

Sonderness at the Life of a Stranger

Alex Cuffe and Merren Ricketson were connected as conversation partners for 'It Comes in Waves'. They began writing to one another as Melbourne's second COVID-19 lockdown began. Initially, Alex shared documentation of her recent exhibition at TCB Art Inc. and a related interview published in un Projects. Merren responded by detailing key projects from her forty-year career as an arts facilitator. Prompted by the personal nature of Alex's work Merren also composed a piece recounting her life's trajectory. The text that follows is an excerpt from their correspondence.

Merren Ricketson >>> Alex Cuffe 11/07/2020

Dear Alex,

Lockdown had been a time of looking back for me, so this text centres on my parents and generational influences...interconnections flowing into ripples turning into tidal waves.

My father, Earle, was a potter so he's always present: the salad bowl or platter at dinner, my containers for paper clips and earrings, the various chipped bird baths in the garden. He died in the week of my 40th birthday while Kathleen, my mother, died in 2012 a week after my 58th. I was mum's main carer, increasingly as she lost her sight. She lived round the corner, only moving into care in the last few years. She carbon copied all her letters to her sister-in-law Shirley, and I have these copies. When she was no longer able to see and write to her lifelong friend in London she sent tapes, I have these too, returned after her death. I also have a painting and drawing by my grandmother, Ruby, and her easel. Ruby was invited to study at the National Gallery Art School but went on to have 6 children.

Art and politics have always been part of my life. Martin Smith, dad's best friend, was a framer. His workshop gave me a lifelong love of the smell of linseed oil. His clients paid him in paintings so the walls were covered with works by Boyd, Tucker, Hester, Counihan among others. Martin's family, Rosie and 4 children were bohemians. Their sprawling old Federation house, filled with Indonesian textiles, Indian wall hangings, woven baskets, grass matting, trinkets and pottery was quite a novelty in the late 50s, early 60s. The house and rambling garden with rose arbours, dovecotes and endless hiding places

prompts rich memories. This was a world that alternated between spirited fantasy, an impromptu circus featuring their pet goanna and the injured kangaroos they took in, or day-long games and treasure hunts, to the all night drunken political arguments and loud, wild gatherings we children witnessed.

Both my parents were in the Communist Party. Mum, had joined in her late 20s early 30s. She'd left her conservative, comfortable family home in East Malvern, initially to visit Shirley in Sydney, and had stayed on working for a lawyer who was getting Jews out of Europe, a man who introduced her to his left wing friends and ideas. I don't know exactly when dad developed his socialist leanings but he had a lifelong hatred of silvertales and privilege after being bullied at the elite school his uncle sent him to after his father's early death. Dad left Australia after the war to work on 'the youth railway' which was being built across Eastern Europe and became very involved in the Party on his return to Melbourne. I so regret not taping his extraordinary and often hilarious stories of travelling across war-torn Europe.

While I am extremely proud of this aspect of my parents' lives, of their life-long pacifism and their hatred of inequality and racism. The reality is that once married 'armchair socialism' certainly became the way of life for my father and he demonstrated little awareness of any equality within his marriage and sadly had very little understanding or compassion towards my mother's bipolar disorder, something that dogged her life. He was a heavy drinker and quite oppressive with frequent angry outbursts, while she was increasingly submissive and resentful. My brother Philip, four years younger, was ill with bronchitis when young which added to the tension. However, both gave us a love of life, literature and music, and both instilled the idea that you had a responsibility to leave the world a better place than you found it. While I was aware from an early age my mother had very little money to run the household, we had books, paintings and a few precious records—Reedy River, Pete Seeger, The Clancy Brothers, Beethoven—played over and over.

Mum took me to *My Fair Lady* on my 6th birthday. I can still visualise some of the scenes. The record later embedded all the songs. Utter fascination on that day inspired my lifelong love of theatre, poetry and later Shakespeare. I begged to be allowed to attend the local Methodist Sunday school so I could participate in their concerts. The church was quite a distance, even in those days when kids walked everywhere, but my atheist father refused to drive me. Equally significant on that birthday was that my great uncle, who loved books, gave me *Suzanne goes to Brittany*. The pages opened to English text on one side and French on the other. This began my love of the language and all things French, especially Paris, which has only been intensified by travelling there a number of times.

Mum was first hospitalised with depression was when I was about twelve. My parents separated soon after that coinciding with a pretty difficult adolescence. It was only later I came to see how brave mum was. A minimal

inheritance had enabled her to leave. Looking back, it was like a soap opera sometimes: my father's midnight pounding on the door of the half-house we moved into, my mother's deep sense of betrayal when he and her best friend Nancy got together, our moving to Mornington so that mum could be closer to two siblings and their families, my difficulties at a new school and disruptive behaviour at home, with our increasing poverty being a constant struggle.

Mum took dad to court seeking more than the pittance he was paying for us kidz but the judge rejected the claim as she 'had left the marital home'. She had lousy underpaid jobs but her spirit, particularly when 'up' was inspiring—no one could be more joyous, interesting, mischievous or enthusiastic. She created a very happy home life and our house became a drop-in refuge for my high school friends, particularly once we'd started drinking. She found a group of us behind the bathing boxes, the girls smoking Alpine and the boys all drinking brandy. My friends still talk of her inspiring them with her ideas and interest in everything. I can see her now leaning forward in her chair, as passionately engaged in discussions as any of us. She had a fine voice and she and Philip, shared a love of music—he's a singer/songwriter and painter and lives in Sydney.

Perhaps I am emotionally closer to him than anyone else. I envy his artistic and musical skills, and ability to live on almost nothing. I really missed him during the first lockdown, despite our exchange of hand-written letters and sharing of images, poetry and podcast suggestions so decided to drive to Sydney to visit him and the Biennale. We had our usual blow-ups cos I wake up chitter-chattering for joy, full of plans for the day ahead and my energy depletes as the day unfolds, while he doesn't communicate verbally (although writes and draws profusely) much before noon, prefers to live in the moment, and is a night owl. However, we walked miles as always, discussing our latest discoveries, various dysfunctional relationships and self-doubt, performance vs. authenticity, punctuated with wonder, laughter, coffee stops, art viewing, author sharing and visits to his favourite bookshops.

Philip and I visited dad every second weekend, something I hid from my friends as there was a stigma towards separation and divorce in those days. I have awful memories of Nancy getting increasingly drunk at Saturday night dinners where, after Philip had gone to bed, she'd attack mum relentlessly. When I inherited dad's dining room table I felt underneath for the grooves I'd made. I had forced my fingernails into the wood to brace against her onslaughts, no mean feat as my nails were always bitten to the quick! Dad was more financially comfortable than mum, and his life with Nan included a lot of socialising and holidays, but I was also very aware of his sadness as he put us on the train on Sunday arvo. Caulfield station is still a bleak, grey place to me, regardless of the upmarket ticketing booths and gaudy ads there today. I am pretty sure that while I may appear open and candid the emotional armour I still use to block closeness and the sense of always being an outsider was built chink by chink during those years.

You could set your watch by my mother's bouts of depression. There'd be the usual clues. Her house, filled with scattered disorder, saved newspaper articles and library books, geranium and daisy cuttings in jars, poems she penned for special occasions, the ever-present ironing board, and the breakfast dishes pushed aside so she could get onto more important things, would become increasingly tidy as she attempted to quell the coming storm. Then would follow 14–16 weeks of her deep anguish. She'd sit at the kitchen table with head in hands, willing it away, eating very little, endlessly apologising to us, and putting off the inevitable decision—going into Malvern Clinic, which in those days was a lovely, light, repurposed old mansion with cottage gardens, her second home over the years.

There she could let go, the nurses and doctors all knew her and accepted her condition. She faced the double burden of the illness and the stigma of it. 'They just don't understand' she'd say of friends and relatives who encouraged her to just pull her 'socks up' or 'get on with it'. At Malvern Clinic they did understand and though she regretted and later refused to have shock treatment, she would come home much her old self, filled with joie de vivre once more. Then the manic phase would begin. The house would return to its cluttered comfort with records on at full volume and stuff everywhere, she'd book multiple courses through the CAE, ring all and sundry and then repeat the details of every conversation between each call, including renditions of radio interviews and discussions with the neighbours, and I often had to go Myers to get refunds for expensive purchases. A friend said after her death that she had more life than any woman she'd ever met.

Mum had won a scholarship at school. She'd overheard her parents discussing the irrelevance of her going on as she would 'get married and have children', so she was forced to leave and do shorthand and typing, which she hated. Her endless regret was not being a nurse, due both to her sense of interest in all things medical and her sense of service. While she was gregarious and outgoing and always attracted good friends I was increasingly aware of her intellectual loneliness. As a single woman she was not included in social gatherings by her married friends and I know she missed the opportunity to talk politics and ideas with those who had stayed in touch with my father. She had a lack of confidence and residual guilt at leaving, although it was clearly better for all of us. Had she been a nurse instead of pumping petrol in Mornington for \$30 a week she would have been working in a stimulating environment, had financial security and been able to take advantage of shift work, most beneficial to a single mother.

Thus she was adamant that I would go to Uni and have the choice and independence being qualified ensured in those days. My father too. He had taken me to Monash when it was still in scaffolding and told me I would go there one day. I wasn't such a good student, so many more interesting things were going on, but mum forced me to study in Matric, waiting on me hand and foot, forbidding any friends to drop by during the week and this

got me through. Due to Whitlam bringing in free tertiary education a record 8 students from my school went to Uni in 1972. A Studentship gave me a huge \$49 a fortnight to live on—luxury! It also meant I left her and Mornington at 17.

I lived with dad for the first year and our political arguments were heated and frequent. He was quite a Stalinist and his ideas appeared so reactionary and prejudiced to me, especially in regards to Feminism. He believed 'once the revolution comes feminism and gay rights would all be taken care of'. My various arguments about repression and the inequality of women in the USSR went unheard.

A small inheritance allowed him to buy a potting wheel and he took to clay with gusto. The house shimmered with clay dust. There were experimental and failed pots on every surface, clay fingerprints on every light switch and door handle, and drawings of proposed pots on scraps of paper everywhere. Soon after this he followed Nancy to Tewantin. She'd relocated to be closer to her son and grandchildren. Dad lived in an old house with a huge studio. They married a decade later. In the last years of his life he built an enormous kiln which he only fired a couple of times before he died. Queensland was such a repressive state then and while he had great mates he could not wait for me to come and stay so we could discuss politics endlessly. Philip and I got there in time to see him in the last days. We spent some time clearing out his potting shed packing up a number of platters and pots to bring home. On every shelf amongst drying and finished pots were his scribbled recipes for glazes. Fortunately, the local TAFE college took the kiln.

My late teens and 20s were joy filled and angst ridden years of exploring art, literature, feminism, lesbian separatism, conscious-raising, hippydom and hallucinogenics; living in numerous share houses in The Dandenongs and the inner city, including a huge ex-ashram in St Kilda with 12 other people, still some of my closest friends; experiencing the first love of my life becoming more and more violent as his schizophrenia developed and having to leave for my own protection, travelling in northern NSW and QLD to live on sustainable farms; becoming the beard for my first close gay friend to allay his family's suspicions; developing my life-long love of yoga, getting out of my studentship; having disastrous relationships but making life-long friends, including a long and very happy relationship with a woman; losing friends to heroin, others to AIDs and seeing the full horror of the disease make its insidious way across the world particularly in the arts community; knowing several woman friends who had babies on their own including Felicia who had a relationship with Philip resulting in the birth of my nephew Iza; presenting a number of exhibitions in my house including sculpture shows in the large garden, and then moving into arts management through the local council arts centre; travelling to Europe at last to see the paintings I'd been looking at in books for years, followed by 6 months in India; becoming involved with the WAR Committee; falling in love with Bill, having Hannah; beginning work at the NGV as a sessional education officer; starting Artmoves

with Helen Vivian; having Angus; working with Liz McAloon and WAR Committee on the dinner for 'The Dinner Party'; working on several Gasworks Outdoor Sculpture exhibitions and running art programs for students with disabilities; working on the first Melbourne Fringe Festival; curating two exhibitions for The Schizophrenic Foundation in the Access Gallery, NGV; coordinating 'Can't see for Lookin, Koori Women Artists Educating'; being appointed inaugural Education Officer at ACCA; being invited to curate Top Arts at the NGV and then in 1999 a real job! Managing the VCE Season of Excellence—linking Top Arts with Top Designs, Top Screen, Top Class Dance/Music/Drama and Theatre Studies and Top Acts.

I was so busy in my 40s and 50s—fabulous frenetic years of having the kidz, building work skills and networks, endless deadlines—grabbing time for inner life through conversations and precious times travelling. I absolutely loved my various jobs, working with so many creative people, dealing with high-achieving student artists and performers and seeing how the Season's exhibitions and concerts reinforced the power of arts education in so many schools.

However, I didn't do too well balancing work and family. I was still working at the NGV, and on other small projects in the early days but as the success of the Season grew and the project intensified I was away from home during many weeks and weekends due to the endless demands and the workload. Despite my kidz assurances to the contrary I feel they did miss out on a lot of care at times, as did my relationship with Bill, volatile as it always was. Fortunately getting THE job coincided with Bill leaving work and being the home body but as it was fairly chaotic. Lockdown has allowed me time to go through piles of photographs from these years. The great thing about photos are that people always appear happy and it's been great to see images of the kidz as they grew, their antics for the camera, the great dress-up birthday parties we had, and the holidays we went on, the dinners and barbecues, and being with their friends and cousins.

Bill and my relationship has always been characterised by our differences, by me being busy somewhere else and needing constant projects, while he is very happy being at home, especially listening to music, creating or pottering in our wonderful garden. He had a casual job at the NGV as an art handler for years which he loved as he shares my interest in art. I stopped full-time work about 10 years ago and studied Auslan which had been a long held dream, but I have not qualified as an interpreter. I work as a CRT in a couple of schools including the Vic College for the Deaf—although not in the current situation. Hannah and Angus continue to be my most effective teachers and demanding critics—both are kind, generous, funny, and fantastic cooks like their father.

If I don't fixate of the horrors happening across the globe, especially in regards to global warming I can say my 60s is the happiest decade of my life. This is due to Bill, the intersecting circles of family, friends and colleagues,

living so close to the sea, being a member of the Ukulele Songbirds, reconnecting with the Women's Art Register, being on the Board of The Boite, and working on the Education program for the 'Flesh after Fifty, changing images of Women in art' exhibition and seeing what is unfolding in regards to feminism in theory and practice. Next year, our first grandchild. But that's another story...

Warmly,
Merren

[Alex Cuffe >>> Merren Ricketson 13/07/2020](#)

Dear Merren,

I'm reading your email in bed, I've pulled out my back for the 5th time this year. I'm propped with my pillows to best distribute my weight that I can but my shoulder is locking, sending sharp pains up through my neck. Reading through your email I forget that I am in my body, my mind wonders, I can smell the damp musk of the powdered clay. Dust sitting in the air illuminated by a ray of sun through a window, the smell of books, that vanilla aroma that they call Biblichor. I shift my weight again, needing to pee but dreading moving my body in fear of the cramping pain. I'm sort of transfixed on the detail that I am the same age as your child, Hannah. I feel humbled that I have had the insight into your life and journey. How the generations have passed down so much and hearing that your children are your biggest teachers. I feel the feeling of sonderness at a strangers life. Of how much we don't know of strangers.

So... My mother died when I was 18 of secondary breast cancer. My earliest memories of her were of holding what we called emu eggs. They were drains from her surgery, a double mastectomy, I remember the deep colour of the blood that would fill them. Apparently, when she told me she would possibly die from breast cancer, my mother said I responded through sobs, 'but who will make cookies'. She would recount this almost like a criticism. Studying psychotherapy, I'm taught that parents teach their children how to process emotions. And reflect how difficult it is to feel safe within feelings.

I keep thinking about the worn grooves on the table you inherited. I wonder if you found them, whether your fingers still fit within the groove, I wonder if your nails are still kept short or if you bite them when you're stressed? My aunt offered to send me my mother's quilt a few days ago. I've only just started talking to her, it's been eight years since we were talking. I was so scared she would reject me and my transition. She is the closest thing I have to a mother. When we met at a train station in Footscray we instantly fell back

in love and spent hours wandering the streets looking for food she wasn't intolerant to. Talking about trauma and mental health of the family. She cried when she noticed I wear my mums necklace. A heavy silver chain our old neighbour made for her when I was 7. I declined my aunties offer to look after the quilt. I'm afraid that it will become damaged under my possession. That I am still so uprooted that it will become lost in the endless moving one does while young. But maybe if I have ever have children I will want this heirloom as some object of a person they will never know.

I don't feel young. I joke that trans years are like dog years. That makes me 68. I joke but the feeling sits heavily, I am one of the older people I know in the queer community. there are in fact only three older trans woman in my community. All of which don't really speak much to me. Most of my friends call me mum, some even joke and call me boomer. There is a lot of grief not being able to look to others to see your future, what is possible, what can one become? There is an empty heaviness on my chest to this thought. I'm often a little tense talking to older women. I wonder if they can actually accurately see me. What lens do they interpret my body? Will they hear my voice and think that they can see through me. That even conscious efforts to accept me the bubbles of the subconscious will prove their disbelief. They say what makes a community is intergenerationality. I don't know the stories that have come before mine. I am yet to imagine if I will be alive in a year or two. I heard most of the older queers moved to Lismore and the gold coast during the aids crisis in the 80s.

I want to thank you for sharing your story, how generous it is. That my work has prompted this response and that it feels so familiar yet new to hear. As a stranger studying psychotherapy, this feels so normal to me. I wonder what our talks will hold. How completely odd yet normal it is to be typing to a stranger talking about gender and art over the internet during a global pandemic. How mundane it is yet every moment could be a movie we watched years before. I think so much about what a future could look like and realise so much from this opportunity to talk to you, that I don't know what the past is either. The feeling is of just floating in the now as my body aches.

Thanks again and with warmth,
Alex