A landscape of stories by Nick Gadd

About 18 months ago, I started to spend time walking around the inner western suburbs of Melbourne where I have lived for 20 years. It wasn't for fitness reasons – this wasn't cheerless power-walking, but vague wandering. As I went, I took photos of street art, faded signage, smoke pouring out of chimneys, old factories, weeds bursting through wire fences – but it wasn't about the photographs, either. Walking helped me grope towards the answers to questions I couldn't quite define.

Purposeless solo walking can be considered an irregular activity. Virginia Woolf, in the essay 'Street haunting: a London adventure' wrote that she needed the pretext of buying a pencil to justify her urban explorations. Her real reason for walking was that she loved the way her imagination was stimulated by chance encounters, glances into lighted rooms, the sight of buses and butcher's shops, which seemed "accidentally but miraculously sprinkled with beauty". But having some practical motive for your walk, even a spurious one, apparently makes it more legitimate.

"Walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body and the world are aligned," writes the Californian essayist, Rebecca Solnit. Her history of walking, *Wanderlust,* explores the subject from literary, historical, political and artistic angles. The point that resonates most with me concerns the benefits the walker gains from encountering the city in a way both unplanned and observant. Solnit writes: "The random, the unscreened, allows you to find what you don't know you are looking for." It's a truism that we spend much of our lives in a fog of habit – the same journeys to school or work, the same trains, shops, rooms, faces, streets. And yet it doesn't take much effort to escape. A place we know well can become strange if we raise our eyes a few metres, take a few steps off the path.

As I walked, I became fascinated by the stories of the suburbs. Many of us are remarkably unaware of what has happened in our communities. Events of a few years ago are soon forgotten. But landscapes – whether urban or rural – do not forget as quickly as we do. Around us there are traces of other lives, other histories, if we care to seek them out.

I set out to challenge my ignorance of the streets I lived in. I wanted to make connections between the place now and as it used to be; to let the city surprise me; to work out why things are as they are, and where and how I belonged.

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What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish?

– T.S. Eliot

I'd learned a little of the industrial history of Melbourne's west since I came to live here. The area was known throughout the 20th century for its factories, abbatoirs, refineries, and heavy industries. During World War Two, vast amounts of munitions were manufactured here, both explosives and ordnance; in peacetime local factories produced food, chemicals, fertiliser, rope, metals, glass and much more. It was a proudly working-class area, not unlike the west of Yorkshire where I'd grown up. But by the 1990s, much of that was in retreat, as successive governments stripped away tariffs and manufacturing declined. Jobs disappeared overseas, companies were taken over or bankrupted. The old economic and social certainties evaporated.

Not far from my house stands a monument: the derelict Bradmills clothing factory. The company struggled through the 90s, some of our neighbours among its employees, but went into receivership in 2001 with the loss of 900 jobs. The site has been abandoned ever since. Every now and then I edge through one of the gaping holes in the fence and wander around. Industrial debris is everywhere: pallets, rubble, bits of metal sheeting, chunks of machinery. There's even an abandoned car, full of crap, left to rust. The factory is partly demolished, roofless and unwalled; what's left of the frame is a rusty skeleton, and the windows are broken teeth. When I first went in a couple of years ago, one of the admin offices was still furnished – chairs, shelves, even the ring binders in which someone kept the accounts. I have a vision of a dutiful clerk on the final day, inking the last entry, closing the folder, leaving the office and turning out the lights.

Today, everything has gone from these shattered halls, but I imagine the voices of garment workers speaking Greek, Macedonian, Serbian and Croatian, Italian and Chinese, Vietnamese and English. The only sound is the flutter of pigeons' wings in cavernous spaces,

and my footsteps on the fissured concrete. Aerosol cans are scattered across the floors; the walls are a gallery of art and tags. The old warning signs are still legible: *Danger! Benzyl alcohol, highly inflammable. No naked flame or smoking within 20 feet.* A painted hand points to the 'dye house'. Another sign, almost wholly peeled away, carries the warning *Employees with chemicals in their eyes must wash at the eye wash station for 15 minutes before reporting to medical centre*. The 'eye wash station' is a rusty shower head sticking out of the wall, and a metal sink on a vertical pipe skewed at a drunken angle.

As is usually the fate of such locations – the old munitions factory in Footscray is one example – the site is slated to be a massive development. A thousand new houses and a retail and leisure complex are going to be built here, including a 'fashion hub' selling imported clothes at a huge mark-up; but the work has been held up by a dispute between the developers and the council. Now the site stands at an intermediate point, neither one thing nor the other. Vegetation, ignoring the 'Keep clear' signs, clumps with impunity around doors, sidles up fire escapes, encircles rusty girders, and cracks the concrete floor. Rabbits skip around the dye house; foxes trot through deserted offices. As anyone knows who has seen Camilo Jose Vergara's extraordinary photographs of derelict industrial landscapes, *America In Ruins,* it doesn't take long for the non-human world to reassert itself. People forget, and – to use one of the defining clichés of our time – "move on"; quietly, without fuss, nature returns and resumes possession.

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The English writer and psychogeographer Nick Papadimitriou insists that to understand a place properly, you have to know its topography. His eccentric book *Scarp* is a series of narratives and meditations about an escarpment, north of London, which he has been walking for 20 years. The book is based on his epiphany that "the apparently unconnected places that I had walked through … in fact shared a deep connecting substratum, the underlying belt of high ground on which they are situated." Besides walking, Papadimitriou pored over old maps, studied geology, contemplated the relationships between hills, rivers, flora, insects, train lines, roads and sewage systems. Gradually he gained an intimate knowledge of the physical geography of his area, until he and the landscape achieved a kind of mystical union and all its stories flowed through him.

It's confronting for a 21st century urbanite to realise that, much as they may ignore the natural world, it fundamentally shapes the way they live. Before I took up walking I spent most of my time in interiors: cars, trains, houses, apartments and offices. (Given the rate at which new apartment blocks and shopping malls are being built, it will soon be possible for Melburnians to live their entire lives without encountering natural earth or fresh air at all.) I couldn't have told you where the creeks flowed, what kind of rocks were under my feet, or which bits of my region have a higher elevation than others. It wasn't until I began going around on foot that I realised the obvious and yet startling fact that human society is shaped by topography.

The most fundamental aspect of this is rock. The western suburbs are built on a plain of volcanic basalt. Whenever you step onto a park or reserve or the banks of a creek, you feel lumps of it beneath your feet, which explains why quarrying was the area's first industry. An 1860 map of Yarraville includes the promotional copy: "The land is high and dry, commanding the most picturesque views of Melbourne … There is a never failing Creek of Fresh Water [Stony Creek] at the southern boundary of the township, and the finest building Stone is available within a mile." Over the next few decades, countless tons of bluestone were clawed, dug, and dynamited out of quarries around Yarraville and neighbouring Footscray, to be used for major public buildings, places of government, education, worship, incarceration, and countless roads and private houses. After this frenzy, the sites were simply abandoned, and used for waste disposal. In 1900, a local councillor complained "Since the plague scare commenced people were sending all manner of rubbish to the tip, which was in a disgraceful condition." But nothing was done about it. Photographs from the aerial survey of 1945 show quarries pock-marking the western suburbs like scars on a veteran boxer's face.

A second topographical key to the area is the confluence of the Maribyrnong and Yarra rivers, whose deep water was ideal for berthing and loading ships. Wharves were built along the river banks, and around them sprang up foundries, smelters, a glue factory, a sugar refinery, canneries, tanneries and slaughterhouses. These discharged their effluent into the river, and pollution into the air, with complete impunity. The so-called "noxious trades" made the area notorious: according to historian John Lack, Footscray was first nicknamed Stoneopolis, then Stinkopolis. In the 20th century, industry continued to prosper, especially near the wharves: petrochemical and fertiliser plants, an acid works, and glass manufacturers were among those concentrated there.

Today, Sugar Australia is still here, and Gyprock ('Everything else is just plasterboard'), and a Mobil refinery, and haulage companies. But many waterfront sites are deserted. The acid works stands derelict. Other premises have been demolished and blocks of land await the next development. You have the sense, once again, of the temporary nature of industrial activities. Walkers can get quite close to the river, and look across towards the petrochemical complex of Coode Island. But before you reach the wharves, you are firmly halted by a wire fence and signs forbidding entry. It used to be possible to get much nearer, but in these terror-phobic times access is restricted. If you get too close to the Port Authority area, a Customs and Border Patrol vehicle appears to find out what you are up to. But no such restriction keeps out the rabbits, birds and weeds, which are reclaiming their territory in vacant lots and abandoned factories. Yellow flowering plants burst through wire fences, gutters bow and break under the weight of wild grasses, birds swoop through broken windows to nest in the loading bay, rabbits colonise the workshops.

Rebecca Solnit writes in a memorable phrase that "ruins are the unconscious of a city." If we think of a city as being like a mind, then public buildings and roads are only its conscious, rational part. To take the analogy further, perhaps toxic waste is a suppressed memory, the stuff of nightmares, the result of some trauma that can't be acknowledged. And like such a memory, it is liable to rupture the veil at unexpected moments.

In 2005 the Port of Melbourne bought the riverside land formerly owned by Pivot. The site had been used to produce chemicals and fertiliser since the 1840s, and was one of the most contaminated locations in Victoria. The ground water contained arsenic up to 20,000 times the safe level, and massive quantities had leached into the river. According to the terms of the sale, when the Port of Melbourne bought the site, Pivot was released from any liability to clean it up. Nevertheless, a short distance downstream, fishermen still gather, plucking fish from the water.

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When you walk back through Yarraville shopping centre, you pass between a supermarket car park and a vacant block. This nondescript area has for a few years been used as overflow parking for the Yarraville Oval; more recently it was fenced off and a few spindly trees were planted. Now there is a playground, not much used, and a few benches that no one sits on. There's nothing to show the casual passer by what happened here.

In 1973, on this block, 40 units were built and the new owners – most of them pensioners, looking for small convenient units in which to retire – moved in. Within a few weeks the walls started cracking, driveways broke, sewage pipes burst, yards subsided. A reporter wrote that the site resembled a scene from the London Blitz. When torrential rains washed away what remained of the foundations, the units became uninhabitable. The buildings were literally sinking.

Then the dirty secret came out. The units had been built on top of one of the old bluestone quarries, which had been filled in – exactly when, no one knows – with sludge from a sugar factory near the river. A monument from the first stage of Yarraville's development – an empty quarry – had been filled with the residue of its second phase – industrial sludge – to create disaster in the third, post-industrial era. The council's engineer claimed to be unaware that the site had ever been a quarry, and admitted that he was "not very well up in geology". The insurance company said its policies did not cover subsidence; the builder claimed he had council approval; the council denied responsibility. Like a monument to ignorance, the 'sinking village' stood for several years – pending legal action – before finally being demolished, and the land has been vacant ever since. Ironically, the suburb that produced fine bluestone for splendid public buildings became notorious for units that collapsed within weeks.

Yet, search the internet for pictures of the 'sinking village' and they are almost impossible to find. If it wasn't for the memories of those who saw it with their own eyes, and a few newspaper clippings, the story would be doubted. To the generation for whom all truth comes in pixels, it is perhaps beyond belief. The story, a remarkable tale of urban amnesia, is itself nearly forgotten.

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In times like these, constantly wired, infinitely connected, the sheer amount of communication can be exhausting. The noise, the news, the natter never stops. It's like living under a waterfall of information – check your inbox, change your status, update Twitter, Instagram your lunch! – and yet so little of the stuff bombarding us seems to actually *matter*. Our culture is always talking about how 'connected' we are. But these networks are one-dimensional. We might be connected to others in our own time, in the shallowest sense; we know little to nothing of the past, and our connections to place can be sketchy at best.

Simply to stop and remember feels like a tiny act of resistance. Memory means freezing the waterfall for a few seconds, as happened to the Niagara Falls in the last northern winter, so that you can look at things more carefully, learn their stories, think about their meaning – and perhaps, if you're lucky, let them surprise you.

I have lived in this area for 20 years – not long in the grand scheme of things, but enough to seed it with a crop of memories and associations. That's where the tree fell on our house in the great storm of 2003. The fence an old Greek neighbour leaned over to give me persimmons and talk about mythology. The spots where my kids started school, lost teeth, learned to ride a bike. The railway platform where I've stood on thousands of mornings, en route to work, interviews, footy matches. Some places are associated with more bizarre incidents (mother-in-law, fruitbat). The athletics track where I measured countless long jumps as my daughters did Little Aths. The bookshop where I've attended readings and launches, classrooms I've studied and taught in, the church where friends married, the pubs where I've listened to music, shared stories, jokes, confidences. The house beside the park where I've sat on long summer evenings, laughing at friends' tales of trips to gather magic mushrooms in the 70s: "*…and when we drove back, the bonnet of the car was miles long!*"

Small things. But these are the moments and memories which leave a place, in Virginia Woolf's phrase, "miraculously sprinkled with beauty".

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It seemed an odd location to find a clump of mangroves.

I was walking beneath the West Gate Bridge, the main traffic artery that spans the Yarra from west to east. Directly above me, cars and trucks were flying along the freeway, climbing the bridge. Perhaps a few drivers or passengers glanced curiously down as they zoomed over, but more likely they were focussed on the city ahead of them – as I am when I drive that stretch of road. Around me were the dinosaurs of industry – the massive white drums of the Mobil refinery to the north; electricity pylons striding out to the west and east; the chimney of the Newport power station to the south. I was actually looking for the site of Victoria's worst industrial disaster, where 35 men died in 1970 when a span of the bridge collapsed during construction. There's a sculpture in the form of 35 stone columns, and a plaque bearing their names, where a memorial service is held every year on the anniversary. I

was wandering around, reflecting on the event, trying and failing to imagine the scene on that day in 1970, when I noticed something unexpected in the wetlands. At that spot, where Stony Creek flows into the backwash, were several clumps of what looked like mangroves.

I had never realised there was a nature reserve in the shadow of the bridge, on a site once devastated by industry. But local environmental groups have been working quietly in the wetlands for years, cleaning the place up, planting indigenous species, monitoring and reporting industrial pollution, which has encouraged native animals and birds to return. The stand of rare white mangroves, *Avicennia marina*, was re-established after the originals were killed by an oil spill in the 1980s. Now they are thriving and self-propagating. A little further along, the creek runs through the site of former quarries, landfilled and converted into parks and reserves. There are regular tree plantings, and frogs can be heard. Hundreds of people walk their dogs or stop for picnics, while kids circle the bike track; there's a community garden, and not long ago Deborah Conway performed at a local music festival. Stinkopolis might not have become Greenopolis, but maybe we can restore enough natural spaces to keep us sane.

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"You don't know a place until it surprises you," writes Rebecca Solnit. If we make our lives predictable, we remain contentedly ignorant of our surroundings. But when we take a more random course, we open the door to surprises. They might be pleasant or unpleasant, of course. A stand of mangroves, or a quarry of sludge. The point is to be attentive.

The restoration of parks, creeks and wetlands is a noble aim. But I'd like to see the preservation of stories alongside it. The narratives embedded in landscapes need to be conserved as much as the landscapes themselves. Not just for practical reasons, so we don't build houses on top of toxic quarries, though it would help in that regard. The stories of a place are the source of its meaning to those who live there. Every street, factory, house, creek is a repository of stories small and large – the housing estate that was once a munitions complex; the bingo hall that used to be a cinema; the bridge where men worked and died; the wetlands that lived then died then lived again.

To walk around a landscape attentively is to read it; to live in a place is to add more details to an endlessly complex narrative. Your story intertwines with those around you in a

mutually enriching and sustaining ecology. Our memories, histories, anecdotes, yarns, proliferate like vegetation, mingling with others, curling tendrils and putting down roots, flowering in unexpected places, unruly and beautiful. The more we understand of this, the richer our landscape becomes, the more we belong to it, and it to us.

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