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in 2005 for Ann Shelton: *a kind of sleep*

# In The Valley Of The Shadow

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*I sleep in the Aro Valley.* The man I share a bed with is a light sleeper. The tick of an alarm clock keeps him awake, a light in another room, a dripping tap. He rests in a fragile membrane of sleep, and the night is full of barbs, prickling him awake. Unidentified sounds generate high drama that I can't understand. Everything loses its proportion in the scalelessness of the night. Unknown sounds are intruders, and must be eliminated. His 'what was that?' comes out with a tense vigilance.

I, on the other hand, feel safe. I sleep with the same sense of protection I had as a child, when my parents' voices would be audible from my darkened bedroom. I felt pleasantly held by the murmuring voices, the intermittent clinks of dishes in the kitchen, and the light slivers through the crack of the door which affirmed the warmth of hessian and panelled wood outside, and the golden echoey mood of the house.

In Vincent Ward's *Vigil 1984*, Ethan describes what he sees when he thinks of hawks. 'I see them diving out of the sun, so that their prey can't see them, and racing just above the ground without moving their wings.' 'Now there you are!' Birdy declares. 'What you see depends on who you are!'

How slender our shared experience can be. I may be a solid sleeper, but I have my own unease; a different 'what was that?' What was it when the candle went on in the middle of the night, or a cool breeze comes across my face when the window is closed? What was the invisible darkness in the corner? What is it when I notice a foreign warmth on my hand but don't notice when another person walks into the room? What are the interpretations of the endless detective-work needed for my body? What is the pain in my back, the fist in my solar plexus, the scored lines going back in my breasts, the waves of love and waves of dread; so much the same.

Are there guardian angels? I was sitting on the top level of St. Vincent's hospital. There were about 50 chairs crammed into this small room, which offered a windowed view onto the roof of this 60's style building. Pigeons used the balcony, maybe smokers. The spire of the church over the street poked up from behind the roof edge, as if it had come over to have a look.

The stress reduction clinic offered acupuncture and energy work. Participants would wait, seated and ears ready, looking out at the roof for the acupuncturists to come with their alcohol swabs and cellophane encased needles. There were also energy healing people who would operate around the person without touching them, seeming to push and extrude whatever invisible substance they were present to. Often they had the air of a conductor, their movements were short and choppy, like polishing or dusting, or more fluid, or still.

It was a hushed environment. They played CDs of ambient new age music with natural sounds like water running, unless the

harpist was there. The harpist was a blunt featured, masculine woman who sang like an angel. I don't think her songs had words. They were soothing and bell-like. They called to mind the music that would accompany the finding of an oasis in *Logan's Run*. I always tried to make eye contact with her as I got up to leave, to say thank you. She would nod and smile a tiny bit and always look slightly surprised.

At some point, sitting with my eyes closed, someone came up to me and gently put their hand on my head. A warm, electric fuzz seeped into it. They held their hands very even, not varying the position at all, although I felt waves humming differently into my body, trickling into different channels. I marvelled at the smoothly graduated power of the energy generated by such minimal intervention.

When they'd left, I sat for a while longer and then got up to thank the person and go. 'Were you working on me?' I asked the black pony-tailed healer I saw there every week. 'Do you know who was?' I asked when he said no. 'I don't think I saw anyone working on you', he said, 'It could have been me – I've been working with Egyptian energy rods and I can affect people up to twelve metres away'. In my own imagination it wasn't him or anyone there, but an Asian or Hispanic woman in a white nurse's uniform. Through the back of my head I had seen her white shoes.

There is a point in *Vigil* where something clicks. It is almost alchemical. Toss is inside the wrecked car assembling her makeshift shrine. The camera notices what she doesn't – a piece of hessian catches fire on the candle before it skims over her collection of pictures: St. George and the Dragon, the planet

Saturn and others redolent with mystical Christian iconography. She holds up a biblical illustration in which one victorious angel saturated with light, has slain and cast down another angel. The vanquished angel sprawls on the top of a seething pile of angel corpses. 'Hunter, Hawk-Man, I know who you are. The Devil's Angel. Ethan ... Ethan ...Ethan Ruir.' Toss says, as she places this light-soaked bird-man on top of a column of photographs descending from her father through her mother to her. With the transformative magic of her words and image alignments something is triggered or released. The sparks fly from the burning hessian and make a noise like tiny rockets, or air escaping out of a pressure cooker. It is as if an imp is angry. She wears a characteristic expression as she watches this – transfixed and uncomprehending.

Vincent Ward searched a long time to find the horseshoe-shaped valley in Taranaki that became the *Vigil* set: 'I remembered sitting in front of our gramophone listening to a recording of Charles Laughton describing in long, succulent sentences the extraordinary beauty of [the Chartres Cathedral] stained glass windows. The light and colours were exquisite as I anticipated, but more profound was the impact of the cathedral's acoustics, which were strongly reminiscent of those in my valley. Characteristically noises were soft and muted, but certain sounds became amplified, and those close by were extraordinarily clear, like drops of water falling into a still pool. This was how I wanted Toss to hear the world: muffled, unclear, then suddenly rent by the scream of a hawk or the thud of a knife into wood, sharp and lucid, reverberating down the valley like the echoes at Chartres.'<sup>1</sup>

'At the funeral, the priest talked about a valley...' Toss pesters her grandfather in the film. 'Where is the valley? *Where is it?!*' I feel a shared, faint hysteria.

In Jane Campion's movie *An Angel at My Table* 1990, the Janet Frame character is in solitary confinement. There is the glossy sound of pencil on paint as she scrawls in a hurry up the green wall. *The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want...* She writes like she is chewing the phrase up with her hand. She is not leaving a souvenir, but writing it to be able to read it, writing and reading simultaneously. *This* is a reason to write, I now see. Pull something out of you to look at it. When in The Valley.

After that I tried to ingrain that psalm in me, for a rainy day or perhaps for every day. I wrote it down over and over, thinking it would wear its tracks into me. It didn't take. Trying to write it down months later, I can recall laying down beside the calm waters, and can remember walking in the valley of the shadow of death. I know that he keepeth me something, and that he leadeth me – he *leadeth* me through the valley of the shadow of death. It comes in fits and starts but it's really no good. I won't remember it in an emergency, as the filmic Janet Frame did. If that is not there for me then what will be? 'You can feel the wind' someone said to me once, and that is true.

Ann sends me pictures of places. I pin *Theatre*, the image of the Valley to the wall. It looks like a set, with a flat of tussocky grass as stage and a backdrop of dark green bush. Light hits dark bush in a sheeny dusty way, the way it might hit silk or blonde hair. If I walked straight over the tussocky paddock towards that bush and

the vanishing point, I would find a little opening in the trees which would bend off to the left. A path may continue into the valley.

I pin its mirror underneath it, the edges not quite touching. The two together enact a repeat which makes the whole a pattern. Now it is a pattern it is different. I look at it differently. I keep my focus broadened and diffuse and seek its rules. Not 'what is it like in there?' anymore, but 'what does it do?'

It is a silk watermark kind of pattern. It echoes rhythmically around within its own closed circuit. A pocked central band is trimmed with a darker band on each side with an undulating pattern. The pattern recedes in the centre. It radiates in an outward direction in the central band, and flows and pours in the outward band. It plays in two tones which reverse – dark green with light green accents, and light green with dark green accents.

Where the symmetry becomes less intense, the attraction weakens. The two closest mirrored edges have the strongest attraction. The reflected clumps of grasses corresponding casually, at these edges become a cylindrical centrifuge, spinning magical etched out forms in space, like grass seen through cut crystal, or as if complex fractal patterns in the air are a glass through which you see the grass. Some other order of intricate symmetry has become visible. The patterning created at the centre has a dual nature, demonic and decorative at once.

The image singly presents a perspectival world which seems enchanting, but in a certain way comprehensible. The mirroring generates a pattern world in which different types of volume are indistinguishable. I wonder, is the pattern in the trees and grass, or

is it in the air between the camera and it. I can't tell, so the air and trees and grass become one. The grass might have been distorted by the air. This air can be bent and chipped and carved; this air is a material.

Double images mean your looking vacillates between two types of looking; the pattern type and the window view type. I am not able to settle into a perceptual mode. This mirroring takes the gravitational pull out of the strata. Which way to the centre of the earth? Up? No. Down? No. It is an ordering which I don't recognise. What kind of mutations would have to take place in me before I could inhabit it? I feel a hint of other orders beyond the grasp of the machine of my mind, but perhaps not beyond me.

When the storm comes, Toss tries to hold it in the ground, but the wind is too strong. The gale uproots the sapling she has planted. The tree comes up out of the earth and the sounds come in. They are alarming and splendrous, like female angels ascending, the tones of their voices twining together up and up. There is no ceiling to these noises, as there is no ceiling for the sapling, pulled into the sky root over branches. The ether is extruding this thing from the earth. There is no tension in the shot at all. The frame holds the flying tree in its centre as if a cage followed its captured bird as it flew, keeping it in the centre. The last we see of it, is its weird stubborn upside-downness, the branches spreading towards us on the ground as the roots tip up to the sky.

1 Vincent Ward 'Making Vigil' in *Edge of the Earth: Stories and Images from the Antipodes*, Heinemann Reed, Auckland 1990, p. 71-72.

