

## St Kilda Freefall

You get windburnt long before you could get sunburnt. And there's a sting in it usually, a sand sting.

You go along to the land's edge, hoping for one of those literary epiphanies, or – what are they? – littoral epiphanies: the ones you only get at the beach. Or at least escape from the unremitting stimulus of the city behind you. But you get blown back. Blown back unequivocally, onto the land, by a fierce gale that burnishes your cheekbones and scrunches up your eyes.

So you might not see them at first. *See what*, you ask. Exactly.

This place is full of things you don't see at first. Some of them have always been here. The huge mansions flecked with wedding-cake paint, or impressively dour and gothic with nary a lick since the day they were cast. Impossible to think of them being built at all. They have always been there, like specialised forms of rocks, hulking, honeycombed and habitable. Impossible, though, to think of their being built for any express inhabitants. The feel of communal living, of shared spaces, shared ingress and egress, of compromise, make-do and make-over, is everywhere about them. They are strata-titled, multi-tenanted, infinitely more permanent than their current inhabitants.

Half a lifetime ago you lived in one of those mansions – rented a room in a sixteenth of a two-storey building. You only ever opened your half of the front door. You'd never recognise it now. You'd need the address.

But walk up from Fitzroy Street in mid-winter. The shops have all changed tenants, and some are gone, like teeth missing in a familiar face. No more laundromat with the kind woman charging next to nothing to do your laundry for you. And it always came folded – Oh! – a domestic moment in a life devoid of domesticity. And you've changed, too, of course, no more sideways flick of the eyes from passing men. *Are you no*.

They're supposed to be all gone now: dealers and pimps, junkies and prostitutes. Cleaned up St Kilda so you can lap your latte leisurely. Now there are just businesses touting for business. On the streets, on the internet. On the rain-scoured pavements, shining as Paris and almost empty. But flick that sideways flick and see the women, young as ever, with the new names. Sex workers sex work. Users use. Workers sex users, use sex workers' work. *Whoosh!* goes the car pulling out from the pavement with the woman now inside it. *Whoosh!* goes the car pulling up and a woman walks away. All night every night all year years I know twenty I was away.

Nowhere to sit where you don't have to pay, so everyone's in the 711 where the coffee's cheaper which is not to say cheap. Faces like artists' models, raddled with hardship and raging all night but placid with one another now in the tender new light. Over the city the balloonists are rising. Sky in all the puddles. Time to go.

Turning around now to walk along the top of the hill toward the sea, still calm in sleep. And then the most unexpected thing in a row of iron fencing and security gates. Unlocked, an open gate. Inside the garden, in front of the usual monstrous edifice of cement, a circle, a patch, a world from another world. I look and look. It is only three things in the end. A swinging woman made of tin, the paint

curling off her, perches above a pot of succulents. She is smiling swinging smiling but perfectly still. A border of small stones leads away from the pot to the doorway. It is for a child to follow. A toy watering can in luminous plastic lies on the path. The child has been called in. From a place of caring into another place of caring. Inside and outside seamless in that world. Like nothing else in St Kilda, named for a place that never had a saint.