

Prelude: Ignis Fatuus

Upstairs in my brain, there lives this kind of cut snake

virus in its doll's house. Little stars shining over the moonscape garden twinkle endlessly in a crisp sky. The crazy virus just sits there on the couch and keeps a good old qui vive out the window for intruders. It ignores all of the eviction notices stacked on the door. The virus thinks it is the only pure full-blood virus left in the land. Everything else is just half-caste. Worth nothing! Not even a property owner. Hell yes! it thinks, worse than the swarms of rednecks hanging around the neighbourhood. Hard to believe a brain could get sucked into vomiting bad history over the beautiful sunburnt plains.

Inside the doll's house the virus manufactures really dangerous ideas as arsenal, and if it sees a white flag unfurling, it fires missiles from a bazooka through the window into the flat, space, field or whatever else you want to call life. The really worrying thing about missile-launching fenestrae is what will be left standing in the end, and which splattering of truths running around in my head about a story about a swan with a bone will last on this ground.

So my brain is as stuffed as some old broken-down Commodore you see left dumped in the bush. But I manage. I stumble around

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through the rubble. See! There I go – zigzagging like a snake over hot tarmac through the endless traffic. Here I am – ducking for cover from screeching helicopters flying around the massive fireplume storms. And then, I recognise a voice droning from far away, and coming closer.

Oblivia! The old swan woman's ghost voice jumps right out of the ground in front of me, even though she has been dead for years. White woman still yelling out that name! Where's that little Aboriginal kid I found? No name. Mudunyi? Oblivion Ethyl(ene) officially. She asks: What are you doing girl? I never taught you to go around looking like that. Her hard eyes look me up and down. The skin and bone. My hair cut clean to the scalp with a knife. I am burnt the same colour as the ground. She takes in the view of the burnt earth, and says, I never expected you to come back here. The ghost says she still recognises the child she had once pulled from the bowels of an old eucalyptus tree that had looked as though it could have been a thousand years old. But this is no place for ghosts that don't belong here, and the virus barks continuously, as though he was some kind of watchdog barking, Oooba, booblah, booblah! The old woman's ghost is as spooked as a frightened cat in flight by the virus's sick laughter carrying across the charred landscape. It frightens the living daylights out of her, although she still manages to say, I know who you are, before swiftly backing off across the landscape until she disappears over the horizon.

If you want to extract a virus like this from your head – you can't come to the door of its little old-fashion prairie house with passé kinds of thinking, because the little king will not answer someone knocking, will not come out of the door to glare into the sunlight, won't talk about anything in level terms, or jump around

to appease you like some Chubby Checker impersonator bent over backwards under a limbo stick. Nor will it offer any hospitality – swart summers or not – no matter how much knocking, trick-ort

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treating, ceremonial presents, or tantrums about why the door was kept closed.

I can prove that I have this virus. I have kept the bit of crumpled up paper, the proper results of medical tests completed by top doctors of the scientific world. They claimed I had a remarkable brain. Bush doctors, some of the best in the world, said this kind of virus wasn't any miracle; it was just one of those poor lost assimilated spirits that thought about things that had originated somewhere else on the planet and got bogged in my brain. Just like assimilation of the grog or flagon, or just any kamukamu, which was not theirs to cure.

The virus was nostalgia for foreign things, they said, or what the French say, *nostalgie de la boue*; a sickness developed from channelling every scrap of energy towards an imaginary, ideal world with songs of solidarity, like *We Shall Overcome*. My virus sings with a special slow drawling voice, like an Australian with closed door syndrome – just singing its heart out about cricket or football without a piece of thought, like Harry Belafonte's *Banana Boat Song* – Day oh! Oh! Day a day oh! Daylight come and I want to go home, etc. Well! There was nothing wrong with that. It could sing its homesick head off to the universe of viruses living in the polluted microscopic cities of the backwater swamp etched in my brain.

The extreme loser, not happy with having trapped itself in my brain, was acting like it had driven a brand new Ferrari into the biggest slum of a dirty desert in one of the loneliest places in the world, and there had to fit high culture into a hovel. The doctors said it was a remarkable thing, an absolute miracle that nobody else had ended up with a virus like this freak lost in my head, after testing thousands of fundamentalists of one kind or another. They called medical testing a waste of public money and drank polluted swamp water to prove it.

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Having learnt how to escape the reality about this place, I have created illusionary ancient homelands to encroach on and destroy the wide-open vista of the virus's real-estate. The prairie house is now surrounded with mountainous foreign countries that dwarf the plains and flatlands in their shadows, and between the mountains, there are deserts where a million thirsty people have travelled, and to the coastlines, seas that are stirred by King Kong waves that are like monsters roaring at the front door. Without meeting any resistance whatsoever, I have become a gypsy, addicted to journeys into these distant illusionary homelands, to try to lure the virus hidden somewhere in its own crowded globe to open the door. This is where it begins as far as I am concerned. This is the quest to regain sovereignty over my own brain.

So I lie in the brochures that I send the virus, saying I must come and visit, saying that I have blood ties in homelands to die for in the continents across the world of my imagination, and a family tree growing in dreams of distant lands. The fact, I say, is that my homeland has grown into such a big spread that it has become a nightmare of constant journeying further and further out. I am like Santa Claus riding the skies in one single mungamba night to reach umpteen addresses, and why? Just to deliver the good of myself, whether the receiver wants it or not. The virus was quite interested in my idea of belonging everywhere, and asked why I

took these journeys that bring in more places to crowd up its little world. I say that I begin locally, navigating yellow-watered floods that grow into even greater inland sea-crossings, to reach a rich alluvial plain that feeds shaded gardens, where the people who live there say they do not know me and ask why have I come. Always, I move on.

And so I travel, fired up with the fuel of inquiry about what it means to have a homeland, to travel further into strange and

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unknown lands covered with holy dust and orchards of precious small, sun-ripened fruit that are sometimes half-destroyed by war, and at other times, slapped hard in the face by famine. But still, even when I bring gifts to their door, the local people, although hungry and tired, find the courage to reject a person from their paradise no matter how far they have travelled, simply for not belonging.

I tell the virus that I have felt more at home with the cool air flowing on my face from a wild Whistling Swan's easy wings sweeping over snow-capped mountains in its grand migration across continents, than in those vast ghostly terrains of indescribable beauty that have given me no joy. I must continue on, to reach that one last place in a tinder-dry nimbus where I once felt a sense of belonging.

The virus thinks I want what it wants – to hide in a dark corner of its lolly pink bed, where it dreams, in my diseased mind.