

Eve Vincent

## OUTSKIRTS

I regret that circumstances make it impossible for me to have an elephant as co-habitant.

Keri Hulme

The world's first zoo was in Vienna. Melbourne Zoo, modelled on the London one, was about the eleventh. It opened in 1862 on the outskirts of town.

At first the animals were kept in old circus cages, wooden houses and a dome aviary. For years "all visitors could hope to see were some slightly unusual domestic animals and song birds." Then in 1881, the Zoo bought an elephant. "Ranee" was shipped from Calcutta. What an exotic import from a distant pink port! The captain had his crew construct a cage on deck. During a storm off the heads of Cassiope, Ranee wrapped her trunk around its window bars to steady herself on the slippery, sloping bow. Her bellows and the slaps of thunder lasted all through the salt night. The sailors shook until dawn.

Ranee arrived in Port Melbourne at night and was walked across the gas lit city to her new home. Shortly after this, the King of Siam sent two elephants to Australia as a gift. A boy elephant and a girl elephant. One for Melbourne, one for Sydney. The Melbourne Zoo chose the girl, because they already had a boy, Ranee from Calcutta. But Ranee was actually a girl, with an unusually thick tusk. Once this disappointing discovery was made the other elephant was sold to Adelaide. You must remember this was in 1883, before elephant lesbianism. I don't know what the King of Siam made of all this.

*Ranee, a fine Indian specimen, has grown two feet since she arrived. The patient monster is a great favourite with children.*

*The Age, 22nd February 1890.*

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I arrived in Melbourne in late summer. When I moved into my weatherboard house, I inherited the tomato crop. I found shrines under thick leaves. I made sauces and spicy chutneys.

I had the front room and hung thick curtains to keep out the noise of the traffic. My housemate was a witch. That was the first thing she said to me.

("I am a witch")

I like honest people, and had nowhere else to go.

She swept my room for me, as I carried in my boxes. Her velvet skirts and the stiff bristles circled the floorboards. She laughed into the corners to clear out old energy and dust. We found a box of tapes, left behind. All of them were marked "Roy." When I asked "Why'd he leave?" Witch shrugged and said "circumstances."

I listened to one of the Roy tapes. Roy #7. One man, one voice. His body a cage, it was like a fuckin' zoo in there! I could hear bird songs and calling, screeching and roars. I heard violins and wailing, though that could have been Witch. I heard distant voices and screaming in my ear.

I could hear thunder and bellowing. If I owned those tapes, I'd leave them behind too.

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A German Jew went to war. These are the circumstances. It was 1916. That war, mud and guts and trampled poppies. Alfred Wolfsöhn was a medic, tending the wounded and dying. I have nicknamed him wolf!

wolf! heard sounds you have never heard. Young men, dug into tunnels and wet trenches. Pouring over the lip like ants, acting on orders. It hailed bullets all winter, spring, summer, autumn, winter ... Bloody, messy stuff. wolf! "became both fascinated and horrified by the extraordinary sounds which suffering elicited from the voices of soldiers."

After the war, wolf! developed a mental illness. Aural hallucinations over breakfast. Voices of anguish that lingered into the rainy afternoons. He began singing lessons, in a room high above a narrow street with a low sloping roof. Singing, wolf! hoped, would be a sort of exorcism. His first teacher liked folk tunes. His second, opera. wolf! quit.

wolf! began his own exploration of the expressive capabilities of the human voice. He fled Nazi Germany and worked with London's actors and singers. One of his most gifted pupils extended her vocal range to eight octaves. Most students could rumble and squeak over seven. Pretty impressive huh?

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I arrived in Melbourne in late summer.

All through the autumn I liked to catch trams through the streets and read faded flaking posters out the window. All the good gigs were last month.

It was a Wednesday. The first cold day of the year and the tram was thick with wool and felt. It smelt like a cupboard. The seats were all taken and the aisles were packed. Everyone had their cheeks pressed to each others' breasts, their nostrils in strangers' armpits. "Please move up," said the tram driver. He had an accent, Indian maybe. "Ladies and Gentleman, please move to the back of the tram." All the black coats and suits were just standing there. Their arms swung from the straps, fingers clutching loops and shopping bags wedged between legs. No body moved.

"Ladies and Gentleman, if you don't move to the back of the tram, I will drive you to Royal Park and feed you all to the animals."

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wolf! died and so did Ranee. Another elephant, Queenie, died as well. These are the circumstances. Up until 1962, elephant rides were a popular activity for children visiting the zoo. That way elephants could earn their keep. Queenie was a gentle animal with dreamy eyes and lashes as thick as a broom. She was quite famous, in a zoo animal kind of way. Once, a group of school boys crowded around her. They had their shirts untucked and their ties loose. They were wild boys. They teased Queenie by holding fruit and nuts in outstretched palms and then withdrew them as her trunk tickled their fingertips. Queenie disappeared behind the house, to her pool. She came back and mimicked the boys, holding her trunk out to each of them and curling it back to her body. She held her spiralled trunk to her chest. Then suddenly she soaked those boys with a spray of muddy water from her pool.

In 1945, gentle Queenie was being fed by her keeper. He tapped her trunk and she attacked, crushing him to death. The daily papers put her on trial. "Queenie convicted of the deliberate killing of her lifelong keeper" ran one headline. The public pleaded for leniency. The Zoo had her shot.

Oh Queenie.

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I'm in this pub. The red carpeted back room is smoky and quiet. He says "I don't know much about my family history. But I've got this one story." The

beer's on him, so I'm listening. "It's pretty funny." I'm leaning forward on the varnished bar, feeling my elbows get sticky. He slurps foam from his glass and pushes the curls from his forehead with a flat palm. "My ancestors owned some land in Melbourne. Early on when Elizabeth Street was a muddy track."

When Royal Park was on the outskirts.

"When Swanston Street was ... just some street. They owned this land, where the town hall is now. They decide to move east, to Gippsland, get some land up there and sell timber. They wanted to clear the country, so they swapped their bit of city for an elephant. This is true right. They got this elephant and took it up to Gippsland, to get it to work, dragging timber limbs. But it died."

"The elephant?"

"Yeah. On the way to Gippsland, it died."

"Oh." I drain the dregs of my beer.

"Pretty funny huh?"

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wolf! died but his work lives. One of wolf!'s most devoted students, Roy Hart, founded a company to continue his teaching. In the south of France they continue to investigate the human voice, with all its possible expressions. Teachers lead students through an aural geography. They cross borders, and break down the barricades. They scramble scales and mine the deep octaves.

The "Human Voice" they say, is multi-octave. It is woman and man, dark and light, high and low.

It is rumble and squeak, many worlds, many countries, many animals.

It is elephant and keeper.