



Essay:
Boom!
Excursions in
fantasy land
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Image: Margaret, Stickybricks dance night from the 'Tenant by tenant' series /
Source: www.keithsaundersphotography.com

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Midland: Recently I watched a small group of drunks on the pavement across from the Midland library swinging punches at each other. There were four of them standing in a circle, each giving voice to slurred phrases that I understood to be insults only because of the gruff musicality with which they flew from the mouth. One, a fellow in his sixties and too well-dressed to be a street-dweller, drew my attention. He had a certain dignity about him. I admired him as he stood tall, tilted his chin and challenged the man opposite. But then he swung his fist in a fast, wide arc, and the passionate force of it was all too much for him. He lost his balance and landed with a loud slap, flat on the grey cement pavement. The punch hadn't come within an inch of the other man, who stood tottering and looking as if he might fall over of his own accord at any moment. I wanted to laugh at this impromptu, weekday-afternoon slapstick: the grand, proud swing of the empty punch, the comical self-inflicted damage done by the fall. Part of me wanted to stay and watch the rest of the show, but my initial smile passed quickly.

There was suddenly something about the scene that was not at all funny. I bowed my head to climb into the car. As I started the engine, I took one last look at my man, still spreadeagled on the ground and moaning. No doubt he'd hurt himself. All that pride and energy in the swing, I thought, and for what? The street rang out with the futility of it.

In the recent Australian feature film *Last Train to Freo*, adapted from a play by Reg Cribb, two thugs get on a train at Midland, Perth's easternmost suburban rail terminus, and travel the full length of the line to Fremantle. As they do so, they leave their own welfare-class people behind and travel towards the city, and then beyond it, into the elite western suburbs where they plan to run amok.

"Not much dog shit around Midland anymore," says Trev, the tall thug, at the beginning of the film.

"No," replies his buddy Steve.

"The locals are pretty good at pickin' up after their dogs now."

"Yeah."

"Not much dog shit around Perth anymore really."

"No, not like the old days."

As a resident of Western Australia for the last ten years, I have dwelt mainly in the far eastern urban fringes of the state's sprawling capital – hence my local commercial centre is Midland. If you know Sydney, you know the term "Westie" and you are familiar with the idea that the city spreads from

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rich to poor, roughly speaking, along a route more or less east to west, from coastal plain to foothills. Here in Perth it's the same, though the compass points are reversed. The rich have water views along the western coastline, while the poor peg out land further inland, where the heat intensifies and the Fremantle Doctor fails to reach.

Midland interests me in part because of its huge number of welfare-class residents – Steve and Trev are recognisable types – but also because of the astronomical rate of development that has hit the area during the last few years. I didn't live here during "the old days", but one doesn't need to have been around for long to have witnessed radical change. Trev is right about the dog shit disappearing. At the moment, the whole commercial centre of the town is one vast construction site. The state government set up the Midland Redevelopment Authority (MRA) several years ago to steer in the changes and to excite investors. "Be a part of the New Midland," advise huge MRA billboards all over town. The place is being reimagined, reinvigorated. In commercial and residential real estate terms, it is positively booming. And yet a huge number of people you pass on the streets and in the shopping centres are recognisably poor, uneducated, many of them drug-fucked, unwell, aimless.

"I know, in this boom-time Perth," says Reg Cribb when I meet him for coffee in a neighbouring suburb, "in this boom-time stupor that we're in – our football team has won and our house prices have gone up, doubled – that there are real problems under that, which people in Perth are not interested in looking at."

Cribb's script takes a ruthlessly realist approach to representing the "white trash" element of Midland through the two main characters, Trev and Steve – one an ex-con and the other his young sidekick. The film makes obvious the growing divide between one class and another, and focuses pointedly on the ongoing problem of violence on Perth trains. While *Last Train to Freo* has been well received on the east coast and overseas, reviews published in Western Australia have been cold, even scathing. It seems reviewers in the West are offended that the City of Light might be represented in this way.

"People are not interested in seeing anything that challenges them at the moment, socially, politically," says Cribb. "One of the reasons I wanted to write [the script] was [because] I thought why, in the luckiest city in the world, are there so many unhappy people? I feel it. Steve says, in his monologue, he says everyone's richer, everyone's more beautiful, and you read the magazines and the paper and you think, I'm not feeling that way. I'm supposed to be, everyone's telling me I should be, but I'm not feeling that way. So, there's a lot of discontent around, you know, in the boom period. That interests me. And as soon as you say, in the paper, money doesn't make you happy, everyone goes 'Oh, come on, what do you know?' Or, 'Don't tell me that. Don't tell me I can't go to Morley Shopping Centre and be happy. I got nowhere else to go.'"

A few blocks from the Midland library, my stepson lives with his girlfriend in a rented red-brick 3x1. They've just had a baby, my first grandchild – well, my de facto step-grandchild, to be precise.

"People use the term *non-biological*," these days, says a friend of mine. "It's just easier."

As I pull up in Leon's driveway to see baby Anna for the first time, I'm thinking about John Howard's \$3,000 baby bonus, and what it means for a young couple like Leon and Sam, living entirely on welfare. As it turns out, their eyes are wide with the possibilities. Three thousand dollars is a great deal of money to a family of four living off six hundred dollars a week in outer suburban boomtime Perth. They mention digital cameras and MP3 players and possibly a second-hand car. I think about the cost of running a car – petrol, registration, maintenance – but say nothing, not wanting to rain on the parade.

Anna is sleepy, slightly jaundiced, only three days old. She is the perfect newborn, utterly awe-inspiring, even to a non-biological grandmother. Her eyes are closed, but her tiny face is expressive, attuned to every small noise or bodily sensation. She seems completely content in my arms. In the weeks leading up to Anna's birth, I have been worried for her. Her father, twenty-six, is a recovering addict. He was bright once. As we sit in the toy-strewn lounge room on a hand-me-down sofa, the television delivers brightly coloured light and noise to an otherwise dark room.

Sam seems remarkably confident and happy, even just a few days after the birth of her second child. She tells me she arrived at Swan Districts Hospital at nine on Friday morning, gave birth to the baby at midday, and was home again by five o'clock. She's very young. I wonder how many more babies are to come, and whether Leon can straighten himself out for them. If not ...?

The newborn's face flinches slightly as her toddler half-brother slams a toy truck down sharply on the coffee table.

"She can hear you," I say to Jess, the toddler.

Anna's tiny lips purse and she screws up her face, as if to begin to cry for her mother, but then the idea is gone, quickly as it came, the face dreamily blank once more.

As I prepare to leave, the community nurse arrives, her bag bulging with the tools of her trade. She set up her scales in the middle of the coffee table and proceeds to place the naked Anna on the metal plate atop some light fabric.

"She's lost 600 grams," the nurse announces to two new parents whose faces seem suddenly stern and serious.

"Why's that?" says Leon.

"No, it's fine," says the nurse, reassuringly. "It's good. She's doing really well."

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I wave goodbye, smiling at Leon who is still looking at the baby. There's hope for Leon in my heart, for the first time in a long time.

Port Hedland: I'm sitting in a hire car overlooking the coast at Port Hedland, some 1,800 kilometres north of Perth. This is the Pilbara, the so-called economic heart of Australia. Some years ago, I lived in this area and the place still captures my imagination. My second novel is set here, hence the reconnaissance mission. I am seeking details.

It is particularly obvious to me in a mining town like this, however, just how odd the pursuit of the arts can seem in the face of other, more immediately prosperous ambitions. Here I am, driving around in a hired Toyota, pulling up at the scene of a fictional murder and noting the colour of the dirt, the direction of the breeze, the scent of the wind. Or I'm trailing a character who seems to literally materialise as I traipse on foot along the Spinifex tracks past the edge of town at dawn or at dusk, trying to commit to memory the way the sky changes colour, how the light floods in, while dusty work vehicles, their tyres purring on the hot black streets, carry tired workers to and from their latest shift.

I visit the tourist information centre at least every second day, mainly to look up the common and botanical names of local flora and fauna in a glossy picture book I don't want to have to carry back with me on the plane. It is July, and peak season for the grey nomads – relaxed couples who travel with camping trailers, caravans or Winnebagoes that crowd the parking bays in the main street. Their conversation with the tourism officer is always the same: they are looking for accommodation, and the woman at the desk is phoning one place after another on their behalf. The answer is always in the negative. She relays this with a shake of the head during her mostly monosyllabic dialogue with the person at the other end of the phone line.

"What are we going to have to do?" says a man in long socks and sandals, his shorts hitched high on his bulging belly. "Camp in the gutter?"

"I'm sorry, sir, there's just nothing."

"The only thing I can suggest is to keep driving. Are you heading south?"

"Yes."

"You could try the caravan park at Karratha."

I feel sorry for the nomads. Everybody knows the caravan parks in Karratha are overflowing. There are whole families camped there for months on end. Last week's paper had a photograph of a boilermaker and his wife with two kids under five. They'd been living in a tent for more than a year. As a sub-contractor, there was no employer-sponsored accommodation for them in the town, and they couldn't afford to pay the going rate of six hundred dollars a week to rent a house. The couple were talking of moving back down to Perth.

"How far is Karratha?" the retiree at the counter wants to know.

“Two hundred kilometres.”

Theirs is a variation of the same conversation I hear each afternoon as I sit in the foyer at my motel and check my email, while the receptionist answers one phone call after another.

“No, I’m sorry, we’ve got nothing.”

“Have you tried Best Western? Nothing there?”

“No, I’m sorry. We’re fully booked.”

In the early evening, I sit gratefully in my lack-lustre motel room, filling in the details of a scene for the new novel. The scene is set on the edge of the coast a little north of town, where two lovers get to know each other better amidst a broad, unfamiliar landscape. I have one or two paragraphs still to develop, but my concentration is waning. I am distracted by the booming voice of a contractor who has arrived to take up residency in the room next door. He’s just flown in from Darwin and, for the last forty minutes, he’s been walking up and down in his room, and sometimes out along the landing, bellowing instructions into the mouthpiece of his mobile phone.

“If my voice is funny tomorrow morning, you’ll know it’s because I’ve got me nuts in a vice,” he’d confided to the couple of workers who’d dropped him off earlier.

“Ah, you’ll be right, mate. It’ll be fine,” said one of the men.

“I hope so, mate.”

Since then, the man from Darwin has been spending money like it’s going out of fashion. He’s just ordered at least half a dozen big pieces of machinery over the phone – dozers and excavators and trucks – spending tens of thousands of dollars at a time.

“Listen,” he is saying into the mobile, “I think what we’re going to have to do is send someone out to the site to service them every coupla months. I think that might be the best way to do it. Save us fart-arsing around with having to bring ‘em back into town.”

I feel suddenly inadequate. It is as if my project is worthless, as if my reason for being – a writer of fiction *for chrissake* – is just a mere speck of fly shit on the exhaust pipe of one of these great yellow Tonka toys the mining boys bash about up here. But then, I wonder, whose fantasy is this? It strikes me that the boys themselves are living in one great big imaginary sandpit. Sure, there’s money to be made, but when the bubble bursts, there’ll be one hell of an empty landscape – far emptier than it was when *wadjilas* first arrived.

On the plane home, I sit next to a mine worker a few years younger than me. He’s fine looking, in a boyish way, and shares a joke periodically with one of his workmates, who sits in the row in front of us. He and I smile at each other, but stop short of conversation. Once the plane reaches full

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height, we both lean back in our chairs and sleep. When I open my eyes, half an hour from Perth, the young miner is looking at me.

"How'd you sleep?" he asks.

We get to talking and I discover he works at a remote mine several hundred kilometres north-east of Hedland, eight days out of fourteen. He does rolling ten-hour shifts. And now he has six days off and he's flying all the way to Melbourne just to go to a party, his younger brother's twenty-first. The young mechanic has worked at various mine sites in the north-west and in the territory as well, he says, but he hasn't stayed anywhere longer than eighteen months.

"It's pretty rough and ready out at the mine," he says. "No telephones, no television."

No women, I think, but keep that to myself.

"I don't know how you can stand it."

"It's good money."

This is true. When he'd first asked me about my work, I told him I was a lecturer at the university. He'd looked embarrassed when I returned the question.

"Oh," he'd muttered, "I'm just a mechanic."

But the fact is that as a mechanic he earns something like \$85,000 a year, which is more than I earn, and more than most Australians earn.

"What do you do with it all?" I ask him.

"Hey?"

"What do you spend all your money on? All that time out at the mine with nothing to do ..."

"Just ..." he falters, "well, just party, really. On my days off, I come into town, and live it up a bit with me mates."

Fly-in, fly-out: My sister's house in McMasters Street, Victoria Park is a two-bedroom double-brick place built almost a hundred years ago on a massive block. "The plan is to put two or three townhouses at the back," Lola explained when she and the family first moved in a year ago, "and then we'll fix up the main house for ourselves with a little courtyard garden at the front." At the moment, though, the backyard is an expansive dustbowl, good bathing for the family's fifteen-year-old dog, who looks decidedly miserable most of the time. The townhouse plan has not yet got to paper, mainly because a huge amount of money is tied up in a second investment property fully mortgaged up in Broome.

In the meantime, Lola makes me tea in the tiny crumbling kitchen, tacked on to the back of the house some decades ago and untouched since, bar a paint job or three.

"Do you want to go halves in a muffin?"

This is inner-suburban living, Perth style. Victoria Park is walking distance across the causeway bridge to the CBD and the home of the former premier, Geoff Gallup. According to the City of Perth website, the city is officially “Boom Capital of Australia”. The council boasts that “Western Australia’s domestic economy grew at 14 per cent in the June quarter 2006, higher than China’s growth rate of 11.3 per cent and higher than Australia’s GDP growth of 2.3 per cent”. Indeed, Perth has become one of the major centres for the energy and resources industry in the Asia Pacific region. But it is also the capital of a kind of single-parent household difficult to measure using official figures.

Lola’s house is one such example: it is a house run almost entirely by women. My brother-in-law works several thousand kilometres to the north and flies home for the weekend once every three or four weeks. Lola’s son, aged twenty, also works away, in his case via a fly-in, fly-out arrangement at a mine north of Kalgoorlie. Lola and her teenage daughter have the house to themselves most of the time, which also means that they have more than the lion’s share of the household chores and responsibilities.

Men involved in the mining industry – particularly those employed using a fly-in, fly-out rostering practice – are earning huge money, working long shifts. Out at the mines, the men are fully catered for with three meals a day and serviced accommodation. Most of the time, however, their accommodation is a single bed in a donga the size of a wardrobe. According to the latest figures, West Australian men now earn an average of \$1,168 a week, which is \$63 above the national average. Meanwhile, women in this state have a full-time wage which is \$56 below the national average, and those with husbands working away carry the added burden of living day to day as a virtual single parent.

What interests me about the households of these long-distance commuters, however, is not so much the economics of their situation, but the emotional and psychological effects of these strange living arrangements. The dynamics of such households vary enormously, depending on whether the patriarch is present, absent, expected any moment, or just on his way out the door. Children demonstrate a kind of Jekyll and Hyde behaviour accordingly. But it is not just the women and children who are affected in the long term. Nicholas Keown, a researcher at the University of Western Australia’s Rural Clinical School, conducted a study on the health of male workers in the goldfields region and is quoted in *Australian Mining* in August 2006 as being particularly alarmed about psychological problems among male mine workers. According to Keown, more than one in three long-distance-commute workers show symptoms of minor psychiatric problems such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse-related disorders or chronic fatigue. And who wouldn’t? These are people working ten or twelve-hour revolving shifts, living in austere accommodation amongst an almost purely male population, and so far away from family and friends that their mobile phone goes completely out of range. It sounds like a kind of Siberian hard-labour camp.

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I am not trying to suggest that anybody is being subjected to such situations against their will – there are, after all, vast quantities of money to be made. Last week, at my local supermarket, I listened to two mothers of young children in the line in front of me comparing notes about having their husbands working up north.

“Well, it’s just the way it is, I suppose,” one of them concluded. “We just have to get used to it.”

“Yeah, that’s it,” said the other.

“Everybody knows somebody in exactly the same situation.”

“Absolutely.”

I heard a story recently from a working mother who lives in one of Perth’s new housing estates. Sue was running late to pick up her kids from school and, as she reversed out of her driveway, she noticed a little boy of around three standing alone on the neighbour’s verge. The boy looked lost and confused. Sue stopped the car and got out to ask the child if he was okay. The boy was too shy to speak. Sue didn’t know what to do. She didn’t recognise the boy’s face as a local to the area and she was conscious that she was already running late, but it didn’t feel right to leave the child. After a few minutes of one-way conversation, she coaxed the boy into her car, and drove on up the street. She thought perhaps he belonged to a neighbour she didn’t know, a little further along, and that if she drove slowly he might recognise a house. Hers is a long, winding street, house after brand new house – all neat as pins – and as Sue drove along, she realised that she didn’t really know any of the people in her own street.

The front yards were uniformly devoid of life. Everybody, including herself, was usually so busy with being at work, or getting on with day-to-day commitments, ferrying kids here and there, that they didn’t have time to recognise each other, never mind stop and speak. The little boy sat beside her in the front passenger seat looking puzzled. She drove on, and wondered what people might think of her, having just put this child in her car and driven off with him. Suddenly the child’s eyes widened, and Sue thought perhaps he recognised where he was. There was a particular house. She pulled up the car, and followed as the boy sped around the side through an open gate, and into a backyard where a woman was crouching down, her back curved over her gardening. The boy’s mother said: “Oh, he was just here with me a minute ago,” and Sue said: “Well, actually, that can’t be right, because he’s been with me for more than twenty minutes and it must have taken him quite some time to walk all the way up to my house.”

Afterwards, it was not the boy having wandered off or the mother’s negligence that bothered Sue. Rather, it was the sense of isolation – the terrible knowledge that she lived in a community of strangers. Here they all were, working madly to pay off new mortgages, and feeling safe in the knowledge that the price of real estate was increasing, they were investing in their

future, and yet ... this is the street where she lives. Every house harbours a hard-working couple, and she doesn't know any of them. They don't know her. Where is the security in that? And what are they worth to any of us, really, she thought – these sparkling, half-million-dollar houses? What do they actually cost?

Coda – Midland: It's a weekday morning and I am back at my local shire library in Midland. The building is a double-storey affair with a modest fiction collection and a predictably motley set of regulars who the librarians know by name and who spend long periods reading newspapers, or conducting loud nonsensical conversations with themselves as they circle the stacks, passing the time, passing the time. Public libraries suit me well, and I have done some of my best writing in them, the background muttering of slightly lost souls, coupled with the occasional high-pitched squeal of a toddler letting loose a tantrum in the children's section, permits me to observe and eavesdrop in between productive periods of hush. Today, however, I am not here to write, or even to research, so much as to get out of the house.

Writing fiction is rarely a full-time job for me. In a good week, I can manage to spend three solid half-days on my latest work-in-progress and occasionally, thanks to a break in the university calendar or an official writer's residency, I manage a stretch of a few intense weeks at a time. But lately, I have been making use of a grant from the Australia Council, and have the rare gift of a three-month stretch with which to make good headway on a new book. Yet I find myself edgy, distracted, even distraught. After a month, I am wishing for any other kind of job – any other occupation at all. I am too much inside my own head.

This morning in the library, I am caught up – as usual – in daydreams. I am like a ghost, living half inside an unwritten draft of something only half-imagined. The other half is lodged here, in the real physical world of the fluorescent air-conditioned library building with its gaudy colour-coded stickers on the spines of every book. I am on the second floor and I can't find what I'm looking for in the non-fiction section; I'm not sure the thing I am looking for even exists. As I return to the stairs to make my way back to the ground floor, I pass a man in a creased blue rayon suit seated at one of the desks. I had seen him out on the street a little earlier, and something about the way he walked with his arms hanging stiffly at his sides and his gaze glued to the pavement made his destitution obvious, even at some distance. Now, in the library, I trace a path around him as if to give him a wide berth. But then I notice that he is busily writing something with a blunt pencil on the back of a recycled sheet of A4 paper. I change direction, walk a little closer and glance over his shoulder at the untidy scrawl.

It begins: "In London, the ...

I am strangely reassured to find that there is some kind of narrative going on inside his head, as there is so frequently in mine, something calling out to

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be extracted, expressed, something not completely obvious to the outside world. But then there is the man's body language, the way he hunches forward over the page, one hand fingering, obsessively, the fabric of his blue rayon pocket. Perhaps I have been too quick to romanticise. Perhaps his scrawl is the merely the product of a serious delusion. He probably thinks he actually is in London. "Yes," I think, "that's right; he's in fantasy land, whereas the rest of us are ... what?"

We all have the need to invest in some kind of narrative, some kind of future scenario, collective or solitary. How else could we get out of bed in the morning?

Later I pass the man in the blue suit again, as I drive home. I wonder what he is thinking. He is in the thick of The New Midland, heading for a small public park opposite the old Midland primary school (now fully renovated and home to the Australian Opera Studio). Perhaps "park" is not the appropriate term for this small square – "green space" might be better. The word "park" implies somewhere people might want to play, or sit, or meet. But this new zone, the centrepiece of which is a bright new metal sculpture – an abstract human body with an expressionless face – has no seats for passers-by, and the trees have been planted in raised beds full of ground cover and wood-chip so that the grassed area in the centre harbours no shade. This is a space designed to be looked at, not used. The drunks, the homeless, the drug-fucked are not welcome here. Which begs the question: if those left behind by the resources boom cannot dwell here, where can they dwell? After all, this particular suburb – as it is so clearly represented in Reg Cribb's *Last Train to Freo* – is already the end of the line.

Notes: For the sake of privacy, the names of several of the people mentioned in this essay have been changed. Donga is a colloquial West Australian term for the transportable accommodation frequently used as single men's quarters at remote mining sites. Most dongas fit the dimensions of a sea-container to be transported easily by truck. For more information on wages, see David Uren and Alana Buckley-Carr's article, "WA wages boom", *The Australian*, 19 May 2006. Nicholas Keown's research is quoted in "Health Crisis in Goldfields", www.ferret.com.au, 15 August 2006. ■

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