

ADELE DUMONT

*No Man is an Island*

Despite the bush circling us, and the cockatoos and kookaburras that lift out of it, this place doesn't always feel like part of Australia. It's an in-between place. This side of the fenceline has been razed, probably back when the military base was constructed. But for some reason a few lonely gums have been left. At this time of day, before the heat settles, some older men use their shade to study, painstakingly copying out the alphabet in neat rows. When an officer walks past, they break their concentration and call out a cheerful 'good morning!', or try to imitate our greetings: 'Good day, how is going?' Some others walk back and forth along the main 'road' like swimmers doing their early morning laps. They have small branches in hand, which every few steps they use to swat at the gathering flies.

Beyond the trees is the internet room. Snaking away from the small window where people make their bookings, the internet line periodically breaks into commotion, and then quiets, with calls of 'one line, one line'. This is the busiest part of the camp at this hour; most people are still sleeping and many will not wake until after midday, though they will still pronounce 'good morning' to anyone they pass.

The entire design on the camp feels haphazard, as though the buildings have been dropped from above with a sense of carelessness that belies the strict order that the straight lines of the neat fences lay claim to. Dormitories are wedged between classrooms, a barber shop nestles between a sewing room and a gym. The flow of irregular maritime arrivals to Australian waters is unpredictable, so that an unexpected influx can mean a classroom here is turned into a dormitory overnight.

All the buildings in Curtin are of the same design: pallid-coloured, metal, box-like structures that are supposed to be cyclone proof. At school we used to call these kinds of buildings 'demountables' but here we call them 'dongas'. I follow the narrow path running between two of the larger ones, which are

currently the mosques.

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Although they were technically already in Australia, the men's knowledge of my culture was limited to footage caught on 'Sunrise', some (generally American) movies, and conversations with random officers. They were intensely curious to learn everything about all that lay beyond the fence line: How much is one kilo of lamb? How much is a pair of shoes? Which city has the best job prospects for tailors, for mechanics, for shoemakers, for shepherds? They would ask me to teach them about 'Australian culture'. But I didn't really know what to tell them about – unlike a lot of other cultures that came to mind, I didn't really know what was distinct about mine: there weren't any national dishes, any traditional dancing or folk costumes that I could describe. There was Vegemite, but this was not eaten by everyone, and not even a dish. There were kangaroos – but most Australians had dogs or cats or guinea pigs, and only saw kangaroos if they happened to go camping. I didn't know the rules to cricket or rugby, I never used 'Aussie' slang, and I didn't drink beer. I associated music like 'Waltzing Matilda' with a crude kind of patriotism. I didn't really feel an allegiance to our flag, or to our national anthem.

Australian indigenous culture was of course something more distinct and maybe easier to describe, at least in a superficial way – its instruments, paintings, languages, weapons, stories, its long long history. But this was not my culture, nor was it mainstream Australian culture. In any case I was uncomfortable talking about dark people playing clapsticks around a campfire and hunting with spears when I knew that most of our indigenous population now lived in urban areas.

I thought maybe it was more truthful to convey something of the Australian ethos of mateship, but this was hardly a uniquely Australian quality. How could I describe Enmore, the place where I lived in Sydney? In a strip of road not much wider than this camp, there were African hair salons, Thai restaurants, gothic clothing shops, a methadone clinic, a vegan butcher, an anarchist cafe, an adult book shop. I could always say this was a very multicultural nation. But this I knew the men would have found unsatisfactory. Mostly I just let them ask me questions, and attempted to answer as best I can:

'My teacher, in Australia, it is really true men are number four?'

'Men are number four? How do you mean?'

'Number one: women, number two: childrens, number three: animals, number four: men', he recites like a mantra.

I laugh – 'where did you hear that?'

‘One officer say for me. And also it is true that a woman in your culture can divorce her husband and then he will have to pay her money forever? And that he will have to give her everything he owns?’

‘Well, it’s a bit more complicated than that. It depends on lots of different things. If they have children together, then maybe he will have to pay some money to look after the children, yes.’

‘Teacher, what say the boys and girls when they meet each other the first time, what questions they going to ask the first time?’

I smile at their questions, at having to explain things that I have never really had to explain before. I suppose that until coming to Curtin, I had thought of ‘culture’ as something that as Australians, we didn’t really ‘have’ much of. When I thought about ‘multiculturalism’ I saw other people bringing their own cultures here – their own religions, foods, languages – but I struggled to define what my own culture was. But the more I talked to the men, the more I came to see that culture was something much deeper, colouring all my assumptions, defining what I considered ‘normal’.

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Before beginning work in detention, I assumed that communication with detained asylum seekers would be awkward and strained, that the men would be guarded, and that I wouldn’t know how to act or what to say. But I felt instinctively close to the men from the very start. I think it was maybe this closeness that made me half-forget sometimes, that we had come from very different worlds. It was only when they talked about their lives before Curtin, that I remembered that our lives until this point had taken very different paths, and that this place, which we now shared, was just a juncture.

‘Some of my friends they were working in shops making shoes, same as me. Some army people they came and started fighting them, and killed all of them in the same place’.

‘And why were they targeted, was it because they were Hazara?’

‘Only for this reason, because they were Hazara. If I stay in my own country, in Afghanistan, or if I go to my neighbour country, Pakistan, it is a very bad situation, very sad situation, I can’t describe it’.

‘So if you’re a Hazara in Pakistan what kind of life do you have?’

‘People there think their life is a kind of punishment. They say we are not living life, they say we are facing a punishment’.

‘But a punishment without any reason.’

‘Yes, with no reason. Just we are Hazara. In Quetta, that is the city where I lived, the government

tries to cover our voice. It is a big problem for us, because we are in the minority. The government attacks us. For example three months ago, there was a school, a kindergarten, and someone came there and blasted himself. He killed eighteen people in the same place and one hundred people they were injured – I think five, six children, they were three years and four years, they were in the same place and so many women they were also killed. It is just because it is the government policy, it is not something that is accident.’

I have of course heard these kinds of descriptions before in TV news reports. But there those stories are always framed by headlines and buffered by weather forecasts and sports updates. How different it is to hear the words not delivered from an autocue, but raw, and stumbling, and sad.

‘When we are in Hazaratown<sup>1</sup> we think we are safe. But the mothers always tell the children, you shouldn’t go far. Even the young men, their family always encourages them to not go far from Hazaratown, in any circumstances.’

‘So you stay in that area, and what happens if you go outside that area?’

I sense that the answers to all my questions are very obvious to him; this is his world. But he is patient with me:

‘They will kill us. They killed many straight away, straight away, for nothing. It is very dangerous, we are unsafe everywhere, just we are safe at home. If we go for example to a shop outside Hazaratown they will kill us. I want to describe you one time what happened. In the local bus there were many people, a group stopped the bus, checked the IDs to see who were Hazara, and killed all of them.’

‘Did they kill them in the bus?’

‘No, they took them outside and they killed them with Kalashnikov. And they were filming everything. When they kill people they put on Youtube, on Facebook, because they want to make us scared, we should stay in the same place, we shouldn’t go out. Three days ago they had a bomb blast in the university bus, they killed three girls from the college. They make us... I don’t know what say in English... they make us... scared.’

‘Yeah... I don’t know... scared is probably the best word.’

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Sometimes after work I like to go out onto the mudflats that surround the town. In the Wet, the mud is

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1 The Hazaras are an ethnic minority who are persecuted in their homeland, Afghanistan. Many have historically sought refuge in neighbouring Pakistan. Hazaratown is the part of Quetta, Pakistan where the Hazara community is concentrated.

swampy in parts, sludgy underfoot, but now it is a parched moonscape – cracked and calloused and hard enough to be driven on. I am sitting taking in the sunset when a car appears, its windscreen missing, crammed full of people and looking like it's about to conk out. It pulls up and then one man staggers over and the others soon join him in a circle around me, each holding a can of Emu Export. The man introduces his sister to me, a woman with glazed eyes who looks younger than me. She lowers herself clumsily onto the ground, clearly pregnant: 'You from round 'ere?'. I tell them I'm living in Derby and I'm working at the detention centre. 'The what?' 'Detention centre it's called, like a prison.' The woman places one hand on her stomach and with the other raises the can to her mouth. I can't help telling her, 'you know, that's not so good for the little one, be careful'. By way of explanation she tells me her husband has just been locked up.

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Some refugee advocates have stressed the sameness of asylum seekers to 'us'. And of course it is true that asylum seekers are ultimately ordinary people, dreaming of simple things: a safe home, a steady job so they can make enough money to feed their family, a school for their kids to go to. It is understandable that advocates have tended to highlight our commonality and downplay our differences, given that so much polemic has been construed in such starkly dichotomous terms: legal versus illegal; law abiding tax paying Australian citizen versus uninvited queue jumping potentially dangerous alien. In this context, difference seems to be something inherently negative, widening the gap between 'us and 'them'.

However the closer I became to the men, the more I had the feeling that by insisting that they were 'just like us', we were also denying something. I could see plainly that there were elements of my culture that, even with a lot of explaining, were alien to them. Equally I grew increasingly irritated when I read things (however well-meaning) imploring me to 'put yourself in their shoes' or 'imagine your life was being threatened'. The fact was, no matter how hard I tried, the experiences of the men surrounding me were simply beyond the realm of my imagination. It seemed to me silly to pretend otherwise. I had not had a particularly privileged upbringing, but I had never ever in my life felt unsafe. Danger to me was a rough surf, a bushfire, someone driving over the speed limit. It was not something I could imagine living with.

For me the men's strangeness and difference and foreignness was not something we should be reluctant to acknowledge, at the risk of jeopardising one side of the 'debate'. Yes, we were all human, but I wondered why we needed to hide all that was different about us. The gaps that lay between us were to my mind endlessly fascinating and worthy of attention. Diversity was supposed to be

something that Australians celebrated, and I think embracing diversity meant much more than tasting exotic cuisines, or listening to new styles of music. It meant seeing cultural difference as something that we could not just acknowledge, or tolerate, or accommodate, but rather, something that we could learn from.

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This land is desert country, but not barren. It is the land of boabs – the oldest ones, swollen and gnarled, can be five hundred years of age. Sometimes I used to reflect on what we had done to this square of land in half the lifetime of one of these trees. Through this same sky, spears had sailed towards wallabies, and Boeing planes had been launched, and now others were landing, bringing people who had journeyed here over mountains and across seas. Dreamtime stories say that the boab trees were once too proud and so were punished by being replanted upside down. Now, uprooted, they reach towards the sky.