

Notes from Fiona's Masterclass

The Skinny Louie Book 1992

THE SETTING

Imagine a small town.

Along its edges, chaos.

To the east, clinking shelves of shingle and a tearing sea, surging in from South America across thousands of gull-studded white-capped heaving miles.

To the south, the worn hump of a volcano crewcut with pines dark and silent, but dimpled still on the crest where melted rock and fire have spilled to the sea to hiss and set as solid bubbles, black threaded with red.

To the west, a border of hilly terraces, built up from layer upon layer of shells which rose once, dripping, from the sea and could as easily shudder like the fish it is in legend, and dive.

To the north, flat paddocks, pockmarked with stone and the river which made them shifting restlessly from channel to channel in its broad braided bed.

Nothing is sure.

The town pretends of course, settled rump-down on the coastal plain with its back to the sea, which creeps up yearly a nibble here a bite there, until a whole football field has gone at the boys' high school and the cliff walkway crumbles and the sea demands propitiation, truckloads of rubble and concrete blocks. And the town inches away in neat rectangular steps up the flanks of the volcano which the council named after an early mayor, a lardy mutton-chop of a man, hoping to tame it as the Greeks thought they'd fool the Furies by calling them the Kindly Ones; inches away across shingle bar and flax swamp to the shell terraces and over where order frays at last into unpaved roads, creeks flowing like black oil beneath willows tangled in convolvulus, and old villa

The Hopeful Traveller

Prologue

2002

In which the island is described—Its history, geology, flora and fauna—The game begins.

SEE IT FROM above as the bold bird sees it, swooping to choppy waves, teasing and tickling. Inches from their fingertips she finds the updraught held like a surprise in the curve of water. It lifts her up, drawing her into a loop so that she might at first seem to be heading back in the direction she has come from, but that is an illusion: she is flying steadily forward, a hundred miles in a single day.

So she advances by a daring series of reverses.

See the island as she sees it with her black bottle-glass eyes. See the hump of it across the rolling stretch of water, its muscled shoulder rising on the out breath, sinking on the in breath, its highest point tipped with tumbled rock like the dorsal crest of some ancient beast. Once it oozed up molten to set as slab and bubble, a clot in the fiery crack, but over aeons the clot has been worn by water to its present form: an island separated from the mainland by a narrow channel, treacherous with reefs and a seething current. Its slopes have been carved to deep gullies, its cliffs are towering walls of crimson lava sculpted to arches and pinnacles and booming caverns lacy with birdshit. In only one place has the wall been broken. Between twin headlands set down like the paws of a sphinx on the sea is a bay. There the sea cuts into a beach of boulders and iron-grey sand

Mr. Allbones' Ferrets. 2007.

He stands in the dark, shoulders hunched, hands shoved deep in his pockets, the air poking chilly little fingers through rips and tears to bare skin. He wriggles his toes in thin boots, keeps a sharp ear cocked for the snuffling of a dog, the rustling of dead leaves that could mean detection: that he's been spotted and stands at that instant like some unwary beast, poised between the beads on the foretip of the keeper's gun. Beyond the crowd of trees just breaking into leaf a bird calls, over and over, a peculiar plaintive *whoop whoop* he does not recognise. The stars hang brilliant between the branches, a wide daisy-field of light. Bright enough to see by, though the moon has dwindled to a scraping. Bright enough to make out the belly hump of the warren among fronds of bracken and the pale web of his nets, knitted, he hopes, to cover every exit.

He stretches full length and, with his ear pressed against the swelling of the earth, he can hear the usual murmurings: things growing and things easing through narrow crevices, mingled with the rush of his own blood and the soft footfall of his own beating heart. And then, from somewhere yards below as he lies listening like a baby at the breast, there rise other sounds: the brush of something squeezing through a shaft, its fur burnishing clay, the sudden *thump thump thump* of the alarum, a rapid scrabbling, a muffled chorus of squeals, the drumming accelerating to a frantic tattoo.

Down there in the dark there's something approaching fast, red eyes glistening down the length of a tunnel, and there is no alternative but flight, abandoning offspring like a cluster of pink cherries in the nest, to bolt for the open or, if that is too distant, to scramble into the nearest stop, head wedged against a blind wall, haunches to the intruder. Safe, the rabbit hopes, from attack. Brain and eyes tucked securely beyond reach.

Limestone 2009 One

I was born in limestone country.

This has implications.

It is a different thing to be born to clay, or schist, or basalt.

Basalt country, for instance, teaches its children the lesson of insecurity. The hills may be quiet now: heavy muscled creatures, cloaked in bush or tawny tussock. The harbours cupped in their big hands may dazzle, dizzy with playful yachts in toy-box colours or serious with the chug and hum of freighters and containers and naval frigates and the occasional cruise ship materialising like some Miami hotel amid the dockside pubs and chip shops of a scruffy little port. All may appear in order, but that is just the surface. Once those hills ran liquid fire. Once that harbour seethed beneath towering clouds of steam and ash. And below the peaceful idyll, through fracture and fissure, the earth still burns. Rocks melt. This solid ground could burst beneath your feet. A plume of steam could hiss from a crack in the

Decline and Fall on Savage Street 2017

own money, to marshal whole battalions of workers, to govern a medium-sized country. She'd be good at that. In the meantime, she fusses over the placement of a kitchen sink.

The architect finds sinks a terrible bore. For him, the excitement lies here: in the drawing room, with its handsome side bay window and the cunning ceiling rose that doubles as frame to the marvels of illumination and also as concealed vent to draw warm air and contagion from the room beneath. Beside the drawing room, another as ample, as well lit, for dining, where glass-panelled doors open to a side verandah with — why not? — a conservatory. Vines and ferns, camellias and the scent of jasmine on a summer evening.

He sharpens his pencil, adjusts the set square, turns his attention from public rooms to private: the bedrooms across the hallway. The owners', with its fireplace and wide bay and window seat, and next to it a room that might be office or library, calm retreat for the master, and beyond that the children's rooms, one for boys, one for girls, and, to the rear, a bathroom with bath on clawed feet and handbasin, plumbed to a supply delivered by progress and ingenuity via pipes fed by tanks high on the peninsula hills. He allows himself also the fantasy of a water closet within the bathroom in the American manner, a closet that will quickly and hygienically deliver the owners' waste to the municipal sewers that are in construction, the first waterborne sewerage system in the country. All that mess and stink will be carried off to the east unseen beneath the city's streets to trickle into the sandhills of the estuary.

In the villa of ten rooms there will be no need for the scurry through the rain to the dunny by the back fence with its hovering flies, its little box of squares torn from the daily paper, its cloak of passionfruit vine framing the view of the distant back door beyond the damp ranks of silverbeet. No need for the nightsoil man in his noisome cart, creaking by at 2 a.m.

And finally the architect turns to the kitchen, doing his best to accommodate his redoubtable Efficiency Engineer with an arrangement of coal range and chimney, larder and scullery, meat safe on the southern wall as advised. And the two small adjoining rooms that will house the cook/housekeeper, one a bedroom, the other her sitting room, or perhaps a bedroom for her child. So many cook/housekeepers seem to have suffered an identical