

Reality on Reality's Terms

By Greta Williams

Prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility.

Fumey, spiritous mists inhabit this place

Separated from my house by a row of headstones.

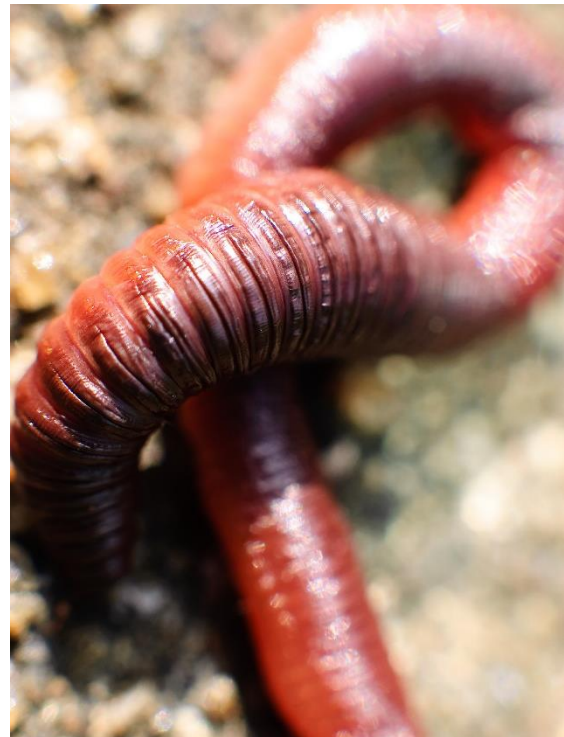
I simply cannot see where there is to get to.

Sylvia Plath, "The Moon and the Yew Tree"

At the beginning of this year, I moved from my parents' apartment to a shared semi-detached house in Carlton North. Carlton held no significance when we applied. Out of the four us, I am the only one from Melbourne. But on March 23 when our household, along with the entire country, went into Stage Three lockdown—allowed to leave only for groceries, exercise, work and care—the house and its surrounds became both a haven and an exercise yard.

As my office became my bedroom and my bedroom my world, I began to walk. I walked through Princess Park, through Carlton Gardens and up the Merri Creek Trail, before finally concentrating my tours on the Melbourne General Cemetery.

In the few months before moving to Carlton and lockdown, I had seen the cemetery twice daily from the tram during my morning commute to work, the headstones peeping through the window between gaps in the crowds. Yet on my



walks, I had carefully gone around it, not wanting to "disturb" anyone. Now in quarantine, and unable to be among those whom I knew and loved, these remnants of company are a natural compromise.

Opened in 1853, the Melbourne General Cemetery is home to 300,000. Unlike the grid of the surrounding streets, where you always know in which direction you are going, what lies ahead and where you are relative to everything else, the cemetery's paths lack an obvious design. Long arteries cut through but are not visible when you

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stand among the graves. A network of paths and open drains take you from one silent “suburb” to the next. Where you are headed is only to be determined by where you end up.

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As Australia is spared the worst, my household begins to talk of what it will be to return to normal, how we will feel once the lockdown is over.

Sitting around the dinner table with my three housemates for our new ritual of Friday night drinks, Shai, who likes to categorise things, asks, “What is the first thing you’ll do when things return to normal?”

A pause—“Touch someone,” Liv volunteers.

“Of course!” we all agree, and debate the question of who, and more importantly, what touching will feel like now.

In the first weeks of quarantine, our preoccupation was with returning to normal—to what had been reality. I once had partner who tried to meet reality with stoicism. When confronted by me, red-faced with tears of frustration, his empathy usually drained into the

aphorism “you’ve just got to take reality on reality’s terms.” The phrase made my blood boil.

Now, as I walk the cemetery, it could be inscribed on the stones in front of me: reality on reality’s terms.

In his book, *Darwin’s Worms*, psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, also known for his aphorisms, draws on Darwin and Freud to urge us to accept that we are not above nature but of nature, and like all beings, subject to the precariousness that the constant threat of death creates. We must, in other words, accept reality on reality’s terms, or live life grieving that which we cannot control.

When living through a pandemic, responding to the nature of these new terms is the difference between life and death. Collectively, we hope that those in charge will make the right decisions at the right time—be on the right side of adaptation. As individuals though, stuck at home for the sake of the collective, it is easy to feel the sense of one’s self as an autonomous decision-maker erode with each passing day. Manifesting your own destiny is, it seems, far more contingent than any of us would have previously cared to admit.

Walking in the cemetery again after heavy rain, I looked down to see worms beached on the asphalt. Some were dead, but many slowly squirmed across the ground.

It is unclear why worms come to the surface in the rain. Some species come out to mate, but the rest, some scientists suggest, are driven by hope for a migration to easier, moister conditions. Other experts speculate rain makes a similar noise to a predator, provoking a speedy escape.

For Darwin, worms heralded our ability to adapt to the challenges of the natural world. Yet, at this instance, in their moment of transit in unfamiliar surroundings, the worms at my feet had lost. I looked down at them, pink streaks on the footpath, and I too was at a loss.

I simply cannot see where there is to get to.

What I can see, as I wait out the pandemic among those passed, is that the notion of individual control—at least in the comfortable way that I, and many Australians, always pretended to exercise it—is a bandage against the collective vulnerability that we refuse, on the whole, to readily acknowledge.

In quarantine I, like many others, am grieving the loss of the faith I placed in the certainty of my own choices. But, as I read the fading epitaphs surrounding me, it is clear our new “normal” will come from celebrating, as Phillips says, “what can be done with what is left.”

It is misty in the cemetery this morning and I can't see beyond the few feet in front of me.

I keep on walking.

Works cited

Phillips, Adam. *Darwin's Worm's*. Basic Books, 2000.

Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. Faber and Faber, 1965.

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