

Story for performance #964
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Tags: [architecture](#), [home](#), [plants](#)

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The front verandah was wrapped in wooden shutters that made a cool antechamber to the cave of rooms where Miss J had lived for eighty years. The shutters protected her from the busy street. The first of their kind in the colony, they were a distant precursor of the now ubiquitous 'plantation shutters' and had earned a place on the heritage list. They were like a curtain across a stage and made Miss J into an actress when she stood out front expostulating to passers-by in a knitted cardigan and cap and stretchy leggings under a long full skirt—regardless of the season. Being hard of hearing, she spoke too loud, and people stopped to listen. Then she would go inside, disappearing from public knowledge. She was mostly private, lived always alone, never married, worked professionally until retiring age. She would go through her old stone cottage to the garden at the back that was her haven.

The trees had grown their fill: walnut, fig, peach, olive, lemon, some of them planted by her. Flowering shrubs and ground covers and clusters of pots: iris and agapanthus, salvia and geranium. Lawn curved around the beds under the trees. A garden shared with cats and birds, lizards, possums, snakes, butterflies. All those years she had tended it, digging, watering, clipping. Sometimes it had the look of a damp climate garden. Other times it acknowledged aridity with aloe and cactus. She weeded, bent double like a penknife, even in her eighties, to yank at the roots, as stringy and fibrous herself. With her elbows on her knees, she could rest her palms on the ground leaving no gap between upper body and firmly planted legs. Her garden was a place of mystery, concealed like a temple courtyard. Meanwhile the cars and buses passed out the front, and when she was in the mood she would socialize, mornings with the postman, afternoons with office workers striding back and forth. She gave her opinions forthrightly, excoriating, lamenting, cursing change. She boasted of the history she had seen, insisting any listeners pay heed.

Then a new townhouse was built next door, its high concrete wall casting an overbearing slab of shade over her garden. She had lost the fight against it as we discovered after we moved in. Without knowing it, I had come into her world as a spy, a watcher from above who could freely admire the well-tended greenery of a neighbour's garden. She hated being observed. Sometimes, remembering the invasion, she would look up and scowl. The perfectly established garden was her life's work. I had taken possession of it with my gaze.

I found out she had been secretary to the general manager of a large company. She was no pushover. Then one afternoon in September a storm came with a ferocious wind that blew down the cypress pine at

the front of her house, crushing the heritage verandah. Miss J lived frugally, according to her needs and habits. When the council told her that the verandah must be repaired in keeping with the original, largely at her cost, she would not play along. Instead the old arabesque iron roof was tied down with rope and the place made to look derelict. 'It should just be demolished,' one morning walker declared. In that battering of pride, Miss J's body and spirit must have suffered. She was dead a year later. Through the next summer her nephew and niece kept watch over the place from a distance. They lived interstate and the problem of their aunt's house was theirs now. People came in to water the garden and keep the grass green. Then the property went on the market. The condition of sale was that any buyer must restore the fallen verandah and heritage shutters. The façade must stay intact. But heritage did not extend to the larger envelope of the house. No value was given to the garden, nor to the memory of the person who had created and maintained it, inseparable from the house in her understanding. And no regard to the benefit a neighbour gets for free from a vision of delight.

The new owners were quick to adapt the site to their own conception. The second summer after Miss J's demise and the first summer after the sale of the property, the garden was removed. It was hot, hard work, neatly done in a matter of weeks. Loyal to Miss J's memory, the postman intruded at one point to photograph the old peach tree as it lay scattered across the ground in chainsaw chunks. A hundred growth rings ran under my fingers as I felt the cross-sectioned slabs of that rough warm wood. Then everything was taken away and the site was cleared. Let in for the first time in nearly a century, the harsh summer sun lit up the wall behind for all to see.

The earth is level now. The magpies are having a good time finding worms in the rich red soil. As the space is prepared for the next stage of construction, no trace of Miss J's rare old garden remains. It wasn't documented in any particular way before she died. Although I have the best view of it, I never took the time to record its details through the changing seasons. Perhaps I idly imagined that my love of it would bring about a stay of execution. I suppose I thought that the value I found in what Miss J had done in her long life-time would be recognized and save the garden. Now as the digging starts for the new foundations, it feels as if her grave is being turned. Her legacy floats on the air. If she could see, she would stand out in the street, in front of those heritage shutters, clench her fists and howl for all to hear.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nicholas Jose.