

I. Jacarandas

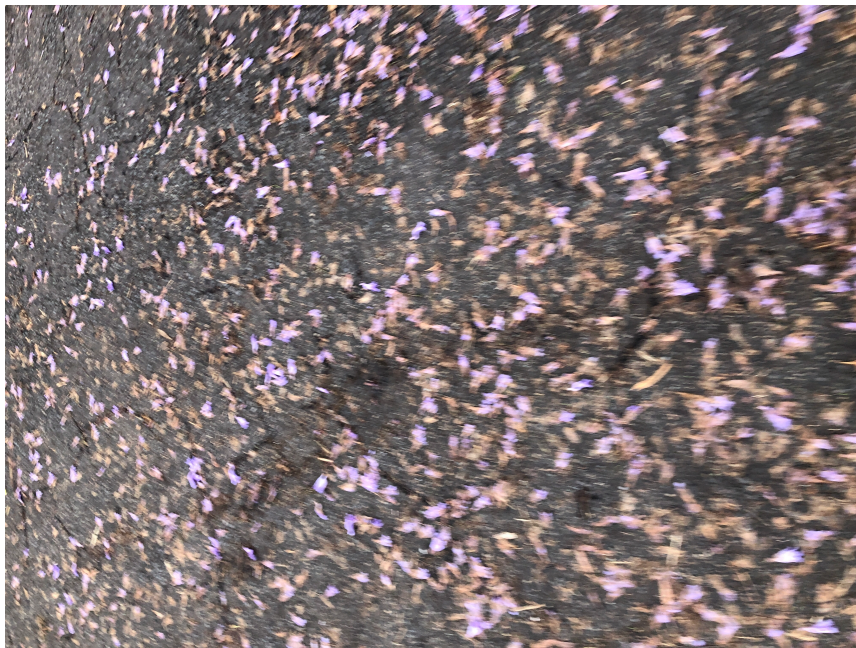


Photo of jacaranda flowers on the road, 2021

When you think about your childhood, you remember climbing jacaranda trees— their rich lavender blue blossoms peppering the green of the front lawn and up the driveway where the wheels of your Dad’s car would churn them into a grey sludge. He was relentlessly driving up, and reversing down, checking on you and your younger brother, Dylan, in between completing home deliveries— him and his Honda Jazz stained with the smell of Benson and Hedges smooths, wok, and labour.

‘Tell your dad he should be sweeping daily when the tree is flowering’, your neighbour would tell you, ‘look at the lawn and driveway, one of you could slip and fall and bloody your knee’. You wondered if her concern for your knees was feigned. Was this her attempt to curb your dad’s perceived indolence which ruined her utopian fantasy of white suburbia? Your neighbour couldn’t tell your dad herself because your Dad would leave home at 6:00am every Monday to Friday:



Photo of Mama and Yeye's takeaway shop, *South Asia*. Retrieved from your dad's Facebook, 2021

6:30am: Arrive at Mama and Yeye's takeaway shop

6:35am: Short flat white from the neighbouring cafe with a Benson and Hedges smooth— maybe a vanilla slice too

7:00am: Produce arrives— organise them in containers in the pantries, shelves, and fridges

8:30am: Prepare bulk ingredients for all menu items— garlic, onion, ginger, chilli, carrot, capsicum, broccoli.

10:30am: Cook bulk of all dishes to be ready for lunchtime rush at midday

12:00pm: Standby to cook more of whatever needs to be restocked

1:50pm: Cook own lunch— most likely Hainanese chicken rice or beef rendang

2:00pm: Eat lunch

2:20pm: Can of Coke with a Benson and Hedges smooth

2:30pm: Prepare and cut lamb, beef, pork, and chicken. Marinate overnight.

3:00pm: Clean entire kitchen area and mop floors

3:35pm: Benson and Hedges smooth

3:45pm: Leave

4:00pm: Arrive home

Your neighbour couldn't tell your dad in the evenings. Tuesday to Sunday:

4:45pm: Leave home

5:00pm: Arrive at Fairway 9

6:00pm: General managing and home deliveries — help in the kitchen if dinner time is busier than usual

9:00pm: Clean entire kitchen area, mop floors, and vacuum restaurant seating area

10:00pm: Leave Fairway 9 and drive staff to bus stops, train stations, or home

10:30pm: Arrive home

Your neighbour couldn't tell your dad on the weekends:

8:00am: Clean the house

10:00am: Leave the house with Lucy and the kids

10:30am: Arrive at Chinatown to buy produce

11:15am: Arrive at Thaitown to buy produce

12:00pm: Lunch in Thaitown — probably kuatiaow ruea with extra chilli for Lucy, extra egg noodles for Nicole, and extra pig's blood jelly for Dylan

12:50pm: Can of Coke with a Benson and Hedges smooth

1:00pm: Leave Thaitown

1:30pm: Arrive home

2:30pm: Leave home

2:45pm: Arrive at Fairway 9

2:50pm: Benson and Hedges smooth

3:00pm: Organise produce in containers in the pantries, shelves, and fridges

6:00pm: General managing and home deliveries — help in the kitchen if dinner time is busier than usual

9:00pm: Clean entire kitchen area, mop floors, and vacuum restaurant seating area

10:00pm: Leave Fairway 9 and drive staff to bus stops, train stations, or home

10:30pm: Arrive home

Your neighbour could only tell your dad — 'you should be sweeping daily when the tree is flowering' — on Monday evenings. Monday evenings were your dad's only time not working. Monday evenings were also the only time completely devoted to your family. You, mum, dad, Dylan, P'Porn and Pa'Ew would eat out every Monday evening — three out of four times it was a Thai restaurant. 'Thai food again!?' you and your brother would protest. From Cabrogal (Fairfield) to Eora (Thaitown) to Cammeraygal (Neutral Bay), your

parents remained uncompromising in their support of the Thai diaspora— a diaspora that, like many others, is economically, culturally, and socially reliant on the hospitality sector. How do you host while you are being hosted? According to Treuran et al., immigrants and migrants are often skill discounted, taking the best job they can get out of economic necessity (Treuran et al., 2019). The hospitality sector “provides refuge employment for these vulnerable job-seekers” (Treuran et al., 2019) through a wide range of jobs. These jobs often have low barriers to entry and require different skills and language proficiency (Treuran et al., 2019).

All your neighbours looked the same, spoke the same, and looked at you and spoke at you the same. Mostly, you were invisible to them— until you weren't. This time every year, your mum would say to you “the jacarandas are blooming, they're your Khun Yai's favourite” — your neighbour would say to you “tell your dad he should be sweeping daily when the tree is flowering”. For you, the lavender blue blossoms churned between rubber and concrete were indexical markings of your family's racialised labour, just like their scars healed over from hot oil and large knives. For your neighbour, it caused a glitch in her white suburban simulation. Your neighbour had seen *Blade Runner* a few times and her imaginary of dystopia was a hyper-Junkspace landscape bore from the fear of increasing globalisation and imminent Asianisation. If “aging in Junkspace is nonexistent or catastrophic” (Koolhaas, 2002), then the grey sludge was a jarring nudge to the rib that her utopia could “turn into a slum overnight without warning” (Koolhaas, 2002). For your neighbour, the grey sludge was maintenance, workers, maintenance workers, night workers, cooks, cleaners, out of order signs, wet floor signs, mops, brooms, and vacuums. The grey sludge was black hair, almond-shaped eyes, flat noses, Benson and Hedges smooths, strange food smells, and languages she couldn't understand.



Still from *Blade Runner*, 1982 dir. Ridley Scott

II. Australian Idol/Idle



Still from *Australian Idol*, 2003, Channel 10 Network

idol (n.)

1. **a.** : An image or similitude of a deity or divinity, used as an object of worship
2. *figurative.* : Any thing or person that is the object of excessive or supreme devotion
6. **b. logic.** : A false mental image or conception; a false or misleading notion; a fallacy

idle (adj. and n.)

2. **a.** : Of actions, feelings, thoughts, words, etc.: Void of any real worth, usefulness, or significance; leading to no solid result; hence, ineffective, worthless, of no value, vain, frivolous, trifling. Also said of persons in respect of their actions, etc.
4. **a.** : Of persons: Not engaged in work, doing nothing, unemployed

On birthdays, Christmas, Australian New Year, Chinese New Year, Thai New Year, your family would celebrate with karaoke— a twenty dollar microphone from a market stall wired up to secondhand speakers that would blow if you slightly turned the dial, plugged into the family laptop connected to the TV. Your mum would tell you to run the free karaoke software she downloaded and queue anything by Carpenters (her favourites are 'Rainy Days and Mondays' and 'Yesterday Once More'), 'Don't Know Why' by Norah Jones, or 'White Flag' by Dido. Thai songs she would queue for herself because you never learned to read or write.

Unsurprisingly, your mum— a highly empathetic woman with an affinity for ballads— became emotionally invested in Channel 10's singing competition and reality television program *Australian Idol*— smittenly nicknamed *Idol*. You sat with Dylan in your parents' restaurant every afternoon and evening after school— you would do your homework and pick whatever you wanted off the menu for dinner. You would sit in the pantry room atop buckets of jasmine rice, snacking on cashews by the handful. A 90's box television was placed on top of the smaller fridge, carefully, so that the wonky antenna would receive something other than static— your mum would fiddle it into position to air *Idol* during the dinner time rush. Luckily for your mum, the pantry room was open with no doors and connected the counter area with the kitchen. She could seamlessly walk through while helping in the kitchen, working the till, and waiting tables to catch glimpses of *Idol* in between.

Your mum's blossoming love affair with *Idol* ended after two seasons once she realised it was unrequited. In the show's 2004 season, Australia was introduced to eighteen year old Zhuo "Flynn" Liu, a heavily-accented Asian man portrayed as physically undesirable yet endearing due to his naiveté surrounding his lack of talent. To introduce him on screen, the show's hosts ironically narrate, "a man called Flynn was sharing his good will and getting ready to unleash bucketloads of, what we call, the X factor... extraordinarily memorable". From the moment we see Liu, the running gag is his heavy accent, with the *Idol* judges going back and forth with him on the pronunciation of his name— '*Hello everybody, I'm Flynn, hello everyone*', '*Fling?*', '*Flynn*', '*Fling*', '*Flynn*', '*Flynn or Fling?*', '*Flynn*', '*Fling*'— a ten second moment that goes on for ten seconds too long. Liu performs his version of Michael Jackson's 'Beat It', laden with his heavy accent, tonal mishaps, and gangly, effeminate, ill-timed dance moves. This juxtaposition, according to Law, "must have been delicious for *Australian Idol* producers: the unabashed sexiness of the song, and Liu's almost blunt lack of sex appeal" (Law, 2009). The way in which this scene is edited— cutting from Liu's performance to show the *Idol* judges wiping away tears of laughter— encourages the viewer to laugh or scoff or smirk along with them. Of course, Liu's audition is met with a unanimous "it's a no from me", to which he bows and humbly thanks the *Idol* judges. Outside the audition room, Liu thanks *Idol* for giving people the "the opportunity to finish their dreams, to tell people music is the good stuff, that music is connected with their life".

Liu was not the only auditionee to earn screen time due to the novelty in their lack of talent, however was “singled out as having extra appeal, presumably because of his ethnicity and the currency it held” (Law, 2009). Throughout the consequent seasons, Australia is introduced to many more Asian-Australians with similar edits drenched in irony— famously, Jennifer Lai and Vinh Bui in 2009. According to Law, Liu made cameo appearances that “seemed increasingly mean spirited. They culminated with the finale at the Sydney Opera House, in which [Liu] sang tonelessly, danced in a revealing tank-top, accompanied by professional choreographed dancers” (Law, 2009). Shortly after *Idol*, he underwent cosmetic surgery on his cheekbones, jawbones, and eye lids “for my career” (Fawcett, 2005; Law, 2009). There is a collective sense of optimism that Liu understood his popularity bore from novelty and that he was the subject of a national joke. However, his actions post *Idol* indicate his genuine desire in pursuing a career in the Australian music industry, revealing that he may not have been privy to the irony of it all.



Photo on 'How to Glue Your Eyelids'. Retrieved from <https://jonellepatrick.me/2012/01/21/how-to-glue-your-eyelids/>, 2021

For your fourteenth birthday, you organised a scavenger hunt across the city— Gadigal land. All your friends met at Town Hall steps at 11am and had three hours to complete the tasks on the list while handcuffed to each other. The list included things that teenagers

found funny— ‘Stand in the Hyde Park fountain’ and ‘Hold a pigeon’. Once a task was complete, photo or video evidence had to be provided for you to decide a winner. At the end of the three hours, everyone convened at Town Hall steps where the winner was announced. Your friends took this opportunity to sing you happy birthday, cut a Coles mud cake, and give you your presents. Your two best friends from primary school saved their presents until last— you spent each other’s birthdays as a trio every year. One of them handed you a small pink box with Japanese characters printed in black. On the box was a picture of eyes so you deduced that it was a beauty or cosmetic product but you couldn’t decipher the text. You looked up at your two best friends, “oh it’s eyelid glue! To make your eyes look less Asian!”. They widened their eyes with their index fingers and thumbs. You sensed the expansiveness of your body— filling too much space yet liquifying, melting and dissipating into the sounds of teenaged white laughter. You don’t remember any of the other gifts they gave you or what you did with the eyelid glue.

III. Driver’s License



Screenshot from Twitter. Retrieved from Twitter user
@lildedjanet, 2021

You are twenty four and can’t drive— you don’t even have your L’s. You passed your L’s test on your sixteenth birthday like everybody else but failed to log 120 hours before the license expired on your twenty first. You didn’t resit the test. Countless friends and ex

boyfriends have offered to teach you since, and the subject is brought up every time you show your NSW Photo Card to the seccy at the pub. The subject bothered you when you were younger. You would sit on the oval at lunch time and silently ache at quips from your friends that implied your ineptitude and idleness. A flash of keys, red P's, green P's. You grew mad— your anger misdirected at your parents for what you believed to be their ineptitude and idleness. Your mum wouldn't get her full license until you were twenty two. The roads scared her because she had grown up in Bangkok— she would clutch on to your arm even at zebra crossings. Your dad spent the little free time he had resting, peeling ginger or cleaning the house. Your parents felt guilty for working when you wanted to go for a drive, and so they paid for twelve driving lessons but couldn't afford more.

You were eighteen and in the car with your second boyfriend. He had road rage like he had something to prove. You were in the passenger seat when a driver cut him off. He merged into the right lane to make visible the other driver, and wound down the window next to you. 'Fucking Asian!' he yelled across you at the middle aged couple sitting in their car. They looked at him, then at you. You looked at them, then at him. You felt the words reverberate in your chest, sucking dry the moisture in your mouth and throat. Were you visible to him? You felt every single atom in your body instantaneously, you felt them as they dissolved, fusing into the air and the silence.

You are twenty four with a shit sense of direction— you blame it on the fact that you can't drive. You are the polar opposite of your dad in this aspect, who has gained an extensive knowledge of the locale within which he completed home deliveries— and beyond. You became reliant on Google Maps to take you from A to B, even within your suburb. Compass points, labels, scale, grids. In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Homi Bhabha discusses the creation of cultural diversity and the containment of cultural difference:

“...although there is always an entertainment and encouragement of cultural diversity, there is always also a corresponding containment of it. A transparent norm is constituted, a norm given by the host society or dominant culture, which says that 'these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid'.” (Bhabha, 1990).

‘Our own grid’. A grid that you are subject to. How do you navigate a space that splinters your being? A space that cherishes what is palatable in order to claim itself ‘democratic’ and ‘civilised’ through ‘cultural diversity’, yet alienates the assemblages of forces that ground you? A space that ceaselessly grinds against the bedrock of oneself and one’s culture, pulverising cultural difference into ashes to be thrown to the wind. When large, ugly craters are left behind, how do you orient as Orient?

Your dad navigates the space through labour. Eighty eight hours of toil per week just to be located within their grid. He is located as the model minority— hard-working, resourceful, and therefore deserving of direction. Eighty eight hours of toil her week just to be able to find his way from Cabrogal (Fairfield) to Eora (Thaitown) to Cammeraygal (Neutral Bay) and beyond without a map.

It is unsurprising that the analogy used by Homi Bhabha to describe one’s belonging in a host society is cartographic in nature. The system under which cartography was fabricated— the colonial world making project— was one of the grand architects in active un-belonging. Dispossession, displacement, genocide. Cartography functions as a colonial tool that ‘altered the ways in which space was considered and led to attempts to apportion and control it’ (Storey, 2012). For example, maps produced out of the British Empire depicted its’ territories in pink. This conveyed ‘objective’ and ‘factual’ information regarding geographic space and political relations. Simultaneously, these maps claimed and consolidated the British Empire’s control over a quarter of the earth’s land area, including the peoples, cultures, and resources that inhabit these spaces (Storey, 2012). Today, it is nearly impossible not to be located on a grid, whether materially or metaphysically. Satellite imagery, aerial photography, 360° interactive panoramic view of streets, surveillance.

You are twenty four and you sit in your shit sense of direction.

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