

In Footscray is Pleasure

Zoe Simbolon

THE SULTRY AIR of Northern Sumatra blows through an open window. There's no air conditioner in this rickety old van. It's been modified to fit as many people as possible, so another row of seats has been added to the original three. To ensure the most economical of bus rides, men hang off the rooftop, whilst I sit inside, squished like a human sized sardine. As the vehicle undulates around the mountainside, hairpin turns are more frequent, flopping us from side to side like contemporary dancers. We're somewhere between the city and the jungle.

For a moment, I consider the thought that an accident might happen on this bus ride. I'm not alone, but I sit in silence, in a meditative stance, like I'm ready to pray. Then I remember, I'm not religious. To begin to pray in such a dire time would surely be in vain. The dicey turns don't stop me from enjoying the scenery. Palm trees line parts of the road, dapples of light shine onto the van. Alongside the track stand cattle, grazing.

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Every day when I move from east to west, my train rolls past a building sized deity, bowing over bare concrete. A Buddhist temple, in its half-finished glory, is reserved to the bank of the Maribyrnong, festooned with construction gear. I can't help but feel disappointed for South Kensington as the train—once again—fails to stop at its platform, moving onward to Footscray.

Footscray station used to be an uncomplicated affair to navigate. Now it's like an old school friend who never calls, that changes unnecessarily each time you come in contact, continually under construction in want of a better self.

These days, when I leave the station I avert my eyes and cover my ears with headphones to avoid the coos of charity fundraisers. *People aren't rich here*, I think, but I'd never say that to them. *Go somewhere where the locals can afford to give to your charity*. I absolve the fact I am from a suburb where people can afford to give.

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When I was a kid, people would ask, "Where does your father live?" questioning whether, after my parents' divorce, he'd gone back to Indonesia. I'd say, "In the city," hoping the questioner would assume somewhere cosmopolitan, where fresh faced families lived. It's about as comfortable for a child to see people on the street blissed out and asking for money, as it is to admit their father lives in a seedy part of the city.

Collingwood in the mid-nineties was a far cry from the cultivated persona it now propagates. I remember my mum using a steering wheel lock on our car when parked on Smith Street, across from the Nike factory. Our cream station wagon, with the odd beige door, didn't have central locking—this was the last line of defence against coat hangers.

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The regular fixture of old Asian men are seated outside a coffee shop that shoulders Footscray market. They drink drip coffee sweetened with condensed milk and smoke cigarettes. Seasons ago, in the torrid weather in Hoi An, my mum and I drank the same coffee. Motorbikes sped past. One bike held two passengers. The man on the back clasped a glass window in the air, liable to break if any change in traffic occurred.

At the table, we talked about condensed milk. When she was young and travelling in Indonesia, my mum had seen women dilute condensed milk with water to feed to their babies instead of using their own milk. The thought behind this being, it was better for their children because it was Western.

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Last year, a cafe, that can only be described as urban, opened opposite Footscray station. Out of place, it eyeballs Subway and the worn Olympia jam donut van, trudging into the future in its sedate state.

We finish our coffees and pace the sidewalk; a river runs parallel to the produce section of the market where I stand. Piled high like dishes in a sink, sit lumps of beef. The innards of unrecognisable animals lie prostrate, whilst live chickens sit under a metal cage, not dissimilar to a cloche. Every piece of meat emits a different and rank smell. These scents tangle in the air, pinging me towards thoughts of home.

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Footscray is loud and barks orders at all who enter, and at times, it sends heady and mysterious odours in flight. I like to think these are smells that I haven't encountered since being overseas, but really it's just the smell of pork. When I walk about, I can pick out the disorientated from the locals with a knowing look at their pork roll wrappers. I look for Nhu Lan wrappers.

An ad for an SBS cooking show tells me *banh mi* is; 'French bread, Vietnamese filling,' and this quote swells inside my mind, speaking for something much bigger than sustenance. My face, bequest upon me by my Australian mum and Indonesian father was once questioned at this bakery, "You Thai?" I explain and feel less of an outsider.

Every time I order a baguette, a lady will yell at me, "You want chilli?!" I always state in the affirmative but sometimes it's accidentally left off. I should learn; my eyes easily spring wells of salt from too much fire on my tongue. I learnt to defy my father by piling sambal all over my food, not on the side of my plate like he'd suggest. My mouth would quietly smoulder and there would be, as always around him, my stifled tears.

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I sit in the front yard of my grandparents' house in Medan, staring at a young pineapple tree, barely able to keep its fruit off the ground. As always, my Aunt Annie cups her hand around raw rice and eats one grain at a time. She asks me about Australia, questioning what it looks like, if there are places as packed and frenzied as Medan or Jakarta, in Melbourne.

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There used to be a sign at the station stating, 'Footscray'. With an absent 's', two words hung in the air, one reading 'cray'. 'Cray' as in crazy, is both a Kanye West lyric and portent of the radical changes of a suburb. Not too far a stretch from the Freudian slip of the moniker, 'Footscary'. Crazy and scary. In Footscray is pleasure.