

The Treachery of Images Will Set You Free

Nico is pregnant and everyone is excited except me. She had a few friends over yesterday and broke the news to them. Brewing coffee in the kitchen, I eavesdropped on the conversation, until a nauseous spell came over me and I spilled hot brew onto my hand. This morning I woke to find the skin around my wrist blistered and peeling.

It is mine, the kid. I am utterly unprepared. I am an idiot who burns his hand with hot coffee, and they expect me to be a parent. The task is daunting; I know something of childhood, but I know nothing of fatherhood. The kid doesn't even have a name yet – none of them have worked for me. The idea of bringing something into this world, teaching it things that even I don't know for certain, sounds arrogant and impossible.

Awake before Nico, I distract myself with early morning television. The news stories are uninteresting, the hosts' banter fake and uncanny. My attention drifts to the future. I wonder what comes after the human race and fantasize about a time when there is no such thing as people, only one great big tentacled god-being that never changes.

A news story brings me back to reality.

A ship had washed up on the shores of Madagascar. An old schooner, near 20 metres in length. Of the scant details relayed to me, the thing that sticks out the most is the vessel's name: the "HMS Misadventure".

And like that, I am transported back in time. Something hit me in just the right place, and I return to the past, to a moment I'd long ago left in some previous life. I am reminded that all the stuff I now care about once didn't matter... and that all the things that used to concern me so dearly matter no more.

It was more than twenty years ago when I last heard of the Misadventure. I'd known the captain. He had been a seminal figure of my childhood, an on-and-off mentor. He was my

first adult friend, and a man I once loved more than my own father, an old-style iconoclast by the name of Eraclese Murray.

Years ago, I had watched as Eraclese and his ship departed Australia, setting sail across the world. From the pier, I saw the wooden hull disappear beyond the horizon, venturing to wild, distant lands I could only imagine. And now, more than 20 years since that day, his ship had washed up on the coast of Madagascar.

Although he left such a grand impression on me, I only ever met Eraclese a handful of times, over the course of about 10 years. But each encounter happened at a crucially pivotal point in my teen years, and they always heralded a period of great change. The first must've been when I was 12. Or perhaps 13?

I was down at the Moonee Ponds creek, where the birds swim in sewerage that mixes into the Yarra. I would come here with the few neighbourhood mates I'd saved from the shift from primary to high school. Evening hangs at the creek became our one ritualised way of keeping in touch – although, at that young age, we didn't realise the symbolic importance of each meet-up. We weren't aware you could lose friends forever, that any day could be the last day they occupy a fixed position in your life.

It was night when we bumped into Eraclese. He was a vagrant at the time. A homeless camper. Addicted to sweet, boxed wine. His teeth were far and few between, and he stank like overripe fruit, an effect of his favoured drink.

His background was quintessentially Australian, a misfit born of an absent Greek father and a once-overbearing, now-senile, convict-descendant mother. He had the ability to synthesise vast amounts of information and channel them into incredibly niche topics and life observations. He knew how people walked when they came out of prison; he could look at any car and tell exactly when and how it would breakdown. He had memorised bread prices over the last thirty years and could tell you the difference between them to a decimal point. His favourite painter – although he could talk about any – was René Magritte. He knew every

work by Magritte, and boasted that as a young man he had been close friends with several of Magritte's illegitimate children.

But if you asked him to name the President of the US, or tell you what year it was, or give you a weather forecast for the week, he was stumped.

Looking back, I think of Eraclese as an exemplar of whatever an organic Australian strand of Zen Buddhism would look like. If, out of the Anglo-Christian values transplanted here by colonisation, that spiritual tendency harnessed to greatest effect by the Eastern religions, emerged through the cracks. If you assumed that non-dualist thought – that ability to envision a life beyond materialism and the cycles of suffering – was a philosophy with universal application, then its seeds could sprout anywhere, even in the virgin soil of colonial Australian society. Those metaphysical currents that the Buddhists, Hindus, Gnostics and Kabbalists all tended to could break to the surface of any culture. Not transplanted from India, China or Japan, but an Aussie subvariant organically developed. An event of convergent evolution: different organisms arriving at the same end state.

Well, taking all that to be true, then Eraclese was our halfway point. A uniquely Australian specimen, who would one day be identified as the missing link between ocker-fied Christianity and some future breed of Zen practice.

I only half remember my first encounter with him. It felt distinctly dream-like. Like I said, we were down at the creek, and just stumbled upon him. He was sleeping rough, living in a tent he'd pitched on a thin green strip by the otherwise concrete banks of the creek. He pulled us into his world with card tricks, showing off a little real-life magic to us; he made the King of Diamonds appear behind our ears and Queen of Hearts fall from the sky. We were fascinated, and in our child-like way fell in love with this strange man.

He taught us many truths of life: to love our parents despite their faults; to be kind to animals; to understand the plight of the poor and downtrodden. He encouraged us to read and to befriend people of different creed, colour, and class. He instructed us not to waste our lives

away in pursuit of unnecessary pleasures, or to listen too often to the self-critical voices in our heads.

We were about to leave the tent, eager to impart all this new knowledge upon our parents, when Eraclese mentioned he was very hungry. Without thinking, I handed him a chocolate bar that had been sitting in my jacket pocket.

At home, I told Mum and Dad about Eraclese and the many lessons he'd imparted on us. They hated him and everything he stood for.

My friends and I grew apart. Skip to five years later and I had nothing to do with them. My parents were going through a divorce, with all the commotion of lawyers and shared custody. This tumultuous circumstance allowed me enough free time to vent my anger and frustration upon the world. I was probably freer then than I've ever been since.

This was the time of my second encounter with Eraclese, homeless prophet.

I'd begun hanging out with a boy called Sister. I'm not sure how he'd copped his nickname, but it stuck. We'd been in the same maths class, but once we became friends, that class was a rare sight.

We'd spend school days roaming the neighbouring suburbs, exploring disused factories, breaking into skyscraper offices, sneaking into train yards. Pushing boundaries was a relished past time.

One night we'd snuck in to an old grain silo, when some good Samaritan saw us trespassing and called the cops. Well, we heard those whooping sirens and made a run for it, fleeing through backyards and office lots. But the cops stuck to us. They patrolled the block, circling it with two or three cars.

Sister and I ran through the suburbs, until we came to this house, a nice-looking place with proper hedges and new paint, and we jumped the fence and hid in the back garden, where it was all neat and trimmed. There were chickens and rabbits in some kind of coop, and

a manicured veggie patch, which doubled as a herb garden for mint and rosemary. We sat there for about an hour. The cops probably gave up, but we were too scared to give up on precaution, determined to sit there till dark.

Unknown to us, the homeowner saw Sister and I camping in his backyard. He came out of the house with a cricket bat in hand, ready to pummel us to death. I heard a scream of anger and turned in a flash to face him, and recognised it to be, of course, my old friend Eraclese.

He had undergone a metamorphosis. He was no longer a toothless wino but proper, middle-class proprietor. He wore a cashmere pullover, with shirt collar protruding out from underneath, and thin-rimmed spectacles covered his eyes. His teeth had returned. A cigarette sat comfortably in one hand, with a bohemian casualness, but it didn't smell like any cigarette my parents or I smoked; it was infused with herbs, unmistakably chamomile and probably thyme, blended with some kind of nut aromatic and a hint of sweetness from what I could only ascribe to marzipan.

He recognised me instantly and dropped the cricket bat. He beamed at me in adoration and laughed. Said it was good to see me. That he'd never forgotten the kindness I'd shown when I gave a chocolate bar to a hobo. I tried stuttering excuses for my being in his garden, but he would have none of it. He only had warmth and friendliness for me. Without further discussion, Sister and I were invited into his home.

It was a collector's paradise. We followed him through a labyrinth of artifacts, books, nautical maps. His house – a nouveau-riche, overly modern terrace, double-storied and fully carpeted – was decorated with oddities. Peruvian face masks, a taxidermized Mandril ape, the unpublished comics of Robert Crumb; these and more decorated Eraclese's home. We came to a living room where piles of cassette tapes had been stacked to gravity-defying heights.

He made tea while Sister and I sat uncomfortably. Off in the kitchen, he couldn't stop talking, although gone was the freneticism of his alcoholic days, instead replaced by a bourgeois sweetness. He asked us about our studies, and what we wanted to do with our lives, and if we had any thoughts about the future of our nation. We didn't offer him much; we couldn't. Gone was the imagination of my youth, replaced by a teenage apprehension. I felt distinctly not-a-child for the first time in my life. I hoped Eraclese wasn't disappointed by this.

When conversation lulled, he turned to discussion of his project of the last three years. Since going sober and cleaning up his life, he had begun a university degree. He was writing a doctorate, a masterpiece thesis on his favourite painter, the one love of his life, the idiosyncratic, inimitable, surrealist maestro Magritte.

Magritte, Magritte, Magritte. Once he'd started, it was all he could talk about. Excitement overtook him, and he told us everything about the Belgian painter and what he meant to the world, and what he meant to art, and how profoundly he had understood the human condition. Eraclese spoke at an ever-increasing rate, and it looked like he was on the verge of tears, as he threw his hands about like one of those inflatable tube men who dance outside roadside stores.

And, oh, how he claimed his thesis would be the final word. He'd discovered some conspiratorial secret behind Magritte – something to do with the painter's illegitimate Australian lineage, people whom Eraclese again claimed he personally knew. He alleged his studies had uncovered a truth woven into the Belgian artist's work; in his poetry, his paintings, his very philosophy. This thesis would set free some powerful idea that had been locked away for half a century, lying dormant in parchment, paper and canvas, filed away in galleries across the world.

The topic meant nothing to me and Sister. We had no interest in great truths or conspiratorial secrets, and even less time for the surrealist painter René Magritte. As Eraclese babbled on, we grew bored.

There was a laptop sitting on a sofa. A charging cord connected it to a power socket hidden behind an antique stereo. It looked like it could be worth something. Sister caught my eye, as a smirk appeared on his face.

The tea kettle boiled. Eraclese disappeared back to the kitchen. I grabbed the laptop and ran, sure that Sister would follow. I heard Eraclese call out 'boys?' repeatedly. I'd say it took him a good few minutes before he realised what had happened. He had been in such a kind mood that day.

We spent the night at Sister's place, a dingy little shack in Strathmore, trying to break into the password-protected laptop. I think the plan was to get in, wipe the hard drive and sell it. But by half past one in the morning, we'd had no luck unlocking it, so we went for a skate around the neighbourhood.

We arrived at the Moonee Ponds creek overpass, a steel bridge that allows local traffic to cross the gully. Without much thought, and only the occasional late-night trucker our witness, we tossed the laptop over the edge and watched the water trickle over it.

The laptop was no more. With it, went Eraclese's thesis and the entirety of his research of the Magritte secret. I didn't much care at the time.

I would later learn that Eraclese spent the next four months hospitalised. The loss of his thesis delivered him a nervous breakdown, one of the ones where the person never comes back quite the same. He was broken. It was us; we broke him.

Hence why, the third time I met Eraclese, it was a sombre affair.

The third time was just after I graduated school and was in that free-floating summer that follows, haven escaped the authoritarian days of school but not yet amassed an exponentially increasing list of adult responsibilities. In this time, I floated like a tumbleweed in the breeze, totally insecure but so beautifully impressionable and passionate.

Sister was out of the picture at this point. His dad had ramraided a newsagent's ATM, cleaning the front off it with his Jeep Wrangler. The cops sent him away and so Sister was deported to the countryside to live with his aunt, a vaguely wealthy rural aristocrat.

I was head over heels for my first girlfriend. She had broken up with me a month prior, but I still wasn't over her. I was maturing into a very serious and determined person, and I didn't believe I could live without her.

Walking in a neighbourhood I rarely visited, I stumbled upon a half-constructed house. It was one giant wooden frame, an unfilled mass of crimson timber. Whether it was being torn down or built up, I did not know, but I knew the man squatting there. Again, it was Eraclese Murray.

Although his figure was immediately familiar, his appearance had changed. A Manson-esque beard covered his face. His clothes were relics from the Salvation Army. Wrinkles had torn his forehead apart and his brow was pierced like a voodoo doll.

I realised what I had assumed to be the frame of a house was not a house at all, but a ship of gigantic proportions. Eraclese was building the structure from the outside-in. It looked majestic, a proper White Whale hunting vessel sitting alone in suburban Australia. This was what would become the HMS Misadventure.

He saw me. We locked eyes, he in the frame of the boat, me standing in the middle of the street. I didn't know what to say; I don't think there was much I could've said anyway. After a few measured seconds, he gestured for me to join him.

I greeted him inside the frame of the boat-to-be. Our small talk was brief. He showed me his blueprints and pointed to various designs and diagrams. He was patient and turtle-like in his movement.

He told me he would use the ship to find his father, determined to plug that hole in his life once and for all. A fisherman had told Eraclese that his dad had surfaced somewhere in

the Maldives archipelago, having made the Indian ocean his home. Eraclese planned to complete the construction of this vessel and seek him out.

I spent all summer building that boat with him. It was my act of repentance. Over the three months it took to assemble, we exchanged less than a dozen words. Many things melted away from my mind – my ex-girlfriend, Sister and his awful family life, the anxiety of study and work and the hopelessness with which I looked upon the average Australian adult's way of life. An attitude of misanthropy I had developed during my teen years disappeared underneath the spin of determined weeks woodcutting, iron-bending, sanding and varnishing. I committed everything I had to building Eraclese's boat; I would work on it all day, go home to sleep for six or seven hours, and then return the next day to do the same. My dreams were invaded by visions of the boat on tranquil waters. I was obsessed. It was all I could think of; how beautiful the individual parts were – the wood I carved and painted, the windows I bolted together – and how even more beautiful it would look resting upon crests of waves, bobbing up and down underneath a bright ocean sun.

The project was my salvation.

And then one day we were done. I was surprised, I hadn't prepared for the final day. There was little fanfare. Eraclese shook my hand, and we took one last stroll through the now-complete hull, admiring our handiwork while remaining in our trademark silence. A truck came to pick up the boat, and we met it down at the ports in Sandringham, where the driver had carefully deposited it into the water.

My anticipation for the moment was ill-founded. As with most of life, it was undramatic. Eraclese climbed aboard, waved at me from the bridge, and set sail to find his father. I watched him disappear over the horizon and that was that. My mentor was gone. I went on with my life, following its many twists and turns, charting the course that unknown powers had set for me.

And now, 20 years, Eraclese has returned to my life. This time, as a news story on early morning television. The HMS Misadventure has reappeared.

I wonder if he survived the shipwreck. I grapple with what this news might mean, and what lesson I am supposed to draw from it. I realise his arrival always heralds a new phase of my life, the signpost of an emerging era. I plan to reorient accordingly.

The thought that Eraclese is dead scares me. I reassure myself he's alive. I find it difficult imagining what his death looks like.

I am once again reminded that the stuff I once cared about no longer matters... and that things I now care for so deeply, once never existed. Everything is always new.

I start making coffee for Nico, who is stirring in the other room, and try coming up with names for the kid.