

## Images of Western Australia Easter Moon Easter Lily

*26 November 1959. I do wish the children would stop screeching and fighting. They are much too hot of course and both refuse to give up their corduroy for the nice new cotton shorts and tops.*

*We have been in Western Australia almost a fortnight. The people on the ship were right about the bath water going out anti clockwise but wrong, as far as I know, about screw top jars for stockings and under clothes. Certainly there are ants everywhere but not in our clothes. White ants have been eating the kitchen door post and the wood exposed looks like corrugated cardboard. I thought at first it must be a particular kind of Australian wood.*

*The other evening at a party a guest, a woman lifted up my skirt. She wanted to know, she said, whether the pattern went right through. Was it real embroidery or not. I felt dreadfully shy and awkward, twice as tall as anyone else in the room! Very new in another country but also having only recently come out of a different world which has nothing to do with leaving Britain. I feel shy because of those years I have just been through, shut away in the kitchen, the nursery, the playroom and the seclusion of the locked railings of the Queen Street Gardens. For a long time I have been only in the company of prams and pushchairs and little legs buttoned into leather gaiters and the jingling bells on that useful harness which tethers the parent to the child. I realise I am not used to talking about clothes at parties. The pattern is only pressed onto the material, it's not some interesting hand embroidery from Hungary or Tibet. The woman, I didn't hear her name, blushed. I think it was with the exertion of bending down, not because she felt she had been impolite. Because she was small I could see her blush spreading down her neck and down the front of her dress. I don't think I have ever seen the full extent of a blush before.*

*It feels like being in a foreign country to come here. It is the brightness of all the colours and the very clear blue sky. There is no smoke. The light is so bright and the sun is out all the time and this makes our clothes seem dreadfully shabby. I have thrown our Burberry raincoats away. The dustbin people did not take them at first because they were not in the bin, only rolled up on top.*

*I want to write about the trees with their clouds of blue flowers, as the flowers fall they look as if they are growing in the grass as well. On the street lawns there are gnarled little trees with long fragrant leaves. These make pools of shade. Going to the shops we went from one pool to the next. The trees remind me of dolls. People have their letter boxes by the footpath. Mostly tins on posts and you can see people wandering across their gardens to fetch their letters. Barefoot is nice. Especially where there is a water sprinkler. I did not know the feet could be so receptive. Leaves and grass.*

*All the women here seem to have well shaped sun tanned legs. English legs seem ugly in comparison. The children here have brown legs and square cut sunbleached*

*hair and a kind of vacant expression which I suppose comes from being in the water, the sea or the river, for long stretches and perhaps it is the thick coating on the forehead and the nose of a white zinc cream ointment. When I close my eyes and hear the strange cries of birds or the soft liquid crooning of a bird they call a magpie I know I am in a strange country. There is too in the shops a sweet fragrance of peaches, apricots and nectarines and every garden seems to have a lemon tree. Quite old women stand in their thin night-gowns in the mornings watering their front gardens and the street lawns. The street lawns look fresh and green in spite of the hot sun. It is ominous to see the signs of what people will be doing to ameliorate the great heat when it comes. I feel hot now what is it going to be like later . . . I have never seen or eaten a fresh apricot before . . .*

Of course a blush is universal and so is the shyness of the newcomer or the shyness of the mother emerging after being, for some years, absorbed by the needs of small children. Those things are not really images. The impressions written in the diary have all been written about over the years but every person writing adds something to the picture.

Heraclitus said it was not possible to step in the same river twice. All things flow, he is said to have said. He did not add that images of things are even more fleeting. Images change with the maker of them, whether he is in good health, whether he is tired or hungry, frightened or lonely or bored or disappointed; or whether he is happy and at peace. Images are essentially personal.

A memory can be an image so sharp that it remains for ever. The image can spring from an action which has to be recalled. Actions and feelings and images are so often universal but often there are details which can place them in a specific part of the world.

Images of Western Australia. There was a time when Western Australian writers seemed to deny their region. The best fiction is regional. It is in the very places where the writer lives and walks and carries out the small details of everyday existence that the imagination from some small half remembered awareness springs to life. In Western Australia there are many regions, the coast, the suburb, the city, the sand plain, the escarpment, the bush, the half rural, the forest, the wheat country, the desert . . . observation can be personal or objective. The trained journalist and the imaginative fiction writer may well produce entirely different images from one tiny corner of a wheat paddock. Sometimes it is difficult to recall images without being pestered in the mind by memories and comparisons which come from a previous country and which are heightened by travelling. Often the first image is the one which remains during times of change. Perhaps the Easter lilies are a reminder of this. Uncherished the Easter lilies appear every year with surprising suddenness, their pink and white long-lasting freshness bursting out of the brown bald patches of earth at the edges of newly made car parks and in those places which have been left out from the spreading bitumen.

The suburb which used to consist of old houses complete with gables of corrugated iron, bullnosed verandas and turned wooden veranda posts began to present a picture of neglect as the houses were taken over for business offices and consulting rooms for specialists.

A dog lost in a garden, which is no longer cherished as a garden, gazes at the passer-by with mournful eyes as builders and cranes and concrete mixers follow in the wake of demolition. In the once quiet residential streets there are now tall buildings, floor upon floor of offices, all faced with gleaming windows, some lit up and some dark. At sunset, those windows facing west glow as if on fire. The buildings rise from parking lots all similar but unrecognizable. Small trees and bushes planted hastily as ornaments offer a few twigs and leaves — a poor replacement for the previous riot of colour, the pink and white oleanders, the apple-blossom hibiscus

with their richly glossy, dark green leaves and the masses of red and purple bougainvillea. Perhaps the image which might be peculiar to Western Australia is that the buildings are not at peace with their surroundings. They have been forced to be a part of the landscape and are an imposition. They do not match or complement each other and they have taken away any tranquillity, any special quality of human life the streets may have had once.

There is too the ever growing disaster, the evidence of great wealth in some suburbs where, it seems, people caring even less about each other no longer want to be able to see the light of the rising sun through a trellis of leaves and branches or to hear the doves talking softly, to and fro. The million dollar mansion and the high density luxury apartment, the crowded supermarket and the fashionable boutique, the American ice-cream bar and the expensive sea food restaurant are taking over from the weatherboard and iron, the bleached grass and the pressed tin. The Easter lilies pushing through cracked cement herald the Easter moon. The moon hangs in the branches of a single tree left between the new buildings.

The new images of Western Australia, the enormous hotels, one with an atrium and another built to resemble a ship forever in harbour, the casino, the ballooning quilted stadium and the flourishing pawn shop not too far away are universal. It is difficult for the traveller, waking up in his hotel room to remember which city, which country he went to bed in.

It is a good idea to feel car sick coming down the long hill on the Toodjay road. There is, by an outcrop of granite, a place to pull off on the left side of the road. From high up there is a wide view across the sand plain of the Swan valley. It is especially fine when the weed, Paterson's curse, is in full flight and the neat green ribs of the vineyards are framed in a delicate purple mist. Beyond the vineyards is the changing sky line of the city. And shining blue, beyond the buildings, is the joining of the sea and the sky. The rim of the sea gleams, catching at the horizon a last light from behind a bank of cloud. And at sunset the sun disappears in a miraculous flash of green.

The Easter moon races up the sky. The stunted ornamental bushes look as if torn white table cloths have been thrown over them. The buildings are like cakes which, having taken three days to ice are now finished. Perhaps it is the kind of icing which breaks when it is cut and which is impossible to eat.

The moon and the lilies cannot be claimed as images of Western Australia. Others will claim them too.

It seems on reflection that there is something which does seem to be an image which can be said to belong to us and that is the dead tree which goes on standing among living trees. It is as if the dead tree has a strength which keeps it a part of the vulnerable living forest. Sometimes a tree which looks completely dead has a strip of bark which sustains life and a branch, sometimes a whole tree, sprouts and grows from the side of the gaunt ghost.

Like the dead tree which still offers life perhaps the lilies are a reminder and a comfort. Without fail they flower at Easter. Forgotten till they flower, an unsought simultaneous caution and blessing.