The Gift of (In)Sight

Christine Dew[1]

The house sits high above a tea-coloured river. The river runs, invisibly from here, through densely wooded forest. It traces the floor of a silent valley and works its way towards the ocean. Currawong calls echo far above its quiet depths.

Two people, lovers and long-time partners, are staying in the house. They are surrounded by bush; eucalypt forest whose under storey is rich with casuarina, native berries, flowering grasses and shrubs, little orchids and mushrooms - too many to get to know in so short a stay. The river maps the edges of a national park that also runs down to the sea. They can hear it, the sea; below the wind in the trees and the trickle of the river, beyond the bird calls that puncture the sky. It grumbles deeper than the growlings of koala and possum, more insistent than the skitterings of night creatures or the rustle of bark, twigs and birds landing on their roof. A distant but rhythmic roar of energy.

They can see the ocean too, a triangle of colour through trees - sometimes barely distinguishable from the sky, sometimes bright and choppy with movements they can only just make out, and which are out of sync with the rumblings that travel up the valley to fill their waiting ears. Like a dream of the sea.

They are on a cape. On this side of the cape enfolded tongues of land construct the landscape's contours. From the beaches and hilltops they look like giant, lazy slugs lined up imperfectly on the shore. Or dark trails of paint squeezed from a tube. They have been lazing in the sun so long, an ancient forest ecosystem found time to settle and grow rich on their expansive and untroubled backs. Gentle, primeval atlases.

The rivers and streams find their way between these ancient creatures and end at beaches so fresh and uncompromising that they are famous for the lives lost there through shipwrecks. But they wish to 'lose themselves' more gently. The beaches are a treasure trove of delights and a source of energy so strong they bring these poor, exhausted city folk back to life. They traipse their length and breadth with enthusiasm they haven't known for a long time. They delight in delicate rock-pools, expand before majestic cliffs, contract to nestle with a grain of sand on a deep red velvet anemone. They revive in the 'peep' of small birds in the shrubs and wonder at the artistry in caves and the towering cliff face. They are

1 Chris Dew is a writer, photographer and academic with an interest in public space, landscape and memory. She is a Senior Lecturer in the History Program at La Trobe University. She has published work on the Merri Creek path in inner northern Melbourne and exhibited a multi-media installation of a rural Victorian landscape. She is working on a study of graffiti in the City of Yarra as well as a photographic history of the Kew Cottages site. She has spent considerable time on Cape Otway, southwest of Melbourne, where “The Gift of (In) Sight” was written.

awed by the ocean's rhythmic power; thrill at a glimpse of those who live within its shifting and nameless depths.

They want to live here forever, they haven't felt so good in a long time. They are laughing and walking and swimming and looking and hearing and feeling and smelling and eating and loving like they had only just got arms, legs and sense organs - like they never had bodies before. 'Nature' is what they're here for and they love its invasion of their sensibilities. Real fear of a bushfire; thrill of diving in a tossing sea; deep calm on the ridge above hushed valleys. Painfully exquisite minutiae within the forest's shelter: leaf, bark, twig, bird, mushroom, vine, raindrop, insect, berry, gumnut, orchid, grass, ant, bee. They drink 'nature' in, they are drunk with it.

They begin to belong. They begin to feel *proprietorial*. This is *their* road, that is *their* tree, they love *this* beach, they saw *their* dolphins surfing at sundown when no one else was around. They begin to be disappointed if they have to share any path, beach or view; they want it all to themselves. Greedy, needy city folk having the time of their lives. Alone in the wilderness, they imagine - like Adam and Eve.

Then they take a tour with a local Koori guide and their sovereign fantasies are shattered. They are standing on a cliff-top overlooking the Southern Ocean. They had walked to this cliff-top before - through the forest, all alone - and had eaten their lunch perched above this glittering, spitting and ferocious sea. They had swum in the small bay below at dusk, alone with the march flies and the calls of the sea birds. They had walked the length of the beach, in and out of shallow water, setting sun warm on their backs.

But they aren't Adam and Eve; they are standing on Aboriginal land! And this majestic cliff-top isn't their lookout over the wilderness; it is a huge kitchen whose hearth stretches for miles! Their guide points out the depth and extent of the middens; they go as far as the eye can see on either side, piles of ashes and emptied shells stretching along the coast they stand on. Meals have been shared here for thousands of years; lives lived and laid down here since forever.

There used to be a house here, they are shown tools left in the dunes. They have eaten their lunch on the hearth where a million meals have been shared before. They are not such pioneers! And the leaves, bark and twigs that they delight in with such rapturous abandon are ingredients - medicines and sweets. Stuff your fish with this herb, use this leaf for salad, nibble this grass when you're ill, that one for a sweet snack. Collect water with this reed; pick the fruit from this tree early in the morning. And the little bay they had swum in is where the crayfish were gathered by divers who knew not to take the young and the female, who knew to keep this kitchen bountiful for *everyone*.

They had fancied themselves to be alone in a wilderness, proprietorial and utterly original in their rapturous response to the landscape. But the 'wilderness' was revealed at that moment to be *their* fantasy. A coloniser's fantasy, the fantasy of one who comes to appropriate what they see. (If it is 'empty' then 'I' can lay claim to it. If there was no one here before me then what 'I' see must be *mine*!)

On that cliff-top their hubris was revealed. A whole world shifted out of focus and fell away. Another world emerged. In their rapturous drifting through

the landscape they had escaped their own everyday imperatives, they had fallen away from the world of production and reveled in their non-productive communion with 'nature'. But they had been separating and dividing all along. They had drawn a line between a certain nature and 'culture' - not wanting others to belong there like they did. They had fallen prey to the imperative of appropriation all over again. They wanted to be the first, the ones who had ownership of what their eyes could see. They were grasping at the land even as their eyes caressed the sea.

The paths had been trodden for thousands of years, that's what has made it so easy and pleasurable for them to follow - two hours or so to the water - they didn't have to forge new paths in dense forest, they went where animals, but also people, have been traveling over and over again. This majestic view has been a dining room since forever, that's what makes it welcoming, perhaps that's why they were drawn to eat their lunches there like so many before. They are not the first and they are not the only ones, why did they wish so hard that they were? They may fantasise their originality but did they really want the hardship that being the first and being utterly alone would entail? Hasn't their pleasure something to do with all those others, showing them the way in subtle traces left in sandy soil?

Their 'no man's' land is peopled over and over with lives lived on the bountiful hearth they had mistaken for the pioneer's lookout point; the edge of the known at the edge of the sea. But it was only the edge of *their* known and *their* beach, *their* paths, *their* forests fled from their grasp in that moment of dissolution and released them from the loneliness their lust for sovereignty would condemn them to.

What a relief to be freed of the lust for sovereignty, to no longer need to protect what is 'theirs' from intruders – from encroachment – to no longer need to treat others with suspicion! They had been defending something that was never theirs and never would be. And now that it was no longer *theirs*, they could look outward - away from them*selves*. They could stop protecting their borders and see their small place in the scheme of things. A moment in history leads from the past to their present, and they are making a small place in the future. But the seismic shift in world-view changes the world, they have a new place in and of the world – a present peopled by the past. The landscape is no longer 'empty', and they are no longer 'alone'.