

JOHANNA ELLERSDORFER

Suspended Loop

Most nights I walk with E along one of two paths that we have dubbed, “the loop” and “the extended loop.” Both routes start and end at home, circling through the inner north back streets of Braddon and Turner, brushing past Civic and then back up along Lonsdale Street and through Haig Park. The extended loop pushes out into O’Connor, but only just, and then converges with the regular loop down towards ANU. We leave the house, just as it is getting dark, stepping out onto the grey tiles that run alongside the apartment complex. Then, we walk out onto the dimly lit footpath, dodging low hanging branches and spider webs, making our way towards Northbourne Avenue, where the tree density thins and the apartment blocks reach higher towards the sky. Tram bells ring in the distance and the lights are bright and cold, flashing at the pedestrian crossing, and we wait to cross the road.

Before the pandemic I lived in Sydney. In the space of a week I lost my job, and the course I was doing at university shifted entirely online. My five-person share house swelled with two extra bodies, partners of two housemates who needed somewhere to stay. E lives in Canberra and didn’t want to be alone, so I left my room, tidied and neat, thinking in a few weeks things would be back to normal, and came down to Canberra to isolate with her. The walks started as a kind of daily exercise. They were a way of marking time in the long expanse of days that began to blend into each other, as I was suddenly free from the need to go to work each day, with only three online classes to demarcate my week. In her essay “Time,” Jenny Erpenbeck writes that “time has the power to separate us, not only from others but also from ourselves,” and I wonder if in those first few weeks, as we prowled the back streets, getting lost and then finding our way, if I was trying to find a new way of being, new routines to cling to, and something that I could control, as I felt so achingly and suddenly removed from the person I had been only a month before.

Across Northbourne Avenue and into Turner, the streetlights dim again. For almost an entire block we walk alongside empty land bordered by long tufts of unmown grass peeking through a wire fence. The footpath feels gravelly underfoot and this bare expanse feels implausible somehow, as though something this empty and wild shouldn’t be just off one of Canberra’s main thoroughfares. Across another side street the landscape feels more suburban again as we walk past a row of single storey homes with lush gardens that grow out onto the footpath. Then there is a slight incline followed by a bending hill that curves around a block of pink apartments, lit by warm yellow lamps affixed to the outside walls of the building. They form small orange halos on the building’s facade. A thin strand of spiderweb catches the light. I touch E’s arm and we both duck under it, trying to prevent the sticky wisps of web from attaching to our clothes.

In the weeks before the pandemic, when talk of the virus felt more distant than the dwindling plumes of bushfire smoke engulfing the east coast, my aunt, who lives in Austria, messaged to say their borders were closed to Italy. I wrote back saying, “I can’t imagine they’ll do that here,” and for a few weeks as things got progressively worse in both countries, we texted a lot, at all times of day, sharing memes and updates on what we were and weren’t

allowed to do. As friends across Europe started to go into lockdown, I began talking to them more than I had in years. We shared regular text messages and Skype calls sitting down to drink tea together from our respective bedrooms, our experiences eerily similar despite being on opposite sides of the world. We would say to each other, “I can’t believe this is happening” over and over again, suddenly blindsided, mourning plans we could no longer make. Then I would get ready for bed, and they would go about their days, adjusting to a suspended existence between what we knew and a future we couldn’t quite imagine. At a certain point I realised I no longer thought of myself as being ten hours ahead. Time was simply layered and compressed, and with nowhere to go clock time didn’t seem to matter.

At Canberra Museum and Art Gallery there is an installation of clocks by the artist Anna Madeleine Raupach titled *Unequal Hours*. The clock faces hang in the space, white and numberless with black hands. Each clock marks different measures of time, from the average menstrual cycle to the global rate of deforestation and the migratory patterns of bogong moths. The hands are all connected to each other with colourful ribbons that brush against the floor and gently vibrate in sympathy with the ticking of the clock mechanisms. Different measures of time physically interact with each other, and the space seems to pulsate with a quiet energy, but in a single viewing of a few minutes or so, it barely seems to change. Over longer periods of time—hours or days—the clock hands twist the ribbons around each other, looping and knotting to form unexpected patterns. In an interview with the *Canberra Times*, Raupach explained that in the first few weeks of the installation, she had to go in and unknot some of the more tightly wound ribbons on the faster moving clocks, so that they could keep running, keep marking time.

When I read this, I wondered if the pandemic had knotted us in time, halting that normal sense of progress. The future no longer feels like something to strive towards as quickly as possible lest time pass us by. When clock towers were first built in Europe in the early Renaissance period, they didn’t have a clock face or dials. Rather, time was kept by bells striking at intermittent intervals, and the relationship with time was suggestive rather than absolute. Of course, time has continued to move forward during the pandemic, but to me it has felt oddly still. This feeling has been described by anthropologist Jane Guyer as enforced presentism. It describes this sense of being stuck in the present, unable to plan ahead, that has been widely experienced during the pandemic. We are unable to imagine a future because the present is so utterly unrecognisable. Walking in loops remains the most consistent activity of my day. Life is less certain, but I am slowly seeing that as a source of excitement, rather than racing the clock to an arbitrary finish line.

We turn onto Barry Drive and walk towards the iridescent glow of the city. Over Sullivan’s Creek we dodge a cyclist on the shared path. For the first time on the loop we start to see other people walking, students from ANU in small groups wandering back towards the student accommodation, public servants still dressed for the office. Lonsdale Street is bright and loud. The pubs and bars now seem to be open every night and as the pedestrian light begins to flash, E grabs my hand and we run to cross the road. At the end of Lonsdale Street, we cross over into Haig Park, a long but shallow expanse that cuts through Turner and Braddon, planted with evenly spaced trees. A short pebblecrete path runs from one side to the other and is well lit by flood lights. Beyond them, the park is almost pitch dark, and E and I squint into the shadows, trying to make out if they are people or trees. Then we cross the road out of the park, back into the dimly lit suburbs, and walk the remaining few hundred metres home.