

The Museum of Fire

*(Notes for a radio piece based
on a suite of five poems¹)*

(How can I express this?)

Beside the railway line

1) a small brush fire
on the edge of a hill

2) in the middle of a green oval, a woman walking
along the 100 metre sprint track one way
with a man in a suit walking the other

3) a series of concrete pits
covered in graffiti
flame colours, a private secret language

4) a burnt out house in an estate

The woman in the seat next to me, with an enormous white panda,
falls in the aisle as she gets up to leave.

Schoolchildren discussing sex and probability,
the girls twirling their hair.

5) the boys game enough to sit with girls,
and the boys too afraid

I am coming down the mountain to see you.²

*A companion essay for a sound version of poems from
Things in a Glass Box, produced by Stuart Ewings for the
CD Body of Words, Dogmedia, 2004.*

When I first saw the sign for *The Museum of Fire*, coming down from the Blue Mountains on a train, it caught my heart.

I imagined a museum filled with fire: big, small, bright, smoky; display cases filled with burning oily rags; glass rooms filled with old fires that have been raging for days and nights; fires just lit; grass fires, electrical fires; fires moving at incredible speeds and ones that consume so slowly they are almost invisible. All the colours of flames; and a phalanx of uniformed staff to attend them.

The museum I imagined was one that would answer the deepest longings of the child who stands for hours beside the backyard incinerator (a secret, illicit vice) feeding in different objects: a pen top, a brown paper bag, a sardine can, newsprint. Watching the qualities of things burning, things changing from one element to another and disappearing. Patiently sifting through the traces, scrutinising the remnants.

Of course, I discovered that apart from an exhibit entitled 'Fire in the home' (a 'simulation of a real fire'), the museum at Penrith, on the outskirts of Sydney, was merely a place filled with the paraphernalia of fire. A collection of fire-fighting equipment, burnt clothing, burnt furniture, fire bells and sirens, and mannequins showing burn degrees in the 'Panthers Burns and Emergency Services Exhibition'...

In other words, an adult's version of fire: something to be tamed and conquered, something to be fought against.

After all, how can you preserve or document fire? All you can do is represent its absence, and record its passage.

In the Museum of Fire
Lillydale Tech, 1972

Exhibit A -
Jenny Lovett's bright red socks:

the ones she wore the day
Miss McIntyre took us to Georges
for a needlework exhibition...

In making a radio program, devised around poems from my book *Things in a Glass Box*, I want to explore the nature of some of the wounds that are history, both personal and public, and think about what is involved in our attempts at suture.

I am attracted to the idea of the museum as a place (like memory) withdrawn from the reality principle: that everything decays and moves on; that ephemeral things are ephemeral; that the dead are gone.

How do we cross the boundary into that which *by its nature* is no longer accessible to us?

And between my remembering and your looking, what happens?

Making an Exhibition of Ourselves 2

(bold as brass)

waiting for the bus beside the Yarra, hanging around the BBQs,
and the Scotch College boys rowing for their lives
with Jenny and Susan Butler yelling obscene suggestions
in their wake.

Our teacher saying:

‘Those boys have probably never
seen girls like you before.’

A museum is more than just a place made up of things, it is also
an arrangement of bodies. It only becomes activated when there are
people in it: a network of gazes, positions, a maze of looks.

Colonising looks: like western explorers, the museum
specialises in discoveries of things that were never lost or hidden
except in a personal, subjective sense.

Thus we map ourselves onto the objects of the Other; looking
with wonder at things like the okapi³, like a child looking in a
mirror.

The museum is also a system of signs; each thing becomes
‘interesting’ (knowable / ‘discovered’) as it is classified and made
sense of through a common language.

Industry Integrity Ingenuity:

Our school motto was emblazoned on our pockets.
Everyone knew what industry was (factories),
but the rest was as mysterious
as why Mr Roberts always said
‘I appreciate your difficulties.’
(‘I *thank you* for your difficulties’ –? Doesn’t make sense.)

And every museum has its basement full of hidden things that
are unclassified (or unclassifiable), or simply considered less
important. Broken things. Bits. Things that are too small to be
caught in the grid of what is history.

Exhibit B:

(Making an exhibition of *someone else*, or ‘eyeing someone off’)

... the *dreamy* young man on the train with *gorgeous* eyelashes...
We’d search the carriages until we found him then sit opposite,
staring.

He tried to evade us by taking a later train;
we caught him out one night when we missed ours.

1st Class, 2nd Class, 3rd Class..

The boys would snigger
when the teacher said 'periods'

I'd get called 'sexy' by the boys at the station
and then they'd yell 'Aw she's flat as a pancake *anyway*'

What *is* this thing called history? How do we create it, how do we
give it form?

To some, history is a river. Heraclitus: 'You shall not go down
twice to the same river.'

To E.H.Carr it is a mountain: something with a factual reality, an
entity with a separate solid existence but which changes and takes
on different shapes and appearances depending on the position of
the observer.⁴

In this suite of poems it is the body of the okapi (the untouchable
exotic), and it is also fire, and childhood / adolescence.

But what is our desire for the okapi (and what the okapi
represents: the jungle, a primeval 'past')?
Trains rushing past each other in the night
clatter clatter

And what is the desire invested in all our various acts of looking
'back'?

I go to university and have dreams
about red trains and blue trains.

One day I meet a young student art teacher
who wants to work at a Technical School.
I ask her why, and she says, 'Well,
they're so good with their *hands*.'

In linking the five poems, I'm thinking of footsteps (as if each poem
is another room), and the sound of a train, because I think trains are
a bit like museums in that both provide a space for a certain kind of
thinking and remembering...

And what is history (the *writing*), but a train of thought / of
language? A particular type of movement and backward-looking:
a way of catching things from a position that is fixed but not
stationary.

It is a signifying practice – and hence a process constituted in
both absence and desire – laid down on the tracks of other desires.

In a train there are lots of gazes, glances and looks, but it's
considered rude to actually catch someone's eye or to be caught
looking. Best to look outside. A neutral place. But as soon as I
do, I find myself caught up in remembering, in reverie, a complex
system of internal dialogues.

In fact, the times when I am gazing out the window are often
those when I am being most 'inward'.

In the tunnel the windows
become mirrors.

I want to pick up the lobster phone
and call you...

...(What should I say?)

I want you to *listen*.

Another way of thinking about the poems as a suite is to say that each concerns the relationship between the exotic, the dead, and the child within; and the metaphors of history.

The art gallery is a house of dreams,
a dream home.

A Museum of Fire might also be a kind of hell... (a place to look forward to / a place representing all our past mistakes / a place where time has no meaning..)

My domestic science teacher
would be impressed.
I know my station in life,
I have the ticket
(under my fingernails, see?)

artless

And there is something especially dangerous about fire's ability to jump across natural boundaries and barriers, the way the wind can suddenly change and a whole State go up in flames as a 200 metre wide fire with a five kilometre tail turns and becomes a fire five kilometres wide...

The museum is a glass-house:
highly inflammatory documents everywhere

The Museum of Fire, as a metaphor for history, is also the crucible, the past out of which my present is formed: it is the elements I am made up of.

So my principal role here is that of curator: collecting objects, bits, fragments, souvenirs, stories, laying them out, enclosing and framing and positioning them for readers/listeners to wander through.

You are in a sleeping car with
your reading glasses on.

Be *careful* going past
Granville..

The things I want to talk about in these poems are gone. Like the woman killed in my brother's car accident when I was nine⁵, they can't come back, even if I wanted them to. All I can do is explore my historical relationship to them (examine the links, pick out the bones), and your relationship to my remembering.

And the quality of the desire that burns between all these things, and sometimes consumes it.

Inside it's like sex, the colours, the crowd...

I am a hillbilly coming down from the mountain

It's affair weather in Sydney

This is my river.

This is my fire.

This is me.

Endnotes

1. The poems are 'Diorama: The Melbourne Museum' 'Eleven', 'The Mummy's Foot', 'Shutter Moment' and 'The Museum of Fire'; from *Things in a Glass Box* (SCARP/Five Islands, New Poets series 2, 1994. Reprinted in *Box of Words*, Dogmedia, 2004.)

2. From 'The Museum of Fire', *ibid*. All further quotations from this source.

3. See 'Diorama'

⁴ E.H. Carr, *What Is History?* London: Macmillan, 1962. p. 21.

5. See 'The Mummy's Foot', *op cit*, pp 12-17.