

JORDAN DE VISSER

A Small Collection of Things in Reverse

I sat at zero for the longest time, expecting that once I'd started pushing out, once the arterials had been drawn and there was a kind of system of triumphant logic, the rest would fall into place. Most of an entire forest had been cleared and the more severe topographic features had been smoothed out and now here was the city, waiting to be real. I tried to start simply, on cheap cartridge paper so as to say to myself: this doesn't have to be it. This is a foray, the mind leading itself out in careful arcs to see what's there to be pulled down from the ideal.

But even on the cheap paper, non-committal, I couldn't start. The city remained unmanifest. I made the first scratchings and frightened myself, threw the paper away and sat in Erik's spare room on the cold first storey, feeling like there was everywhere to go and no place that really stood out.

I heard him wake up and come down into the kitchen. I went and sat at the counter and he put the coffee on. This was a daily thing. There was something conspiratorial in the way we sat under only the light from the rangehood, letting the steam from the tops of our cups crack our lips in the hours before his wife Therese woke up.

"Again," he said, "I don't know what to say. It's large and it's vague."

Erik and I spoke like people too often too close together. We talked in circles, entrenching one another's patterns, meeting at the same place we always met, each day finding we'd bored just a little further down. But still, certain topics wear on a person, have been chewed on for too long, overstimulating the saliva. My work became one of these topics. I hated myself for bringing it up, but some mornings I was really at the edge. I needed to render the issue in three dimensions, in the space between me and somebody else—if only to hear my own thoughts parroted back to me. Erik was always gracious.

"Did you shave this morning?" he asked me.

"Yeah?"

"Shave in the dark, do you?"

I dabbed at my chin and my cheeks. There were whole sharp patches of hair along the jaw and up to below my cheekbone. I adjusted myself on the stool so that the left side of my face was turned away from him.

“So,” he said, “I’ve made my mind up—he’s going to be Erik Junior.”

“How’d you come to that?”

He floated the remainder of his coffee down his throat, wiped his lip, put the mug down gently in the sink and grinned.

“I just decided that that’s what I want.”

It was happening, the only question was when. The trees had been cleared in a wide sweep, twelve thousand square kilometres of land was newly uniform. By the searing force of intention, nature had been squared into submission. A river kept its head down. By all the projections, what had been called *a significant number of interested parties* should have already bought in. Some had, or had come close, and then dropped out without much notice. And something nearby the other investors had made them nervous, each was waiting for some other to be the first, and now our contract was up for review. They wanted proofs, something we could show, and without them we weren’t likely to be renewed. It fell to me to plan the roads for a city with no places or people.

“What’s obvious,” Erik had said, “is that this is all the wrong way around. A city built all at once, ready-made, buildings going up around the dictates of roads already existing.”

“It’s only for the contract,” I said. “I could put anything in those plans. They satisfy a requirement. None of it’s the way it will go.”

“Then what’s the issue?”

“It’s still my submission, I can’t be careless.”

When I couldn’t draw, which was every day, I drove around. I let the roads encourage me in certain directions. I surrendered myself to be herded down the alleys of my day’s particular needs. As always, I was exhilarated by the predictive intelligence of one-way roads and their convenient bisections. I took my routes on the suggestions of sure-standing signs.

I knew roads, but I knew them in relation to the needs of people. I knew them as connective and logical, not as ends to themselves, pushing out into blind spaces, coming to settle and rest, attracting capital. The whole thing was disembodied.

I drove without a destination, not fast but right on the limit, turning into streets on whim, sometimes down triple-wide industrial roads passing trucks with their cabs down like sniffing dogs, or through suburbs where I'd trace the cul-de-sacs in slow sweeps. I took dirt roads tossing rocks until I came to PRIVATE PROPERTY signs in stencil—dogs, cattle grids, crackling lengths of electrified fence. I was in a way delivered to all of them, no effort on my part. A road was a thing that put people and places in conversation with other people, other places. They were at their best when they went unnoticed.

I met my mother at a Coffee Club. At her age, the present moment was only relevant so far as the practical considerations of living, and the only conversations I could get to stick were about the past, about family history. She had a fat envelope on the table in front of her, packed tight with photos she'd found in her garage. One was a photograph of a photograph, of my great-grandfather, staring at the camera like he was under duress.

“He looks a lot like you,” she said.

“I don't see it.”

Whenever we met she looked at me like I was a thing she rented out to the world. When I was returned, now and again every few months, she took stock of the damages. Even as an adult I'd have to stop her from trying to lick her finger and rub at the unkempt, flaky parts of my face.

“Honey, there's something in your teeth,” she said.

Late in the afternoon I went to Coles. Walking through the carpark, I thought about the strategic distance and placement of trolley bays.

This was the fourth time I'd been to the shops for my ex, who had committed herself to staying inside her apartment at all times without exception. I was grateful at least for the list she texted me, which was specific down to brand names and units of measurement.

I carried the groceries up the three flights of stairs to her apartment in a cardboard box. It was easier to carry this way. I kept the box on the back seat of my car.

The door was open and her apartment was lit dusky orange by various lamps, diffuse light crouching shy of the ceiling. There was a dominant smell of fertiliser and exhaling soil. Two things were in abundance in her flat, and potted plants were the first.

I saw her on her knees by a depressive begonia.

“They’re not getting any air in here,” she said when she saw me. “It’s gotten to the point where I have to go around breathing on them, multiple times a day.”

I started unloading the box on the kitchen counter. Cacti in washed-out Dolmio jars reached for me, bored and spiteful. Stray soil deposits across the bench charted the movements of itinerant herbs. She moved from plant to plant giving out her hot breath like alms and I watched her in circles. In a row curving endlessly off from her shoulder, the action repeated on to a sightless point. The other thing her apartment was full of was mirrors.

At a zebra plant she brushed her hair behind her ear and caught her own reflection. There were bags under her eyes, well-drawn and grey. She tugged on an eyelid into infinity.

“Where are you living now?”

“With Erik and his wife.”

“Nice. Free rent?”

“They’re very generous people.”

She spotted me in a mirror and shrugged.

I had introduced the mirrors, when I’d lived there, to play with the space. It was an experiment in all the possibilities of a room’s dimensions. First I set them up around the bedroom, then down through the hallway and across every wall of the apartment’s main living area. They were large mirrors with delicately detailed frames, but cheap, always second-hand.

What I had intended the mirrors to do was extend the space, imply unreal depths, chart territories of longing and imagination. What they ended up doing was insisting on the definite realities of the apartment as it was, reinforcing the room’s arrangement. A reification of the old and the same. I was perhaps idealistic about what effect the mirrors were going to have.

Her movements in the apartment had a quality of indentured attraction. The room tugged her here and there. While I was still unpacking, she came by force into the kitchen. I thought she might have been intending to help me with the bags, but she’d come to fill a watering can.

“I’ve got, y’know, if you wanna—”

“I don’t—”

“Okay,” she said.

“Anymore. I don’t anymore.”

“Okay.”

I finished unpacking everything and began to tie the plastic bags into sock knots and toss them into the cupboard beneath the sink. She was on the edge of her toes reaching up to water a plant above the fridge. She seemed nebulous and slight.

“It’s not so cold these days,” I said, “you should start walking again.”

“I can’t. Very little air gets into this apartment and I have to breathe on the plants or they’ll die.”

“Yeah but surely—”

She pointed at my stomach, amused. “You’ve buttoned your shirt wrong.”

I looked down and she was right. The softest, most unpublic section of my stomach was clearly visible through a tear-drop opening between two buttons. I cringed to think that I must have been that way in Coles.

Now that every plant had been sufficiently breathed on, she made the same prescriptive journey around each of them, giving just a small amount of water at their bases, which gathered orb-like on the top of the soil before soaking down. On every wall she was there in countless iterations, bending around corners out of sight from my observer’s position. She seemed to lend her sense of herself evenly across all of her reflections—she sensed my watching even though I was looking at the opposite wall.

“I think they’re rude, really,” she said. “Mirrors. They force the disembodied spectator into remembrance of their own very real body. On every wall I have to contend with myself.”

I considered leaving the cardboard box in her apartment. I didn’t, though, and I dropped it by the door near my shoes. I would allow myself to get close to the door like this, close to leaving, a flirtation, at least once or twice whenever I visited.

“Did you ever water my plants for me?”

“Did you ever ask?”

“Should I have had to?”

I went to the door and opened it outward. Syrupy afternoon light came in from the exterior stairwell. The air was brisk, reminding me of my skin.

“It’s golden hour. Go for a walk.”

“I can’t. There’s no air in here and I need to breathe on my plants.”

Erik and I met again in our early-morning huddle. Five in the morning in winter. I sometimes whispered, not only because Therese was sleeping but because I felt like the day was unripe and my being awake somehow illicit.

It was a constant feature of our morning meetings that I would sit at the counter with both palms curled around my cup while Erik would stand and variously lean in the rectangular area of the kitchen, moving now and then to the fridge or a cupboard, as though this house of his was orchestral, something for which he was a conductor. It didn't matter to me, or to either of us, that so much of what we talked about was identical to the things we'd talked about before. We enjoyed our roles, took them up with spirit as often as we could.

On this particular morning he had news. It was an old topic but a significant development. Something we'd gone over a few times and had made a sort of conversational groove out of; he'd gone and turned into a trench overnight.

“We're moving to New York.”

He said it, it boomed—and he saw that it was good.

It had always been a possibility that Therese would take a job in New York. And moving there—the uhms and ahs of all things considered—had featured in a number of our conversations. What mystified me, however, was the sudden activation of words into something actual, happening. I had always thought that words were impotent without some additional shock. Our discussions about New York had seemed insulated, virtual, protected from happening by our very having them. I had thought that in this way we'd put it all at a distance. That words had the sudden authority to stir Erik into action felt a little like betrayal. I experienced a kind of hot jealousy, not for his going to New York but for his new mastery over the arcane potentials of language.

I saw as many places as I could over the next couple of weeks. I had no idea what I wanted or where, but I was happy to be away from my desk, to not have to think about roads snaking out into placelessness, or cities in wait like blind pimples.

When I settled on a place, Erik came to check it out. It was a small loft on Ann Street, with a high ceiling and a washing machine in the kitchen.

“When the agent showed me the place she said something like, ‘I can see you in a place like this.’”

Erik was studying the bay window with his hands in his pockets.

“What do you think that means?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Not sure dude.”

I made us coffee to see what it felt like, but it was after midday and the street was loud and Erik had places to be. His flight was that night.

In the doorway, with his shoes on, he said: “Pluck your eyebrows dude, you’re starting to get like a uniform bar right the way across.”

About the Author

Jordan de Visser is a writer from south-east Queensland.