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WINGED SANDALS

..... AN ESSAY

MARTIN EDMOND



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MARTIN EDMOND

Martin Edmond grew up in a remote mountain village in New Zealand's King Country. After university, he joined travelling players Red Mole, touring extensively and internationally in the 1970s. He spent another five years working as a lighting designer for rock 'n' roll bands. Since 1981 he has lived in Sydney, working as an author and a screenwriter. He has written the feature films *Illustrious Energy* (1988), *Terra Nova* (1998) and *33 Postcards* (2011); his books include *The Autobiography of my Father* (1992), *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont* (1999) and *Chronicle of the Unsung* (2004), which won the Biography category at the 2005 Montana Book Awards. Subsequently he has published *Luca Antara* (2006), *Waimarino County* (2007), *The Supply Party*, *Zone of the Marvellous* (both 2009) and *Dark Night – Walking with McCahon* (2011), which was shortlisted in the 2013 NSW Premier's Literary Awards. Martin has just completed *You Must Remember This*, a memoir of his parents' courtship and marriage during World War II. His next book will be an account of the cryptic life and strange death of the convict artist Joseph Lycett.

WINGED SANDALS

I

It was September, 2003. Spring in Pearl Beach, a pristine morning with the green horizon of the bush silhouetted against a royal blue sky and the faint susurrus of the sea on the shore beyond the lagoon. I was at my desk in the house in Cornelian Road which I shared with my partner and our two sons, looking at the bills and wondering how we would get through the next few weeks: a not unfamiliar dilemma but one which was becoming increasingly insupportable. Something had to be done. Maybe I should return to my job of last resort: driving a taxi? It was a step I had determined never to take again but at that moment there didn't seem to be any other option.

Then the telephone rang. It was one of those rings that cut through the ordinary air, banishing birdsong or silence with their urgency: a death? an emergency? Something life-changing. I picked up the receiver. *Larsen* . . . said the harsh and peremptory voice on the other end. Although I had not spoken to him before I knew who he was: the Head of the Department of English at Auckland University. And there was only one reason why he would ring me at home—to say that I was being offered the 2004 literary fellowship at the university.

I should have been delighted but I wasn't. The offer came down upon me like a doom. My partner had not wanted me to apply for the fellowship and would not be happy now that it was mine—if I took it. She did not want to go to live in Auckland for a year; it would, she said

melodramatically, kill her; and, indeed, she stayed in Pearl Beach with our two sons, then six and three; and lives near there still. It was one of those forks in the road, one of those incalculables that come suddenly upon us and change everything. A doom, yes, but perhaps also a blessing: we had been at odds, somehow the love we had for each other transformed into a war of attrition; where once we made each other happy, now we caused each other intense misery. And what were we thereby doing to the kids?

I had by then published two non-fiction books in New Zealand—a memoir of my father and an unconventional biography of a painter—and there was a third, more autobiographical than biographical, about to come out; it was to be launched in Wellington in March 2004. More important, I had a fourth book to write and the fellowship would give me time and money so to do. But to sacrifice family life for that . . . ?

It was a cruel dilemma that did not actually detain me as much as it might or perhaps should have done. I accepted the fellowship and later accepted my partner's decision not to uproot the rest of the family and come with me. When I left Pearl Beach for Auckland I knew I was also leaving her behind, that for good or ill, our paths were diverging. What I did not know is that the train of events thus initiated would send me, after a decade and half of freelance writing, back behind the wheel of a taxi again.

II

I came first to Sydney on May 18, 1981, expecting blue skies: it rained without stopping for two weeks. I was staying at the Springfield Lodge in Kings Cross, in a room with a double bed and not much else; there was a view out over the dripping, clouded city with its barbarous neon glowing lurid in the wet dark. Late night and then breakfast TV came through the thin walls on either side. I lived on sandwiches and tea or ate out in restaurants on Victoria Street and Darlinghurst Road. Each night I went a

few doors down to the Manzil Room to check out the bands. It wasn't so different from the life I had lived in San Francisco and New York; except that every weekday morning I trudged through the sodden strip and down the hill to the Combined Services building overlooking Victor Trumper Oval in White City to learn the local version of what in London is called the knowledge.

I'd already done a lot of driving. I qualified at fifteen and still remember the euphoria of that day, as I held in my hands the little green book with *Motor Drivers Licence* emblazoned in gold letters upon the front; and made my sisters crazy by repeating those three words over and over. I passed the test in my mother's car, a red and white Hillman Imp; later I graduated to my father's black and grey Chrysler Valiant with the red upholstery; and then there were various cars of my own, beginning with a pale yellow Light 15 Citroën I bought off an uncle for \$350.00. I'd driven municipal buses, including trolley buses, in Wellington; wagons full of musicians' gear both ways across the United States and to all sorts of other places; big trucks carrying theatre sets long distance; but never a taxi.

In a small windowless room above the cavernous garage where day and night the cabs incessantly came and went, a dozen of us sat wearing headsets and listening to a foul-mouthed Pom out of the lower echelons of the Royal Navy harangue us about the things we didn't know. By the time of our test we had learned by rote the answers to four multiple-choice questionnaires, one of which we would have to take. I did mine quick-smart, so as not to think or forget; and then relayed the answers in surreptitious sign language to my Neapolitan friend Gerry sitting across the table upstairs at the Roads and Transport Authority building in Miller Street, North Sydney. We both passed and afterwards he shouted me a cup of coffee and an iced bun before driving us gleefully back across the bridge to the city in his Vauxhall Victor. Gerry had a wife and three kids, little English and was not long in Australia. I've never seen him since.

Cab driving, then and now, is an immigrant's choice. Sometimes the only choice. It felt like that for me, coming from Auckland with nothing in my pocket, having bought my airfare with the proceeds of a marijuana crop I grew, not without peril, in the back garden of the place I rented in St Marys Bay. The night after I arrived in Sydney, at a party in Golden Grove, in a house where later I would live, I met a guy called Graeme Shepherd who urged the occupation upon me. Graeme was a junior officer in the Merchant Marine and is I believe a Master Mariner now. His brother Roger that same year founded Flying Nun Records. Graeme used to drive taxi shifts during his spells ashore. He liked the money and perhaps he liked the life too. Or was he lonely? He sometimes used to mention 'ladies' of his acquaintance but I never saw him with a girlfriend.

No matter: it worked for me. Once I had my authority card, the taxi school found me a job at Bondi Junction and I went to work before I'd even found a permanent place to live. It was a servo that was base for about a dozen cabs, at the eastern end of the mall in Oxford Street, where Whale Carwash used to be; an apartment building stands there now. Mine was T126, an old white XC Falcon with a leaky manifold and collapsed seats, a car I never learned to like. It was a Green Cab—in those early days of Combined Services the various small companies that were being amalgamated kept their individual identities: the Green; the Red, Yellow & Black; the De Luxe Cab Co., which was the first to be issued, in the early 1950s, with a license to operate a radio network. Recently I met in Lewisham a successful dealer in second-hand goods whose father worked out of the original Green Cabs garage in Palmer Street in Woolloomooloo. Peter told me taxi driving ruined his Dad's life. He lost his health, his temper and his pride; and gained in return only worry and debt.

The boss was an Egyptian I called, not to his face, the Fat Controller. He used to stand, sweating copiously, like a sentry in a sentry box, in a little booth down the side of the servo. He was honest but irascible; never friendly to anyone. You got your keys from him and when your shift was

over, you dropped your pay-in, through a slot like a letterbox, into his now locked and shuttered booth. In those days you deducted the price of your gasoline from your pay-in so there was always some mathematics to go through at the end of the night before you could get away; but the modus operandi was essentially the same as it is now: you hired the cab at a set rate for the shift, which lasted a notional twelve hours: 3 a.m. to 3 p.m. in my case, because I've always driven nights. Legally you are *bailed* the cab and are known as the *bailee*: an anachronistic piece of terminology whose origin lies in the arcana of maritime law.

Apart from what I wrote down at the time, I don't remember much of that first stint in '81 and '82. When I think about it now I get a vague impression of driving late at night vacant and too fast down a deserted Oxford Street, Paddington towards the city: before ending my shift I used to park the car outside the amusement arcades on George Street and spend all my twenty-cent pieces playing Space Invaders. I've never since played arcade games and never had before, but at the time it seemed to relax me. And then, after taking the cab back to the base, I'd walk away down the mall with a floating feeling, money in my pocket and completely free, ambling along for a while before hailing my own ride back to the house in Golden Grove.

There wasn't the same financial pressure then. You could be on the dole, for instance, and drive as well. Nobody paid any tax. A lot of young guys going through uni, a lot of musos in bands, used to supplement their income driving. Some of them dealt dope, or other things, as well. Not so long ago a musician friend told me that at the end of the '70s he lived in Edgecliff next door to two women who ran a sex shop. Sometimes they'd say: *Let's go and fuck a cab driver*. They'd hail some good-looking young cabbie and get him to drive them down to the sea at Double or Elizabeth Bay and there they'd have sex in the back seat. That wouldn't happen now. My friend Garth, a petrolhead from Taumarunui who's just retired after thirty years' driving, likes to recall racing other vacant cabs at a hundred

miles an hour up the wrong side of York Road next to Centennial Park. That wouldn't happen now either.

In those days I worked the streets, relying almost exclusively on hails. I never waited on ranks and hardly ever took work off the radio; but I did used to listen. It was a bizarre and complex system of despatch. Each individual job would be called, by suburb and by destination, and if you were in the vicinity and interested you punched the green Bid button on your three-button console (like traffic lights—the others were Cancel [red] and Call the Operator [orange]). The operator would then ask the first three bidders, by two-way radio, their location; and the one closest to the job was given the actual address. This was often a rort. The operators were all ex-cabbies and they manipulated the calls (nudge nudge, wink wink) in order to give the good jobs to their mates: one reason why I seldom bid.

But it was fascinating to listen to their commentary, describing the life of the city at night, the places people were going and the things they were doing. The accidents, the fights and the parties. The celebrity rides. Weird fares that other cabbies had. A lot of it was in code that you had to learn: a VIP for instance was a very intoxicated person; and there was a whole series of numbers preceded by the letter M that meant different things. The most chilling was an M13: an emergency, a cabbie under attack somewhere. All cabs in the vicinity would race over to help out. If you weren't in the area, you'd still hear the progress of the incident broadcast over the network as the operator coordinated the response. Sometimes you'd hear what was actually going on in the cab. A vast oral system, entire idiolects, was lost when the despatch system was computerized.

On any particular night the radio network might be hacked by a fellow who must have been a disaffected driver. He spoke in grating, sepulchral tones, probably to disguise his voice, and his monologue consisted entirely of threats, obscenities and other forms of verbal abuse. He was genuinely creepy to listen to, raised the hackles on the back of my neck and drove the operator crazy. It was always the same operator and they would have this

strange dialogue, in which the hacker made his diabolical propositions, to which the operator never responded directly; instead he told the network his feelings about the anonymous ghoul who haunted him. They must have known each other in another life but it was not the kind of thing you'd ever find out for sure. Just as you never knew the operators' names or what they looked like, only how their voices sounded. One of them had a particularly irritating habit: *Patience is a virtue*, he would drawl, then give the job to someone else.

My main problem during that first period cab driving was, although I couldn't have put it this way at the time, that I didn't like working as a servant. Sydney-siders then were proud of their egalitarian nature, exemplified by the habit of sitting in the front seat and talking to the cabbie. I never had any problem with that kind of person; it was passengers who lounged in the back and issued imperious instructions that bothered me; those who seemed to despise me simply because of the occupation I had chosen.

I was proud but reticent—so I hid who I thought I was and blamed these contemptuous strangers for not being able to see it. It was desperate and sad but I wasn't aware then that I possessed the overweening arrogance of one who has accomplished nothing but imagines that one day he will; and exchanged that promise for a sense of my own superiority that would, no matter my present circumstances, at some time in the future become apparent to the world at large.

At the time I got around these feelings of worth and worthlessness by writing, even though my desire to write was perhaps also the origin of such feelings. I had a friend in Wellington, a poet, who was starting a small publishing enterprise to be called Right Here Books; one of them would be my reminiscences as a Sydney cab driver. On days off I used to sit my small Royal portable in the corner of the sitting room in the terrace house in Golden Grove and tap away, writing the stories of fugitive encounters on the night-time streets of the metropolis. I still have copies of these tales but,

alas, they are no longer readable. The typescript went to my friend and I kept photocopies of the text I called *A Life in the Night*; but the book never came out, the typescript disappeared and the photocopies, made on heat-sensitive paper, have faded to illegibility through the years.

So my account of taking a garrulous Tex Morton to Manly one afternoon is lost; he told me his life story—cane cutter, whip cracker, sharp shooter, hypnotist, busker, film-star cowboy, musician—before he told me who he was: *My name's Robert Morton*, he said as he shook my hand and got out on the Corso; *Some people call me Tex*. Lost, too, is the story of the ride I gave from the city to Newport on the Northern Beaches to test cricketer, the famous all-rounder Keith Miller. He was a charming old boy in a decrepit body; an aging roué who proudly showed me his MCC card and sent his regards to my father, who'd once seen him play.

There was a Greek woman in the midst of an asthma attack I picked up in Bondi Junction and rushed to the Prince of Wales hospital in Randwick. Her husband, who hailed me, didn't come and when they took her gasping away in a wheelchair I found, on the floor of the cab, a large parti-coloured woven plastic bag containing a single five-dollar note: fare plus tip. I once picked up a disoriented Fijian man at Circular Quay and spent too long convincing him he was not in Suva. Another time I took an Italian to meet his cousin off a ship and still recall that solitary man standing with his suitcase before the immense steel wall of the hull curving above him, like something Shaun Tan might have drawn.

Of more moment is a lesson I inadvertently learned through my first and second periods of cab driving. It is a stressful occupation; the two main stresses are driving in traffic for hours at a stretch, and the exigencies of dealing with the general public as represented by random people coming through the door of your cab. On the other hand, there's a lot of time for reflection, for instance when you have taken someone for a long ride and are returning to the city. On one of these rides I realised, halfway over the Sydney Harbour Bridge, that I was driving around with, as we used to say,

my arse in a knot, and dedicated myself to finding ways to untie it. When that was done I realised I was also in the habit of clenching my stomach muscles, and so set myself to relax them too.

I only drove for about nine months that first time before finding other work, first as a proof-reader, then as a postal officer, later as a teacher of English as a Second Language. Half a decade later, when my marriage ended and I left our comfortable flat in Glebe for a crumbling squat in Pymont, I went back driving again. I remember even less from this second stint because during that nine-month period I wrote nothing down. I struggle now even to think where I went to pick up the cab—somewhere down Botany Road in Waterloo—who I drove for, what I drove. All gone in the dark backward and abysm of time. I know I'd let my authority card lapse and so had to re-sit the test but remember nothing about that either.

My sole recall is of my last shift driving on that particular tour of duty. The night before I'd been out with a famous writer to an expensive restaurant in Balmain and there contracted food poisoning from a bad mussel in the seafood marinara. I spent the night writhing on the bathroom floor and yet, next day, went out as usual in the afternoon to work. It was Maundy Thursday, 1988, I had a new girlfriend and we were going the next day to Bermagui for Easter. Driving up the Pacific Highway at Pymble I fell into a micro-sleep, the cab veered recklessly towards a line of parked cars and it was only a shout of alarm from the accountant who was my fare that saved us.

Later that same shift I was taking a fat man somewhere far out west, he went to sleep in the seat beside me and, listening to his gentle snores, I had the utmost difficulty in staying awake myself. It was as if we were driving some dark road that led, not to any real destination, but into the ambiguous, repetitive landscape of a Gerald Murnane novel. After that shift ended and I'd returned the cab to Waterloo and gone home, I vowed I would never drive taxis again. It was, like most vows, made to be broken.

III

The habit of paying someone else to transport you is as old as money. It probably began, not in cities, but at river crossings. Charon, the ferryman of souls across the River Styx to Hades, was a kind of taxi driver: a coin, usually an obolus, would be placed in the mouth of the dead person as payment for his services. He also received the kind of obloquy taxi drivers still get: on Greek vases he is shown as a rough Athenian sailor, sometimes with the psychopomp, Hermes, standing gravely nearby.

Aristophanes in *The Frogs* describes him as *an old, grim, and squalid Ferryman, wearing a slave's felt cap and a sleeveless tunic*, and gives him a line of sardonic patter: *Who is for rest from suffering and cares? / Who's for Carrion Crows and Dead Donkeys / Lethe and Sparta and the rest of Hell?* Later Virgil in the *Aeneid* called him *A sordid god: down from his hairy chin / A length of beard descends, uncombed, unclean; / His eyes, like hollow furnaces on fire; / A girdle, foul with grease, binds his obscene attire.*

The metered ride, the actual taxi, was invented by the Romans. They were wheeled vehicles with a mechanism that used the turning of the axle to release small balls into a repository. At the end of the trip, the passenger paid for the ride on the basis of the number of balls released. Presumably there were equivalents in other towns, other civilizations, but the service as we know it now is essentially a modern phenomenon, dating from the mid-seventeenth century.

In London in 1635 the Hackney Carriage Act became the first legislated English control on vehicles for hire. By 1640 there was a horse-drawn taxi service in Paris, in vehicles called *fiacres*, because the main vehicle depot was opposite a shrine to Saint Fiacre, who came to France from Ireland in the sixth century. He is still the patron saint of French cab drivers, as well as of those who suffer venereal disease, barrenness, fistulae or hemorrhoids.

The term *taxicab* was coined in 1907 when Harry Allen of the New York Taxicab Company imported the first 600 gas-powered vehicles from France into the Big Apple. Allen chose yellow as the livery for his fleet because it is the colour most easily seen at a distance. *Taxicab* is an abbreviation of *taximeter cabriolet*, from the Latin *taxa*, tax or charge, followed by *meter* from the Greek *metron*, *measure*. A cabriolet was a light horse-drawn carriage popular in France in the later nineteenth century; the word *cabrioler*, to leap or gambol, is concealed in its etymology, as is an alternate French word for a kid goat, *un cabri*.

Meters were initially attached outside the vehicle, on the front wheel on the driver's side, with a small flag whose pole was also the lever for winding up the mechanism. Standing upright, the flag showed the cab to be free; once it had been hired, the flag fell, activating the ticking of the meter and so the journey began. We still call the moment that commences a hire *flag-fall*. It was a German, Wilhelm Bruhn, who made the first modern taximeter; and another, Gottfried Daimler, who built the first meter-equipped, motorized taxi fleet, which began operating in Stuttgart in 1897.

It isn't really surprising that the person of the cab driver is held in such ill repute, on the one hand, and on the other remains a (somewhat seedy) romantic figure. Cab drivers are not unlike prostitutes in that they must, notionally at least, be available to anyone for any purpose so long as it calls for a hired ride from one place to another. It is a requirement of law in New South Wales that a cab driver must accept any legitimate fare he or she is offered; and there are very few exceptions that make a fare illegitimate: extreme intoxication is one, the presence of an actual or potential physical threat to the driver another. That there is a degree of camaraderie between hookers and cab drivers I can attest from personal experience. Working girls are always friendly and sympathetic fares and they usually tip generously as well. Sometimes cabbies return the favour, taking anonymous men to brothels on request; to know where the brothels are is a part of the job.

Not only are cab drivers promiscuously for hire, it is also a profession which, in the common mind, anyone can follow. All you have to be able to do is drive a car. In Sydney, this anyone-can-do-it assumption was reinforced by the popularity of the job with returned men from the two world wars. Both Legion and RSL (Returned Serviceman's League) taxi companies make this association explicit in their names; men with war disabilities that prohibited them from jobs the able-bodied could do, men who were psychologically damaged—these could and did drive a cab. In 1945 returned men were offered license plates under a ballot system. When I first drove in the 1980s there were still a few of these old soldiers working. Others had died and left their plates to their widows, or their children, to run.

Migrant drivers in those days tended to be of Mediterranean origin, mostly Greeks and Italians, like Gerry the Neapolitan; one or two South Americans and the odd African; with a few eastern Europeans or Russians like Peter, a lugubrious Russian Jew from Rose Bay who was once my day driver. It was rumoured that he drove, not because he needed the money, but to get some time away from his wife. I would wait for him in a quiet leafy street in the afternoon while she tottered up and down the footpath in her high heels walking her little fluffy white dog; he used to hand the cab over with a twisted smile and the words: *Are you ready to kill?* Once, describing how the job felt, he said, unforgettably: *It is like being dead.*

III

So I was to risk becoming Charon again ... but not yet. I went to Auckland and wrote the first three sections of the book that became *Luca Antara*; travelled to Malaysia and Indonesia to research the fourth part; wrote that at Pearl Beach while the last despairing rites of the death of love were enacted; then gathered up my library and moved to a rented apartment in

Summer Hill, Sydney, where I still live. For fifteen years I had not worked anywhere but at my desk, earning most of the money I made from commissions for screenplay writing.

Few of the scripts I'd worked on had eventuated in films and those few hadn't gone into profit—not unusual in the film world—but I had still been paid. Now I was losing interest in the medium, in part because I'd recognised, belatedly, that I am a contemplative not a dramatic writer. My three books thus far had been well received in New Zealand but failed to achieve publication in Australia, so there was no income to speak of from them. I was over fifty, more or less unemployable and with no real prospects; so I re-enrolled, for the third time in three decades, in taxi school.

Impossible to plumb the depths of the humiliation I felt as I set myself to learn again what I knew already and had tried so hard to forget. It was still the same old multiple-choice test you had to sit, only now you did it on a screen; and in the interim a set of bureaucratic rules had been promulgated in order to make the procedure of rote learning the answers look more like an actual course of study. It was more expensive, too, about two thousand, instead of a few hundred, dollars. The aspirants had changed: most of those I went through the course with were Chinese, Indian, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Iranian, Afghani, Iraqi, Turkish . . . a whole new demographic that reflected the wars, both economic and military, of the nineties and the noughties.

Those groovy young guys from the 1980s were gone forever and I myself, a relic, was no longer young or groovy—if I ever had been. Nor did I possess that immigrant hunger for work, the necessary enthusiasm for their studies these new arrivals from overseas brought with them. I was detached, probably depressed, certainly disenchanted. I hated that we now had to wear a uniform—blue shirt, black trousers, epaulettes—when before we dressed as we pleased.

I completed the course, passed the test and went back driving out of a base in Haberfield, working for a man called Chinese Bob. Bob came to Australia from Shanghai to study politics in the late 1980s; he told me once he was destined for the lower echelons of the Peoples' Republic's diplomatic corps. The events in Tiananmen Square left him stranded; he was one of those whom Bob Hawke famously invited to stay. Chinese Bob made a lot of money in the early 1990s exporting some kind of wool product, then lost it all in a manner he did not disclose to me—he may have gambled it away.

Around the turn of the century he started driving; in just half a decade, with two partners, he'd built up his business and was running about a dozen cabs. Of course he did not own the plates, the real source of wealth in the taxi business, only the cars themselves. The plates—they are actual number plates but they also represent the entitlement to run a cab for hire—were leased at a weekly rate from octogenarian mogul Reg Kermode's behemoth, Combined Services; I and the other drivers paid Bob for bailing us the vehicle and kept the rest of what we earned; he paid Combined what he owed them, and his overheads including all vehicle maintenance costs, and likewise kept the balance for himself.

It used to be the ambition of the common cabbie to one day own a set of plates or maybe two and retire on that: an ambition that is scarcely achievable now that plates are worth about the price of a house out west or a unit in the less desirable inner-city suburbs. Some say that the high price of plates reflects their scarcity and that more should be licensed; but this ignores the fact that, most of the time, there are too many cabs on Sydney streets and consequently drivers have to scramble for a living. And then, on Friday and Saturday nights, when there is a storm or when a train breaks down, if there is a big sporting event on or a cruise ship docked in the harbour, there are not enough.

That hadn't changed much from before but plenty of other things had. There were now EFTPOS terminals in every cab and at least half the

business was done with cards, which meant their users were less likely to tip; the decline of silver money continues and it was rare for anything less than a gold coin to be required as change. And mobile phones had entirely altered the way booked fares operated. People, especially in the city, would call a cab on their mobile then walk out into the street and hail the first passing cruiser. The dispatcher, obliged to offer each job until it was either accepted or cancelled, continued to call it; but most radio jobs, in the city at least, were not there when you went to pick them up.

The system of despatch had itself been computerised so there was no longer any human contact with the base unless something went wrong, increasing the sense of isolation. A cumulative effect of these technical changes was that the ethos of sitting in the front seat and talking to the cabbie had all but disappeared. Front or back, most fares, if they talked to anyone, did so on their mobile phones. On the other hand, most of the cars now had decent sound systems and good CD players. You could get through your shift, not on conversation, but on music.

That was how I coped with the stress, the tedium and the day-to-day irritations of the job. But the long-term implications were more difficult to handle: what had happened to my dream of a writer's life? Since coming to Australia, I had wanted to live, in that old-fashioned phrase, by my pen. I had gone into screenwriting because I thought I might earn enough thereby to be able to write the books that were my real work. This was the problem with cab driving: by precluding the six or nine months' uninterrupted concentration I need to write a book, it prevented me from doing more than shorter pieces like this essay. I could earn a living by driving but I couldn't do the writing that might rescue me from driving as a way of earning a living.

Faced with this conundrum, I retreated into an altered form of the jejune posturing that so deformed my first period driving. I didn't take refuge, as I had then, in a fantasy of what I *would* accomplish as a defence against the perceived humiliation of the job, but in what I *had*

accomplished. I was proud of the book I had just written; it was going to be published in Australia and I somehow convinced myself that it would be a literary sensation that would make my name and relieve me forever from the exigencies of driving for a living.

This was not an unalloyed conviction, I wasn't completely delusional, there were times when I saw the foolishness of my expectations, the fall I was setting myself up for. On the other hand, my belief in the book and what it would do for my prospects became a psychological necessity, allowing me to keep on going when otherwise I might have stopped—and what then? Or, worse, I might have begun to turn into a veritable Charon figure, as some terrifying, embittered old taxi drivers have.

In due course *Luca Antara: Passages in Search of Australia* was published and widely reviewed: uniformly positively in New Zealand, more ambivalently in Australia. Most reviewers on this side of the Tasman seemed perplexed by its innovations, its mix of genres, its deliberate blurring of fact and fiction. The best were cautiously positive, the worst merely confused; that is, until the *Sydney Morning Herald* came out. I was at the base in Haberfield, waiting for my cab to arrive. It was a hot summer day and we—my mate Garth, our boss Bob and Bob's wife Stella—were standing under a tree opposite the servo chatting when Italo, the Ecuadorian, came over. His dark eyes were shining, he was very excited and he had in his hand a clipping from the newspaper, which he gave to me. *This is your name, no?* he said. I looked. It was. Beneath the headline: *Beautiful Lies Just A Klanger*.

Italo was simply delighted that I had my name in the paper and did not realise what a calamity it was; so I didn't tell him. I just thanked him and folded the piece away to read properly later. Written by a young academic teaching in Dubai, it was one of those reviews that every writer dreads. One in which the reviewer, for reasons known only to himself, sets out to destroy the reputation of a book. A demolition job. Without redemption, without qualification. I felt that I had bared my neck and had my head

lopped off. There was blood all over my shoes. Before that review I believed I was a writer temporarily embarrassed for funds who was in the meantime driving a taxi. Afterwards, I was just a taxi driver.

A bad review cannot however destroy a book or even the reputation of a book; not if the book has merit. All it can really do is discourage potential readers. *Luca Antara* survived and has taken on a life of its own. It was picked up by a publisher in the UK and well reviewed in the London papers; the hardback was noticed favourably in the *New York Times* and a Portuguese translation was published by Bertrand of Lisbon, which is apt: one of the questions it addresses, though not in any academic sense, is the Portuguese influence on early Australian history. The book has its enthusiasts in this country too, though not as many as I would like. Most important of all, I have kept faith with it. For although a bad review cannot kill a good book, it can destroy a writer.

The effect that review had on me was nevertheless profound. Once the anger and the pain wore away, and the fantasies of revenge receded, I understood that it was facile to think that driving for a living was temporary; and that to pretend it was could only make things more difficult. I had to come to some kind of reckoning that would allow me to do the job in a whole-hearted manner, without self-loathing and also without the contempt for my passengers thereby implied. I suppose I had been dimly aware of this dilemma when I first drove back in 1981; and again in 1988; and of its origins in my distaste for serving: now I knew that some resolution was imperative.

It came, as such things will, out of the blue. An afternoon in autumn, a clear day with a slight chill in the air. I'd not long begun my shift and was taking a woman of about my own age from Parramatta Road in Annandale over to Lilyfield. She was sitting in the front seat and we were chatting about this and that; when suddenly she looked hard at me and said: *Why is someone like you doing a job like this?* It wasn't that I hadn't been asked this before, and in just that way too. Certain of my contemporaries, usually

women, usually, as I am, educated middle class, would ask it in a tone that mixed incredulity with something else: outrage, or perhaps just indignation. Cab drivers were not meant to be such as I am.

Since it went to the heart of the matter, and was something I struggled with myself, it was not a question I usually knew how to answer; but today was different. Inspiration struck. *I might look like a cab driver*, I said, *but actually I'm Hermes. There are winged sandals on my feet but you can't see them because of my Doc Martens.* She laughed. *Really?* she said, glancing involuntarily down at my shoes. *Yeah*, I said. *Messenger of the Gods, patron of travellers, poets and thieves, conductor of the dead, fount of eloquence . . .*

Of course she didn't actually think I was a god but the conceit diverted us long enough for the possibility to hover for a moment in the air. And that moment was decisive. She went happily on her way and so did I: for I'd resolved my dilemma. From now on I would be, not Hermes but his earthly representative, his avatar, and my sacred task would be the safe and felicitous conveyance of passengers, whosoever they might be, from origin to destination.

It sounds absurd and on one level it is; on the other hand, why not? If I could dignify the occupation in this way and commit myself to representing its timeless aspect in myself, night by night, ride by ride, wouldn't that be a wonderful thing? It wasn't as if I'd have to go around brow-beating people with my fancy, that wasn't required; it was just a question of attitude.

From another point of view, all I meant was what Joe Strummer says, apropos of what isn't clear, on the sound track of Julien Temple's 2007 documentary called *The Future is Unwritten: . . . exemplary manners towards your fellow human beings*, he murmurs. How hard could that be? Towards each ride, each fare, each angel, each asshole . . . as if there might after all be an aesthetics of cab driving; as if my task was to attempt to provide—even if I never accomplished it—the perfect ride.

And how has it gone? I wish I could say like a dream but it isn't that easy. I still have problems with the corporates, especially those who like to show off in the front seat on their mobile phones. They tend to be as impervious to irony as they are strangers to courtesy so my strategy with them is to retreat into an impenetrable silence. I do, very occasionally, lose it with passengers, usually drunks, but only when the provocation is extreme; sometimes you have to assert yourself. But the truth is that when that happens, everybody ends up feeling bad.

For example: one night, late, on my way back to base, I was hailed by an older man standing in the road outside the Crocodile Farm Hotel in Ashfield. I'd already logged off but stopped anyway, thinking he probably just needed a ride round the corner and home. It was only when he gave a slight lurch to steady himself on the already open door of the cab that I realised he was totally munted; and by then it was too late. He was going to Merrylands, out near Parramatta and, judging from the phone call he made as soon as he got in the car, had no cash. He spoke to a woman in a language I don't understand, but I could tell he was asking for something that she would not give; it wasn't sex so what could it have been but money?

He was a Slav and had, I believe, fought in one of the wars that broke out in the 1990s as the former state of Yugoslavia disintegrated into vicious internecine conflict; but whether he was an Albanian, a Bosnian, a Croat, a Montenegrin, a Serb, a Slovene or something else entirely I never found out. After I persuaded him to stop trying to enfold me—*I'm driving!*—in a boozy fraternal embrace, he fell grumbling into a micro-sleep . . . from which he awoke, seconds later, cursing and flailing with his fists at the air in front of him. He did this again and again as we drove up the M4 freeway but at least it was his demons he was attacking, not me. Or perhaps the unquiet ghosts of former enemies.

In my mind I'd already said goodbye to the fifty bucks, but there was another question: would he be able to show me the way to his home? With the weird precision of the alcoholic he called every turn until we pulled up outside a block of flats in a quiet street not far from the M4. I didn't ask for money. I just wanted him out. I waited. He was attempting to retrieve a thought. *You come round tomorrow*, he said at last. *I pay you*. I shook my head. *Bullshit*, I said. *No. Just get out of the car*. Another pause for pixillated cerebration. He surfaced again. *Where my change?* he said. And that was when I lost it.

There is no fucking change because you haven't paid me any fucking money, you arsehole! Now, get out of my car! Right now . . . Well, there was some satisfaction in speaking my mind at last, but I had not anticipated his response. He became abject, like a little boy. *I sorry*, he whimpered. *I sorry. I bad man . . .* He began to weep. Perhaps he was putting it on, perhaps not. Either way, it was excruciating. As I say, nobody wins.

Most of the time it isn't like that. People get into the cab and breathe a sigh of relief. One woman said to me the other day: *It's an oasis of calm in an ocean of chaos*. I keep my cab fragrant, maintain a comfortable temperature and try to play the kind of music I think my fare, whoever it is, might enjoy. Young women in leather jackets, short skirts, tights and ankle-high Doc Martens, for instance, often appreciate [Tom Waits](#); or [Hope Sandoval](#). An older demographic, male or female, usually find themselves intrigued by jazz singer [Cassandra Wilson](#); and I've lost count of the number of people, not fans, who've asked me in puzzled fashion: *Who is this?* when I've been playing a [Bob Dylan](#) CD.

Everybody likes the blues, especially once the sun goes down, so that's when I roll out [Blind Willie McTell](#) or [Jimmy Reed](#) or [John Lee Hooker](#). I've played my half dozen [Little Axe](#) CDs innumerable times; as with Dylan, people often ask in tones of wonderment, *Who is this?* I might even have had a small effect on their sales. Then there are the more exotic acts like [Cesária Évora](#) and [Mariza](#), both of whom sing in Portuguese; or the

Tuareg group Tinawerin, who exchanged their Kalashnikovs for guitars in one of Gaddafi's refugee camps, or so a music promoter told me when he climbed into my cab one day in Darlington while I was playing *The Radio Tisdas Sessions*. Another fellow, a rich unhappy man I was dropping off in Bellevue Hill, said to me, incredulous, envious: *You just drive around all night listening to music you love? That's your job?*

It isn't quite as simple as that because, as I told him, and as he didn't believe (the rich never do) cab driving isn't very well paid. Then there's the hustling, the competition for fares with other drivers, the tedium of waiting on ranks, the boredom. I have a sense of wrenching dollars out of the maw of the city, sometimes triumphantly, at others with grim resignation; and I can never be sure, when I go out to drive, if I will in fact come home with the amount I need to live on. For I set myself a target each night and log off either when it is achieved or when I know it isn't going to be. But it's certainly true that, since I decided to embrace instead of resent the job, it's been easier to earn. As if, as an avatar of Hermes, luck has been with me too.

Luck is of course an incommensurable: every cab driver believes in it and no-one knows what it is. It cannot be compelled or commanded, only accepted. And respected. Some nights you can't go wrong, there is always another person waiting for you when you drop off; others, you can't turn a trick, cabs pick up before and behind you but you remain vacant; you wait half an hour on a rank for a five-dollar fare. One thing I have learned is that too much anxiety is counter-productive. If you drive around looking desperately for a fare, the fares disappear. It's better to think about something else, listen to the music, let your mind stray. I had one old cabbie tell me that, whenever he was having trouble pulling a fare, he'd put on a Chuck Berry CD and would invariably pick up soon after. Chuck was his luck the way Little Axe is mine.

There's the strange camaraderie of cab drivers. When we are driving and vacant, every other cabbie is an enemy; that was what Peter the

Russian meant when he said: *Are you ready to kill?* Once we are hired, however, we become positively courtly towards others, both the occupied and the vacant cabs. And when we meet on a rank and pass the time yarning, we are soul brothers. But because there are something like 25,000 licensed cab drivers in Sydney, though only about 10,000 cabs, most casual conversations you get into are never repeated. They are unique occasions, which may be treasured for just this reason.

For instance: one night, when I'd just returned from an appearance at a literary festival overseas, I was idling on a rank in Phillip Street in the city, leaning on my car and chatting with the cabbie behind me. Somehow it came out that the fellow I was talking to, Zaheer, knew one of those I had met at the festival, the Pakistani writer Mohammed Hanif. Their wives are from the same part of Pakistan and when Hanif visited Sydney, he stayed with Zaheer. Zaheer is a poet writing in Urdu and Punjabi; he also speaks Arabic and was learning Farsi. His poetry has been published in magazines in India and Pakistan but he was resisting pressure from friends to make a collection because he felt he wasn't established enough yet.

As it turned out, this was not because he doubted the quality of his writing, but because he had yet to work his way out of a *financial crisis*. A few years before, he had been detained by Australian immigration authorities and sent to Villawood Detention Centre. Then he was deported, and it took him two more years to get another visa into Australia. He ascribed this calamity to the dodgy advice of a migration agent, which I can well believe. The upshot was, he had a major debt to pay—\$15,000. How do you do that on a cabbie's meagre wage? Australia's treatment of so-called asylum seekers is shameful if not vicious; at the time of which I speak, those who, like Zaheer, were not granted residency and hence detained, had to pay the cost of their own detention. He owed that money to the Australian government.

Zaheer's work has not been translated into English because he has not yet found anyone to do it for him. Poetry in Urdu and Punjabi is highly

formalised so it may not be an easy task. I was telling him that there must be a university in Australia where the languages are taught, when we were interrupted; a very tall, extremely elegant, young black Englishman in a suit was exiting the building and coming towards my cab. I forgot to get Zaheer's contact details, or to give him mine; I don't even know his second name. A modest man, unassuming, without bitterness and also without fear, before we parted he told me a line of a poem he was yet to write, about two rivers in his country, one a river of lovers, the other of poets. His poem will be in praise of their confluence.

People often say, *inter alia*, that cab driving must be a great job for a writer. They mean the exposure to so many different types of people, so many stories, the underbelly of the vast complexity of any big city, must make for good material. I usually demur: writing, I say, is a good job for a writer. Cab driving is no more than a distraction. This is both true and not true. There is value in maintaining a working connection with the multifarious lives of others, there is always illumination to be had in meeting and talking with strangers who might turn out to be friends, and there is the inexhaustible psychogeography of the city itself, a practical infinity that you may nevertheless, if only momentarily, sometimes comprehend.

I call this visiting the phantasmagoria and it is a seductive, perhaps even addictive, pastime; at least if you have a taste for *noir*. Indelible images burn onto the retina. One night after dropping off in a cul-de-sac in the warehouse district near Rockdale, returning to the Princes Highway I saw the pale body of a murdered man, shirtless, stretched out supine on the concrete block of a loading bay while in the distance sirens wailed and unknown perpetrators fled into the gloom.

Another time I picked up outside the casino in Pymont a couple of apprehensive, aggressive wide boys and took them down to a house in Botany, where they asked me to wait while they went in and extracted from the man within his signature to a document they were carrying. It involved,

I think, a piece of property worth a large amount of money. There was a tense ten minutes, during which at any moment I expected to hear shots fired; but they came out intact and much happier and I took them back up Southern Cross Drive and on to North Sydney. It's not the only time I have been, perforce, a getaway man; crims, like hookers, tend to treat cabbies well—so long as you do what they want you to do.

I have been the recipient of heart-breaking confessions from fares I'll never see again. And I've also been the confessor, for instance on the occasion when I picked up an American psychotherapist in Wahroonga and took her to the airport: I found myself telling her, as I have told no-one else, exactly what happened, and how I felt about what happened, when I left my family behind at Pearl Beach in 2004. It was such sweet relief that at the end of the journey I felt I should have been paying her, not she me.

One time down a dark and deserted street in Zetland, as I turned the car around, its headlights briefly illuminated a 1940s footwear advertisement fading graciously on a brick wall: it showed a single red high heel above the rubric: Gay Shoes. I remember a bum I saw falling, perhaps for the last time, backwards to the ground in the shade of a fig tree growing on a sunny lawn in Rose Bay; and another stretched out on the corner of William and Palmer Streets, his little dog tied to a hurricane fence and a champagne bottle and half-filled flute waiting beside him as he slept. There are hundreds of images like these: things seen randomly from the seat of a cab and lodged permanently in my mind.

I wasn't driving the night that Michael McGurk, lender of last resort, property shark, standover man, was shot down outside his home in Cremorne; but I might have been. I can easily imagine a cab driver like myself inadvertently witnessing that killing; and then going home to construct the plot of a thriller based upon his pursuit by all the many interests involved: the killers, the police, the developers, the politicians who are implicated and so forth.

It would be the kind of book that, if done properly, would sell—so why won't I write it? Two reasons. One is that I don't want to spend my time away from driving writing about driving. The other is that the very clarity with which I can see the story makes it wearisome to pursue. I like to write into areas I don't know, not to recapitulate the familiar. Maybe what I'm saying is that I'm not a genre writer; or that I don't have the powers of invention necessary to succeed in the construction of popular fictions.

It's true there are eight million stories in the naked city but it's also the case that, to you, as a cabbie, they only ever come piecemeal. Usually you hear the middle, with the beginning and the end taking place before and after the brief ride you share with the storyteller. I've ended up with a store of anecdote, like that above, which isn't much use in the kind of writing I do. As little, perhaps, as it would be for Zaheer as he constructs a poem in Urdu on the confluence of the rivers of lovers and of poets.

Further, telling these stories to others is rather like telling your dreams: interesting for you, not so much to them. But driving may not be as inimical to writing as I once thought. Since going back on the job in 2005 I've written and published half a dozen books. Some of them, the longer prose narratives, were written in the respite given by grants or publishers' advances; but the others were made as I drove. Perhaps driving is a good job for a writer, not because of the material it uncovers but because it leaves the mind free for other things. And insofar as that weight of anecdotage is concerned, I can always upload it to my blog and let it proliferate, or not, over the world wide web.

That site is called, after the Situationists, *dérives*, because every night out driving is different and each one unfolds according to chance. If you pick up this fare, that happens; if you don't, something else will. Turn that corner and a certain series of events will follow; go straight ahead and it will be otherwise. That's why the strap-line of *dérives* reads: *You are always at a nodal point where destiny forks . . .*

And this is perhaps the last, and enduring, lesson I learned on the job: after the yoga of bodily relaxation in the driver's seat; and the zazen of turning my mind away from petty concerns towards the zone of the gods; comes the satori of the moment-by-moment realisation of the contingencies which shape us. Here may be a deeper analogy between driving and writing than those which are obvious: I mean sitting behind a wheel is like sitting at a computer screen; in writing, as in navigating, you must use memory as a guide; both activities construct out of the chaos of the world the orderly progress of a journey.

Beyond all of these, however, is the understanding that in the activity of prose composition, as in life, you are also always at a nodal point, always making choices that cancel some options while simultaneously making others available. Each sentence you write precludes others, just as at every crossroads there is one direction in which you will go and several others you do not follow. Nor will you ever know what was waiting for you down the roads you did not take. As you write, then, you are making your way, sometimes blindly, sometimes with clarity, through a maze of forking paths. Seeking the one true way to harmony and delight; or the searing fire of irrefutable truths; or both at once.

And, to continue the analogy, those that you bring with you on this journey through the maze, your readers, are comparable to fares in a taxi. Indeed they are the *raison d'être* of the ride. Thus it makes perfect sense to treat them as honoured guests; and to do all that is in your power to bring them safely, happily, perhaps even changed, to their destination.

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