

new writing



homelessness | felt

CATHERINE ROBINSON

— SEEING

The food van was a kind of troubling tour bus propelling me through the interstices of inner-city Sydney. That first night, I remember my eyes straining to make out (giant moths?) cocooned from the prying yellow headlights of the van as it swung around into Tom Uren Square. The shock of it: at least fifty people blanketed under the railway overpass and building awnings. A couple's socked feet tangled out from under a cardboard screen. Broken chairs leaned in conversationally, a double bed base slept three and a watchful blue heeler. A mantel-piece arranged with trinkets and pictures nestled in a section of indented bricking. 'At least I can smoke in bed,' he said, propped up on one elbow, and momentarily in the flare of his rollie I saw the speaker's face more clearly.

My fieldwork was fraught with such invasions of privacy, such scenic exposure to the everyday rituals of sleeping, eating, washing, to the everyday bodily intimacies of lives lived hard in the generalised spaces of park edges, backstreets, drop-in centres and refuges. I got to know the angular shapes of the rough sleeping blokes, their skin sighing away from their unshaven cheek bones with too much cask, their walking stiff and slow from joints familiar with concrete, their hair manky and clumped. I got to know the hopeful confidence of young people on methadone, the overbright eyes and skin filmic with sweat, the tank tops in the winter city-wind. I became familiar with the baleful gaze of white eyes, the irises just a pin prick on their horizon, and with skin erupting in protest at the strange chemicals pulsing beneath, the punctured veins retreating deeper and deeper.

In an interview once, a boy proffered his arm slit neatly three times lengthways from inner elbow to wrist for my consideration. Slot-cars, I thought, feeling a blackness creeping forwards across my scalp into my eyes. I'd talked to myself a lot about this moment—I had a habit of fainting under extreme emotional stress and hadn't made it through one dissection in science. The advice had been to clench my bum muscles 'like you're holding something in' and remember to breathe. It was the shameful thought of letting this boy down that kept me upright though. Come hell or high water, I wasn't going to leave him sitting there next to the tape recorder with his arm stapled up like a school project while I faded out on the floor.

It was the clumps of dark hair on the gym-turned-drop-in-centre floor which finally did me in though—I didn't faint, but I went home with my stomach lodged in the back of my throat and my bum muscles clamped. I'd calmly watched the restraint of a psychotic young man by a squad of four plainclothes police. I'd admired the routinised precision of it, the two women making the first smiling contact, the two men following with batons held behind and all wearing runners just in case. The boy's bellowing echoed through the gym while we all stood fixated in a far corner next to the out-of-date computers only good for Tetris games. The clumps of his hair, left thickly on the gym floor still wavy, too succinctly summarised the struggle.

— TASTING

'I'm schizophrenic with homicidal tendencies,' said Mary by way of introduction as she thumped down into the arm chair next to me. 'Don't worry,' she grinned confidently, slapping me sharply and hard across the thigh, 'I'm not going to kill *you*.' My interview with Mary took place in the sun on the back verandah of a women's boarding house in inner-city Brisbane. Mary had made me a coffee, and I was comforted by the predictable taste: a kind of chemical taste that only coffee from catering-sized tins could produce. I loved the stuff; it made me feel at home. Every service I'd ever done fieldwork in had a tin of Caterer's Blend and it's what I'd always spooned out into the polystyrene cups at the food van, along with at least three or four sugars every time. I noted that people living homeless, especially the young ones, always had at least three sugars. The familiar smell of hot Caterer's Blend splashed comfortingly into my jeans following Mary's jolting slap, and I knew it would dry quickly in the full November sun.

Caterer's Blend and orange drink mix, two-minute noodles, cereal, strange packets of savoury and sweet snack-foods I'd never ever see in the supermarket and frozen pies. These were the donated culinary staples of the homelessness sector, it seemed. Once I encountered Turkish delight, offered from a large cardboard box before I said my piece at a National Homeless Person's Week event. I motioned a chewing action, tried to swallow the rock-hard piece whole, then fought to suppress my gagging reflex as it hovered resistantly in the back of my

throat. There was also the time at a drop-in meals service when the women at my table forgave my red-faced abstinence from the hospital-mash by sending me forth to claim my unwanted main and dessert portions so they could be packaged in discrete takeaway containers produced from oversized bags and eaten later.

For the food van service there was a portable speciality—donated hot dogs in donated long, soft, white rolls. Early on I used to pompously grate to myself about the insubstantiality of this food. Of course, I hadn't thought back then about the broken teeth, infected gums and sensitive stomachs of many rough sleepers which wouldn't handle anything substantial or about just how many tiding-over meals could be stretched from a couple of Eskies of boiling water with hotdogs bobbing, from the garbage bags of bread seconds, from the litres of sauce. I used to sort the rolls in the church car park, pressing for the soft crusts through my plastic food-preparation gloves.

Like those running food vans or drop-in services, staff in the refuges also did their best to cook good meals within the limits of budgets and donations. I would sometimes eat an evening meal with the staff and clients of a youth refuge and got used to the eye-rolling, vomiting and slurping noises or loud burps with which dares were issued for confrontations with staff by the young residents. I'd note the white-faced new arrivals and the heavy drug-users grimly pushing and piling their meal around the plate, before finally sticking to the orange drink mix. Every so often I'd freeze when a fork was thrown down and a raised, darkened voice would ask, 'What is this *shit*?' and the inevitable argument between client, worker, and other clients ensued. No one wanted reminding that they were eating charity.

— TOUCHING

I had my hand on Jeannie's throat; her hand was on mine guiding it over the tissue that tangled lumpily across her windpipe. Jeannie was nodding slowly as my eyes widened; she was satisfied with my response. 'Pretty bad, ay?' She'd had me in a guilty laughter fit a moment earlier, describing outrageously a mad moment in which she lay in the dark across a highway, waiting for a truck to end her gambling habit and tortured family relations, only to change her mind at the last minute. As she sat up, however, she was struck by a car and 'flown into the gutter'. An emergency tracheotomy and three years later, I was feeling the scars push up between my fingers. 'True story, I swear on a stack of bibles.' She kept my hand there too long, our faces close—I could smell the Holiday 50s—and the laughter quelled suddenly in the stuffy interview room while the mini-disc whirred on recording the exchange as a silence. At the end of the interview, she walked me back downstairs to the refuge common area with her arm slung protectively around my shoulders, little affectionate squeezes punctuating her continued conversation, me knowing the scar tissue would be sucking in and out as she talked.

It was often like this. The immediate intensity and intimacy afforded between strangers in the research interview extended to an assumed bodily familiarity too. An embrace became the final full stop of many interviews. Over and over I would stand clutched in an interview room and this kind of grasping was fiercely delivered and returned. There seemed a compulsion in it, a kind of automated need for physical connection and comfort. This was the final muted discussion, an exchange that could only occur, it seemed, between bodies pressed together; an exchange that would cover our thanks and our acknowledgement that something had passed between us, and would not again.

It grieved me to deny this last moment in my interviews with men, to deny that holding together of the two sides of a wound. As it was, each interview would end with a comma. We'd squeeze each other's hands often, trying to communicate that last finalising acknowledgement, but I never felt it was enough for me or for them. Occasionally a sexually explicit invitation or compliment would be offered by men, I felt, to point to the fierce intimacy reached in interviewing, but also to break it, to signal a return to the rules of normal interaction under which I was fair game again. Such comments would set in train the separation process, the jokes whilst packing up recording equipment, and the hollow promise, 'See you round.'

— SMELLING

Sorrow reeks, I came to realise. Rusty piss and arm-pit stink wafted in cloying, depressive clouds. The tang of the sweats, alcohol, cigarettes, sex-work and squats couldn't be easily sloughed off skin or material. It permeated bodies, clothing and refuge furniture alike. It collected under the nails, caught between teeth, drew hair flatly to the scalp, patterned dark patches through layers of clothing. One of Ruby's charges was for stealing toothpaste and deodorant from a 'dumb cunt' chemist and Ben simply stopped going to work once he started to smell himself. It was hard to keep on top of things, he said, sleeping as he did in at his local cricket oval in the sports equipment shed.

For the first hour of opening the youth drop-in staff would be busy handing out shavers, guest soaps and deodorants from the stores out the back. There was a prized, festive newness about these packaged products, the luxurious promise of once-off use. Soon a steamy short-lived cleanliness would warm the place up as the young people cycled through the showers and threw happy cupfuls of generic laundry powder into the wash with their stripped-off clothes. There were even some dressing gowns, donated by a local hotel, for until the dryer came to a stop. Once I bowled up to closed doors and a notice about a staff training session, and as I stood in momentary disappointment I wondered how many had held on to the thought of a hot shower through the night.

At the drop-in for women sex-workers the place would fill with the fug of too much shampoo, deodorant and perfume while the washing machine strained to churn the sex from

the previous night's outfits. In the bathroom there was good-quality liquid hand wash in a dispenser and, in the vanity, a range of body lotions, hair sprays, trial perfume sachets and lip gloss alongside the boxes of tampons, lube and condoms. Once, the staff organised for an aromatherapist to give the women clients free foot massages. Vella chain smoked erratically, scattering ash across herself while the therapist did her best with geranium and lavender on old feet, cracked and deformed from too many decades in six-inch heels.

— LISTENING

I was at a men's refuge and on my wrist was a discrete alarm designed like a watch—I simply had to press it and a siren would go off over the PA, the worker had said. 'And leave the door ajar, some of our men don't like closed-in spaces. They can get violent and some of them aren't *well*, as I'm sure you're aware.' This wrist-alarm was much better than the ungainly thing I'd used while volunteering as an outreach worker. I'd had to go out round the Cross talking to young female sex-workers with what seemed like a cereal box slung round my neck, the pull-down cord which set the alarm off dangling out the front of my tee-shirt like a life-jacket inflation device.

At one of the youth refuges, I had to shout through some of the security doors to identify who was there because of the limited camera coverage. And once, in another refuge, I sat in the Perspex office watching a locked-out unwanted visitor raging silently in black and white in front of the laneway surveillance camera while a decision about whether or not to call the police was made. And when Shaunie got put out for three days after workers smelled the dope smoke in his refuge room for the third time, he smashed his fist into the wall as he stormed out of the office; I heard it from the kitchen and saw the indentations in the plaster later. His rage floated up from the courtyard: 'Yous can lick my salty balls, ya pack of dirty cunts!'

I didn't have an alarm though when I needed one of course, when I needed a team of rescuers to break me out of the interview room and release me into fresh air and full sun. She'd limped in so slowly, this tiny girl. She chose a straight-backed office chair rather than one of the arm chairs I had arranged around the coffee table, adjusting her neck and shoulders and leg as she sat. She didn't give me much eye contact and we'd barely started when she quite abruptly asked me, painfully, to please lower your voice and please turn the lights out because they hurt my eyes. I felt stinging then the loudness of my whole body—its health, its physical power, its intentness. I'd overlooked this, not restrained it enough; I saw clearly how I'd tried too hard and was thankful for her suggestion of the darkness which smoothed things over.

I listened to this girl in the interview room dusk matching up her injured body with the multiple assaults, with being pushed from a balcony, with being put through the front

windscreen of a car. She shifted around awkwardly on the chair and described being kept in a locked room. Her father, her boyfriends, a taxi driver morphed in and out of alcohol binges and pill overdoses and the whispering which said, use a knife. In the dimmed light, her quiet voice came towards me across the coffee table, her little shaky pauses, her held down sobs. I hear her now that gentle, gentle girl who brought me streaming to my knees, empty, savaged, hopeless.

CATHERINE **ROBINSON** has been involved in the field of homelessness research since 1999. Her research has focused on developing an understanding of how the traumas of bodily, psychological, geographical and social displacement associated with homelessness are experienced and survived. Catherine took up a full-time lecturing post in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at UTS in 2003, where she now teaches in the areas of social theory, qualitative research methods, and philosophy of social research. <c.robinson@uts.edu.au>
