AP, 'At a terrible cost, Iraq's violence drops sharply—then there's Iran', *The Age online*, 01/01/08.

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The text message with the prompt arrived very early in the morning, maybe 4am, I couldn't be sure, waking out of deep slumber and flipping on a light switch—not because I needed a light to read it but rather I needed the light to see the tiny buttons to unlock the keypad. It had bounced around the world before landing in the roaming phone's in-box, setting off the irritating ring tone I had mindlessly chosen in broad daylight, and which, though I could never hear on public transport in a busy city, now echoed through the dark, silent house. By the time I had finished fumbling and reading, the room was full of moths and insects, woken by the light and drawn in through the open windows and the soft warm air of what had been the hottest day of the old year. I flipped off the light and lay there in this landscape of my day-dreams, drifting away to other places and turns of phrase, substituting another world and a second life, though this first life already seemed like a dream world with its stillness and quiet disrupted only by birdsong, sweet and discordant; finches darting between the banksias and callistemons and magpies cackling in cypress pines at first light and the smell of the air and the earth and the vast black sky filled with stars you could see clearly all the way to the horizon.

Which set me thinking about horizons. A well-known writer had famously written:

Bush all round—bush with no horizon for the country is flat...You might walk for twenty miles along this track without being able to fix a point in your mind. (1)

But I think he had a thing about flatness and saw it where it didn't exist at all, wanting to flatten those landscapes of Christmas cards, for example responding directly with obvious substitutions to the undulation of Bret Harte's *Gabriel Conroy*:

Snow. Everywhere. As far as the eye could reach—fifty miles, looking southward from the highest peak. (2)

There is something about the horizon in all of this which seems to require invention—the line which must be drawn. A well-known painter makes it quite explicit:

It was alright while we were in sight of the Grampians and then suddenly (there) was this feeling that left nothing of the earth except a thin line. And while I was thinking about all these things it came, simply that if you imagined the land going vertically into the sky it would work. (3)

So maybe it's not the landscape so much as writers and artists talking to each other and projecting their desires to see things differently onto what's there in front of them.

Here I am for two more days in such a landscape of stories of the earth meeting the sky and yet another writer—in this case, the writer of the Great Australian Novel, newly released in a fresh edition—also finds it necessary to observe the nature of being surrounded—enveloped—by this space:

On all sides the eye can range, unhindered, to where the

vast earth meets the infinitely vaster sky. (4)

She does this at the end—at the point of burying her hero in a cemetery within sight and sound of the sea and though a grave-stone is erected, in time everyone who knew him moves on and the weeds grow over the grave, and it disappears, setting free his 'wayward, vagrant spirit'. In fact, a gravestone in the real cemetery still exists but now it identifies a man who was the father of a famous novelist, who never returned to this place. We search it out on visits to ancestors, whom no-one will remember because none are writers or artists but all merely lived lives in the middle of this storyspace, ending up here to forget their own origins in trauma and famine, displacing others in the process and dying. Their houses inside were like the repressive spaces of Joyce's *The Dead*, that story of the repression of the same memory and experience, referred to only in the title and last word, invoking Harte's Gabriel Conroy (the story's main character):

His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (5)

Sympathetic to Joyce's 'history is a nightmare I am trying to escape from', and in spite of my interest in the horizon, I am avoiding the horizontal identification of living relatives, in endless family trees which spread out in all directions, enveloping almost everyone, like one of those mosaics of photographs, used by commercial media in which you start with a familiar face and then you zoom out to other faces and finally to a map of Australia. I'm content with the vertical lines joining the earth and the sky, the straight lines separating the living and the dead and though this is where I begin, who knows where it will end?

But this is where the story ends for now, beaten by time, the elements and filial piety. When the prompt arrived, I imagined she had been out all night carousing, picking up the early edition on the way home and identifying the prompt before going to bed for the day. But perhaps it was merely the prompt which was out all night bouncing around between her, my phone company, the local carrier and me, before landing in a heap in the inbox, drunk and disheveled, after kissing endless strangers. Happy New Year!

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Helen Grace.

(1) Henry Lawson *The Drover's Wife* (1892)

(2) Bret Harte: Gabriel Conroy Episode 1, *Scribner's Monthly*, vol. 11, issue 1 (November 1875), p16

(3) Sidney Nolan to Sunday Reed, 4 May 1942, John and Sunday Reed Papers, State Library of Victoria

(4) Henry Handel Richardson (1930): *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (Penguin, 1982), p830

(5) James Joyce: 'The Dead' in *Dubliners* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1967), p256