

VANESSA BERRY

*Gentle Strength*

(with Anne Dufourmantelle's *Power of Gentleness*)

*"... because [gentleness] has a transformative ability over things and beings, it is a power."*

**Slow Blink**

Beside the house, between the wall and the fence, is an untended stretch of yard a couple of metres across. Here the bins are stowed and fallen leaves mound up without being raked away. I sit cross-legged on the ground like a child might, ignoring the dampness of the earth beneath me and the crawling insects of the leaf litter. Meeting the gaze of the lean and nervous black cat sitting by the fence, I let my eyelids fall closed.

The cat has never lived under the care of humans and has little trust for our kind. Months before, neighbours came crashing through the yard with a wire contraption designed to trap feral cats. Stand aside, they said, we know what we are doing. But the trap remained empty and they soon took it off elsewhere.

Once the trap was removed the cat returned. Whenever I went out into the yard she would appear suddenly, as if conjured. If I approached her she disappeared just as readily. She would only stay if I paid her no attention, her clear green eyes following me as if I was a puzzle she was trying to figure out. Eventually I ignored her enough that she didn't scarper if I sat quietly across from her.

The leaves underneath me, the earthy air cool in my lungs. Eyes shut, a pause. A split-second memory, a line from a meditation, so long ago I had listened to it on a Walkman. A woman with a low stern velvet voice commanding me to "look into the darkness behind the closed eyes." Her voice the length of a slow blink.

Opening them again, I meet the cat's clear green eyes. My blink gestures gentleness, no threat. I make no claim on her but that we are here together.

*"... it reigns in us through tiny fragments of time."*

## Dust

Inside the newsagency there is dust over everything. No one comes in search of the foolscap loose leaf refills or receipt books that wait on the shelves. From the ceiling inflatable red Lotto balls are suspended, bleached to orange from years of sunlight. The magazine racks are empty, but in one corner there is a stand of greeting cards, and above these a row of ribbon rosettes hang on hooks pushed into the artificial wood panelling.

On the facade a painted sign advertises Stationery, Matchbox Cars, Cold Drinks, Video Hire and Australia Post. This entices only those who need to pick up a parcel, and me, who is soothed by redundant office supplies.

It is tempting to think that this is a place in which nothing changes, but the dust tells me otherwise. Time is particulate, it accumulates and disperses. This shop is a moment in which pads of typewriter carbons, lettering stencils, and microcassettes for answering machines might be useful. I hover my hand over a packet of Letraset, deciding whether it is worth disturbing the dust. It isn't the soft, pinkish-grey of household dust, but the gritty, car-exhaust stuff from the highway outside. Sunlight flares beyond the door, where the traffic surges onwards, towards the city or deeper into the suburbs.

I decide against the Letraset and reach for the pad of typewriter carbons instead. Under the dust the cover is patterned in thick bands of colour with the caption "Ultrafilm—for immediate smudge-proof copies." The carbons inside are thin with a silvery backing and have a weird, milk-bottle-lolly smell when I flip through them.

At the counter I push the carbons under the perspex screen that shields the man behind it from me. He has calmly watched me examine the shelves, although surely the store would have few people browsing. The thick coating of dust on the cover of the pad surprises him. As he cleans it off with a paper towel he asks how many sheets from it I would like to buy. The whole thing, I say.

*"... it gives space to things and removes the weight of shadows."*

## Wind

The grass tickles my neck as I lie on the side of the hill, watching the movement of the clouds. The strong afternoon breeze flows over me, combing the grass, getting between the leaves to make them whisper, smoothing my face with a swift touch.

The wind carries the thump of wood being chopped from down near the house in the valley below. I had slipped away without telling anyone but my friends know I like to go walking alone, over the dry creek with its tumbled stones, following the climbing path. Up here the house is tucked out of sight. The wind skims over the valley treetops to meet the hillside and I listen to its gusts swell and recede.

*What kind of weather troubles you?* This question a memory some decades old, of when I had sat on a plastic chair in a basement homeopathy clinic, contemplating a photocopied quiz. The room gurgled with the sound of the building's plumbing as I gave my answers. The questions enquired about such topics as my fears and the temperature of water I most preferred. For the weather question there was a list of suggestions: hot, dry, wet, stormy. I drew in an additional box, wrote "windy" next to it, and ticked it.

Which tincture was I given that day? Did it help me? I don't recall. All that remains with me is the gurgling basement and the memory of betraying the wind. I didn't like how wind pulls at my hair and cuts through my coat and agitates my spirits. But mostly I was being contrary, wanting to exceed the prescriptions of the questionnaire. Every kind of weather troubled me, then.

I am not quite that same person. Up on the hillside I lie in the grass and the wind moves over me. I let it take the heat from my cheeks and skim the thoughts from my head, so I'm nothing but surface.

*“... it only reveals itself after the fact, in the impression it leaves upon sleep.”*

## Dream

In the kitchen I start to tell Lucy about the dream I had the night before. I've barely mentioned the word “dream” when she stops me.

“Three sentence limit,” she says. That’s all she will listen to of people’s dreams, she explains. They are inscrutable and rarely interesting.

I use up my three sentences quickly. The city in my dream, which I understood as Sydney but was nothing like the actual city, immediately lost its strangeness once I started to describe it. Tamed by language and logic, the dream became a flat sequence of details. Lucy listens politely as she pours tea from the pot.

What I don't tell her was that I've been to this city before, in other dreams. Its buildings are made of a soft brown crumbling stone the texture of biscuits. In the photography district I live in an apartment above a store with a faded sign for Kodak on the facade. My room has high ceilings and a bed with a cast iron frame and creaking springs, and a long thin corner window serves me a slice of grey sky and rooftops.

Little happens in the dreams set here; their time is slow motion. I'm in the room, looking out at the view of the city. Or I'm sitting at the edge of the bed, listening to the trams scraping by outside. There's no way to describe how these dreams are more than this, and why they stay with me long after I have them, apart from their gentleness.

*"It is the secret lining ..."*

## Carrying

Occasionally a writer turns my thinking right over; their words inflect my days, linger behind my own sentences. When I found Anne Dufourmantelle's *Power of Gentleness* I had been searching for a philosophy of the gentle. It was a quality I felt an affinity with, and I often craved it, and saw it lacking where it could enact a necessary care.

On my first reading all I knew about Anne Dufourmantelle was that she was a French philosopher and psychoanalyst. Curious about an author who would argue that gentleness is essential, I searched her name. A list of news articles appeared, reporting the story of her recent death.

She had died trying to save two children who had been swimming at a beach in the south of France. They came into trouble in rough water and she had swum out to help them. Although the children were rescued, Dufourmantelle was pulled away from shore by a current and did not survive. The news articles all repeated the same quote—"being alive is a risk"—from her *In Praise of Risk*, and suggested that her philosophy was the source of her bravery and selflessness.

It was a shock that she was suddenly gone, especially as she wrote of gentleness as such a force of life and continuation. I began to carry the book with me like a talisman. I read it in waiting rooms, on train journeys, opened it for a paragraph or two while stopped at the traffic lights. It was as familiar an object as my wallet or keys, the slim paperback with a cover illustration of a young woman carrying a bull on her shoulder. In whiskery pencil lines and grey shading, the bull rests on the woman like a sack or an enormous pillow, its legs hanging down as she holds its weight.

Sometimes the bull is particularly heavy. I feel it pushing down on my shoulder and it takes all of my strength to keep my balance. Other times the bull is lighter, more like a bundle of vapour than an animal twice my size. I need only hold it softly as we move onwards together.

## WORK CITED

Anne Dufourmantelle. *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living*. Translated by Katherine Payne and Vincent Sallé. Fordham UP, 2018.