

The presence of absence

Andrew Miller

I am a shape-shifter. I have been changing forms and identities ever since I can remember.

I am four years old again. I am very small. My brother is even smaller. He is a pillow of pink flesh lying beside me. We are in a caravan. The River Murray is out there somewhere, in the night, beneath the orange cliffs. There is a blanket hanging over our bed, separating us from them. The light still creeps over. I am scared and my brother sleeps. He inflates and deflates as they fight beyond the blanket.

I am four years old again. The shouting continues and the caravan door slams as my mother leaves. Dad remains behind. There is silence now. And my brother sleeps. He is only two. Hours later and I am shaken from my dreams. My dad's face is lined with fear and worry and tears. I am scared now. A pebble has been moved with a toe: an avalanche is sure to follow.

And here it comes. My dad is saying things that make no sense. Yet his gestures speak of terror. Perhaps Mum has gone to Blanchetown. Perhaps she has caught a bus back to Adelaide. Perhaps, barefoot, in the pitch black, she has walked the ten kilometres, through thorns, down dirt roads, to the roadhouse. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps she has flown away. And I am small and I feel my heart racing.

Ba—boom.

Ba—boom.

Ba—boom.

I am four years old again. We drive silently to the police station. It is neither morning nor night. Our car is travelling between worlds and between outcomes. My dad gets out, he leaves his body, he is someone else. 'I've lost my wife,' he says. I think he is crying.

I know I am.

The absence of my mother began with the slamming of a caravan door in 1974. The aftershocks have continued ever since. She never returned. Her absence is an active and volatile presence. Somehow she ended up in a muddy lagoon in the backwaters of the River Murray, somewhere within the grey skeletons of dead river red gums, a bloated body, bruised and broken having fallen from the orange cliffs, having smashed her head, having drowned. While I slept a woman lay dying. And I never knew that woman, but she was my mum. It took me nearly twenty years to realise that she threw herself from those cliffs that night, and with that desperate lunge she changed every day of my life to follow and those of my brother, Dad, and others too. None of us returned. We all fell over the orange sadness after her.

I am four years old again. I am caught in the trajectory of my mother's dive, forever falling and forever following.

As I lay sleeping a woman lay dying. That woman was my mum.

Ba—boom.

Ba—boom.

Ba—boom.

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