



CITY OF MELBOURNE



Blindness **by Khalid Warsame**

After Farhiya left me, my vision began to deteriorate. My right eye had the worst of it—a small black hole opened up in the centre of my sight, and the peripheries came to the fore such that I could not quite focus. It's strange to have things in the centre of your vision remain just out of sight, as if your own gaze is scurrying away from you. Those first few days, alone in our house, I had thought I was going mad anyway, so I wasn't very attuned to the slow degradation of my sight. When my eye began throbbing, welling up with moisture, I had thought nothing of it except that it was perhaps psychosomatic. I hadn't heard of such a thing happening before, and I considered it with a detached fascination. I wasn't eating or sleeping at all in those weeks: I worried a lot about our daughter, and I was also worried about Farhiya. Her brother called me and told me that she was down with a fever and was seeking treatment in Dubai. I had tried to call her in the days after she had made her intentions known to me, to remind her to pick up her medication before she left, but she didn't answer her phone. Perhaps she assumed, correctly, that I would make it harder for her to leave by begging her to return.

My sight failed me for the first time while I was at work. I was staring at the computer, finalising the renderings of the Life Sciences building, when the dull throbbing in my right eye shifted and attained a new, sharper dimension. I turned to my colleague Imogen, who had just said something to me that I didn't quite catch. 'Are you alright Saeed?' she said. Her voice was distant, as if filtered through murky water. I imagined how I must look to her: struck dumb, my mouth slightly ajar, staring unevenly through her. 'My eye hurts,' I told her.

'What do you mean?'

'I'm blind.'

I don't remember who it was that called me a taxi, but I soon found myself being led by the arm to an eye and ear clinic. The doctor spoke gently to me, knowing that I could only rely on the sound of his voice. He shone a bright light into my eyes. I could see the light, but only vaguely, and only in its intensity. He asked me questions and although he was very kind, I could tell that my answers didn't satisfy him.

'When did this start?'

'I don't remember.'

‘There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with your left eye and only some slight swelling in your right eye. We’ll have to do more tests.’

He left me with an appointment with another specialist and an admonition to take a few days off work. It was deep winter, and by the time I left the clinic the sun was beginning to retreat. I held one hand over my right eye, and stood still for a moment while my left eye adjusted. I could see a bit better now—not perfectly, but the muted light of the evening helped. Instead of going home, I hopped on the 402 bus and got off in North Melbourne. I had begun the habit of walking around my old neighbourhood the previous winter, when I had been commissioned to design an apartment building where the old plastics factory once stood. I must have looked exceedingly odd walking around with one hand held to my face.

The throbbing in my eye had receded a bit, and was beginning to itch. My palm was wet with tears. I wondered what I would do if I completely lost my vision. I would have to quit my job. Maybe there was a program to retrain blind architects? It seemed like the sort of program that Scandinavian governments would fund. I could never move there: there were too many beautiful buildings in Scandinavia, and I could not stand the thought of being unable to appreciate them. My own building, the one I had designed, wasn’t yet built. There was a hole in the ground where the factory once stood, some dirt and debris and exposed pipes, nothing more. Last I had heard it would be at least a year before they broke ground.

I was at the top of Canning Street when my phone rang. It was an unknown number. The voice on the other end was unfamiliar to me and the line was bad. I could barely make out what they were saying. ‘Hello?’ I said, but the line cut off. There was a bench nearby, a curved metal seat, with seedlike pink structures jutting out from the frame. I sat down on the bench. The phone rang again. ‘Hello?’ I was greeted by static, and an indistinct voice, male, speaking at a pace that I couldn’t quite grasp. I sat with the call for a while, phone pressed to my ear, the other hand pressed to my eye. It was an awkward position, so I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees. I spoke clearly and loudly into the phone, almost in admonishment, ‘I think you have the wrong number.’

The man on the other end then said a name that I thought had sounded like Paul, or Pat. He asked me if I remembered him. I told him that I didn’t. The man continued to speak, but the phone cut off midway through an unintelligible string of words. The events of the day began to catch up to me and I was suddenly very tired. My thoughts returned to Farhiya. I could never fully know her, not like I wished to know her—I think I had given up at some point on ever knowing her. I was beginning to realise that this was the original sin of our marriage. A memory surfaced: it was just after our daughter was born, and Farhiya was in the kitchen singing softly to her. Her voice, deeper than you’d expect given her delicate frame, was soft, almost a whisper. She was singing in Somali, a song that I hadn’t heard before, about a young girl bringing a lost lamb back to the flock. I had never heard Farhiya sing before that moment, had never even imagined what her singing voice sounded like. My lack of curiosity shamed me—how could I have not even thought to imagine that Farhiya could sing? I stood watching them like that for long enough that Farhiya saw me and stopped.

I got up off the bench and peered closely at it with my good eye. Even though it wasn’t fully dark yet, the streetlights had turned on and bathed it in cold blue light. The bench was familiar to me: I would pass it every day on my way to school as a child. On one side of the backrest there were panels featuring etched

birds—regal and wise with eyes full of knowledge—staring into the distance as they unfurled their wings. I had passed it by probably a thousand times in my life, but I had never thought to examine it. How many other things had I never noticed before? Maybe Farhiya was right to stop singing when she noticed me watching her: I didn't deserve to see the truth of things when I had never cared to before. I looked up the bus timetable on my phone, and as I was doing so my phone began to ring. It was the unknown number again. I declined the call, turned my phone off, and made my way home.



Hotham Hill Seat

Bernice McPherson, Di Christensen, and Craig Perry in collaboration with the local community, 1955
Stainless steel

Cnr Buncle St & Catyre Cr, North Melbourne

Photo: Patrick Rodriguez

Khalid Warsame is a writer, photographer, and arts producer who lives in Naarm.

Khalid Warsame – khalidw.com

Hotham Hill Seat – citycollection.melbourne.vic.gov.au/hotham-hill-seat

City Collection – citycollection.melbourne.vic.gov.au

Public Art and Memorials Map - citycollection.melbourne.vic.gov.au/public-art-and-memorials-map