

## ***Spring Street*** **by Alice Bishop**



Robert Woodward, *Coles Fountain*, 1981. Stainless steel, bluestone. Gift of G.J. Coles and Coy. Limited. Parliament Reserve, cnr Spring and Albert Sts, Melbourne. Photo: Patrick Rodriguez

*'I like water very much to work with. ... it's a bit difficult of course—one can't put it in a lathe and shape it, as you do with metals, or forge it or cast it. But those difficulties themselves are what give it its main charm.'*

—'Bob' (/Robert) Woodward, Fountain Sculptor, 1974<sup>1</sup>

The hospital, Epworth, is the only building between our old apartment block and a short walk to Fitzroy Gardens—then to Parliament gardens—where we feed the possums at night and sit in summer, fountain side, hardly anyone else about. The gardens aren't as busy, or as lit up as other parks at dusk: Ed Gardens, Birrarung Marr or Carlton. Sliced up pear or celery heads, walnuts and bits of hardening bread—I fill my pockets with these things just so we can be close to the city animals. Heath looks over to me in the polluted darkness, almost purple from artificial light. *Should we call it a night*, he says—not really asking a question at all. The moon, maybe streetlight, outlines his short, rust-coloured beard.

<sup>1</sup> <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-220824431/listen>

I do a lot of walking, lately. People who know about disasters, natural and otherwise, say it helps. *Trauma*—it sounds like such a loaded word, one that's only said by Carlton women in wooden beads, by stethoscope-wearing men in chinos and leather loafers: people doing the diagnosing. So much so that I'd never say it out loud. People say the sound of running water helps, that regular sleeping patterns help, that you should be taking vitamins B, D and E. *Meditation*, well-meaning friends suggest but all I think about when I'm using the Headspace app is burning curtains. I think about what must have been in the fridge, on the kitchen table, what was on the TV even, when the house first caught bushfire-light. The only thing that really helps is the fountain: that, and the possums in the park—on purple Melbourne nights.

Our new-old apartment block is dark and damp but East Melbourne is quieter than Carlton, Footscray or Brunswick: the other places Heath and I have lived, in share houses we tried to call our own. Sometimes I walk down our new street, Albert, past the big dark cathedral and across to the triangle garden, back to sit at the fountain further south—its curtain of water calming and the other people sitting around it contemplating their own things: unsaid. Sometimes I stand in the middle of the horseshoe water feature and I'm there. Water is coming down from the sky and the bushfire's fizzling out. My mother Anoushka is smiling like she's young again. Dad, he's soaked to the skin.

*Put what you're so scared of saying out loud into writing, Liya, a social worker once said. It might feel like a weight off, just try.* So I did. 'I can't stop thinking about things burning up,' it read. And I wasn't just thinking of the building my parents lived in, of the bush. People too, they turned to ash. *See, the worker said, doesn't that help?* But I was thinking of the toy-like red helicopter that never made it to my parents' house, of the water it could have dropped over things—cool and clear. Then I'm back beside the fountain a small woman in overalls points to the palm trees. Seagulls mill about on the bright green lawn. *Don't you think they're lovely, just lovely?* She says.

Built in 1981, the fountain has been five more times around the sun than me, had so many people like me, sit near it—just to be alone, just to think. *Com'n babe*, Heath always says, when I'm reading up about things like the fountain. *Let's go for a swim, to the beach—I'll buy us hot chips.* But the usual stuff has lost its meaning: money and sand beneath my feet and routine and trips. Heath says, sometimes now, that I almost get obsessed. He has been beside me since it all, with his practical canvas Kmart slip-ons, his faded Adidas pants. He knows that it's a warning sign when I fixate things. But I listen to an old audio recording of the man who made the fountain; he talks about trial and error, about working alone, about figuring things out.

The fountain has hundreds of individual fountain bells. *It's Modernist*, the nice man from Melbourne City Council says when I talk to him on the phone. *One of my favourite pieces*, he says. He tells me that, yes, they do switch the water off late at night, but no one can say the exact time. An anemometer also sits atop the fountain to measure the wind—its small, cupped arms measuring knots. The council doesn't want water spray on extremely windy days—the kind of days when the hills north east of the CBD burn. But that's one of my favourite parts, the spay: watching working office women in pantyhose and cork-wedge heels, the odd grey-haired man in a too-tight suit, lean in as they're walking home to feel the fountain mist. Sometimes I can almost picture what they'd have looked like when they were kids.

You can walk right through the park, past the fountain, to Spring Street, where people with more money than us, not as much credit card debt, and homes of their own eat pistachio ice cream and the kind of cheese you fry and serve on with pomegranate jewels: rich and red as anything. Sometimes I sit on the steps at Parliament House and wonder how they got there—was it long office hours or family money or just luck? But maybe luck is the wrong word.

Our rented apartment is in an Art Deco block. Built in the 1930s, the walls have been covered and recovered in paint, cream. I don't dream of anything much when we sleep in the building, but when I do it's of the fountain. I'm standing in the middle of its U-shape. To me, right then, it's a horseshoe shape, some kind of good luck sign. In my sleep the fountain isn't built in the shape of a 'C' for Coles—for the legacy of a man who built the giant supermarket chain: cheap eggs and milk and boxes and boxes of unrecyclable cellophane. Bob Woodward, the fountain designer, though, I wake up and thinking of him, of his slightly unsure voice coming through my thumb-printed MacBook. Heath is still sleeping, as the sound city traffic begins to hum outside. Bob's talking about his childhood in Wentworth:

*"... We used to be in the bush a lot—chasing possums, rabbits and snakes. And we had a very happy life. It was the depression years but the depression meant nothing to us in those years. It was normal. Only our parents suffered."*<sup>2</sup>

We go back to Parliament Gardens that February, a year from the day the bush out east—of my parents' home—caught light. It's a purply dusk and the heat is coming back off the footpath as we walk towards Spring Street. The theater lights in the distance look like they belong on some kind of tree. Heath is talking about the beach again, about going to the cinema, about trying a walk along the St Kilda pier. *We could see the Walker Fountain on the way, Ley*, he's saying. But I'm not into underwater lights, a fake blue glow at night and concrete – no palm trees and circular footpaths.

*Let's stay*, I say. Because I have gotten used to things in these gardens, and because I've turned into one of those types: proudly and blindly declaring I stay this side of things—north of the muddied Yarra River, dotted with broken cutlery, disposable, and crumpled soft drink cans. *K*, Heath shrugs before sitting down—longs legs folded—to read up on his own small obsessions through an overheating phone: failing stock market graphs and international policy and the weather, warming. I walk across the lawn, under the palm trees and the fruit bats, flying back, to the fountain in the triangle garden—the one close to the place we've begun to call home.

As I walk out into the fountain my chest unfolds. The white noise sound of the water is not like the refrigerator hum of our apartment, or the endlessly suggested YouTube recordings of rain. There's a calm to it, as I walk into the curtain of water – the cool about my ankles as the traffic of Spring Street, the smell of smog, even thoughts of an old familiar hillside burning; it all just softens, then disappears.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

**Alice Bishop** is a writer from Christmas Hills. She was recently the recipient of the 2017 Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Prize for Fiction, and was shortlisted for the 2017 Horne Prize for her essay 'Coppering'. Her work has been published widely. Find links to her short stories and essays online at [alicebishop.site](http://alicebishop.site) or [@BishopAlice](https://twitter.com/BishopAlice).

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