

ELYNE MITCHELL AWARD 2010

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

2072 words

Weights and Measures

4.1km

I am driving home. Seagulls are spiralling around the tall silver goalposts of the Bolte Bridge. The afternoon sun slinks over my left shoulder, flaring up Coode Island and its toxic holds. Sunlight glints against the bridge's twin towers and they anodise as I pass through in my small, white sedan.

In that instant flash of light I have a sense of escape, even though I am headed towards security. Like your first day in short sleeves after a long winter. Or the airport departure lounge as your flight is being called. Blue sky, white bird, red tail.

16.9km

I'm now approaching Keilor Park, a sea of terracotta roofs, stretching into infinity. Nothing green about it. But there's the airport, away on my right.

I turn the radio on and look down to the passenger seat where the large, white A3 envelope sits. There's a small red dot on one corner alongside the lab's blue and grey moniker. When I collected it, the envelope was a lot weightier than I thought it should be. Perhaps the very layers of my sinew and muscle, flesh and bone have insinuated themselves into the black transparencies. It's taking up a large space in this small vehicle; omnipresent as I drive on.

I haven't taken the most direct route across the city to get to this point. More on autopilot; tracking the known routes. I remember joining Wellington Parade, passing the Fitzroy and Treasury gardens - space, air, and green after the sterile grey corridors, white coats and red seats. Wellington Parade, Flinders Street - a logjam. At the end of Flinders Street I had realised my internal GPS was awry. Crossing the brown Yarra River via Charles Grimes, sashaying past Southbank, I was still in avoidance mode. Ok then, time to face facts. Onto

the Westgate, a cloverleaf turn and it's user pays on City Link. Crossing the Yarra again, this time over the dock lands and I'm finally making my bolt for the bush.

I know, I know, I could have just gone up Flemington Road, bypassed the Bolte; there's plenty of short cuts to Keilor Park, but my story is the hard yards, the long way round.

33.3km

Diggers Rest is just ahead, but I don't. It was a resting spot for travellers to and from the central goldfields in the 1850s rushes. Then, almost a hundred years ago, Harry Houdini stopped here briefly, just long enough to be awarded the first powered flight in Australia. He skimmed above the small township in his bi-plane. There's a road here named after the American escapologist. Tullamarine airport is less than 10km away, as the crow flies.

61.7km

Dusk has wrapped its pinkish grey cloak around the eastern horizon. The atmosphere is heavy. I know that it's because I'm in the vicinity of The Great Divide and the permanent cloud that seems to hover over Mount Macedon and Hanging Rock, with its weird weather and paramagnetic properties. Still, I feel weighed down.

The wide roadway hurries me past. No chance to stop, explore, picnic, or get lost. I look down again, to the envelope on the seat next to me; my two dimensional alter. It would be interesting if machines could read minds in the same way they do brain matter and nervous systems. I wonder whether diagnostic science will ever reach that point and what the scientists would hypothesise from such scans of my own thoughts. Deadly, no doubt.

97.9km

After speeding past Macedon, I decide to take the back way home. Not the easy, free-way route, where cambers and curves make the role of driver almost superfluous. I turn off to Malmsbury and then southwest, towards Drummond and Glenluce.

I'm doglegging my way back to central Victoria and the driving is easing my mind. The longer I take, the longer I put off the telling, the reality. In my hermetic bubble with classic FM and sixteenth century composers, I can time travel, escape.

109.4km

The boy genius musician makes me sleepy. I switch stations to Radio National, where a couple of earnest scientists are conversing. I have come in part way through. An ignorant interloper, I try to catch up. One of the scientists is talking about dark energy. It has the astrophysicists and cosmologists perplexed, he explains.

...the universe is expanding....how can something that weighs nothing, be so heavy?...Einstein's theory – not that one – the one on reverse gravity - lambda....almost 75% of the universe is filled with dark energy – a substance not an atom.....a negative pressure.....a black stickiness....

I listen to the interviewer asking about the phenomenon and the zealous scientist's answers.

I surmise that this fellow goes to sleep thinking about the cosmos and leaps into his work first thing, enthused over super novas, distant, expanding galaxies and dying starbursts.

Totally enclosed in his rational, science bubble.

I admire him, though. Such belief is admirable. But even with such strong faith, he is totally rudderless here. Dark energy has confounded his reality. He's on shaky ground. All the previous theories, even Einstein's, don't hold fast.

...dark energy is permeating all of space...it's a repulsive force...a missing mass, a mystery component of our universe...there is speculation that this energy will keep growing until it dominates all other forces, tearing

apart galaxies and solar systems and even atoms themselves... it's the cost of having space every volume of space has some intrinsic, fundamental dark energy...

I think about Keilor Park and its volumes of space. I think about my own volume of space, and that of the dark passenger beside me.

121.3km

Veering southwest, another dogleg away from Irishtown and I'm heading towards Vaughan. Another goldfields era resting post. Mineral springs, ruins and a cemetery are hidden amongst hillocks and mullock heaps. I'm paying attention to the winding road in front and wary of 'roos and wildlife to the sides. Night has well and truly fallen.

The original locals, the Dja Dja Wurrung, the Jaara, actually saw the dark spaces in the night sky as nature tellers, not as negativity. As above, so below. When Tjingal, the giant emu, was in the sky (the darkness between the Southern Cross and Scorpio constellations) it was time to hunt for emu eggs. To the Jaara people, the dark spaces between the light points spoke of life, food, reproduction and vitality.

131.2km

The road is gravel here, a quirky little bit of lost bush, not that far from bitumen and lights, but it feels like the back of beyond. The tourist brochures call it Dry Diggings, though I'm not sure the locals do. The Loddon river picks its way through here.

I'm driving on auto pilot again, in familiar territory and concurrently considering the scientists' theories on cosmic weightiness. How much does dark energy weigh then, if it takes up three quarters of the universe? And what about all of ours, contributing to it all, for that matter? With almost seven billion people in the world, the universal outlook is not so good.

And perhaps we need to worry about what psychic energy we put out each day, as much as we dwell upon carbon emissions and atmospheric CFCs and PCBs? After all, bad energy comes in many forms.

152.3km

The waning moon is low in the sky. There is a clarity about the night that is almost lucid. I am alone on the road; no taillights to show the way. Only the white guide posts and my own vehicle's headlights, as I approach the Guildford plateau. I am still reflecting, fantasising.

So, what if this dark energy is an accumulation of all our negative stuff - personal and global - wars and hatred, depression and jealousy? All that bad karma. And what if, when we die, it has to go somewhere? Maybe some of our good bits (spirits, souls, 'white light' energies) are recycled, but the bad stuff just sits around up there, like toxic waste. No one has worked out what to do with it yet, so it amasses in space and causes the universe to expand. Like a tumour.

Let's say the Gods are contemplating sequestration by organic means, or alchemy, or some other type of karma, but the technology, or the theology, isn't apparent yet. We have less than one hundred years to work it out before everything goes up in dust. Again. Big time.

160.6km

Strangways ahead. It's only a placename on the map these days, but it's familiar to me. Gold was discovered here, enough to build a bank (with a very large safe) in a back bush paddock. The building is still here, being used to store hay and shelter swallows.

I tune back to the radio. Flick over to the classics. Bach, that's better. Beats the static in my head. I'm studiously avoiding my silent, brooding, passenger of the last hundred and sixty kays. The serious, scientific, white envelope that's been alongside for almost two hours now.

169.3km

Driving through the box-ironbark forest and I'm close to home. In spring there's a yellow groundswell of color. Gold dust wattles shout the end of winter through the gnarly black and tortured grey trunks. Look more closely and you'll see the white early nancy's with their darker purple spots of attraction, tiny greenhood orchids and the showy, mauve waxlips. But all there is now is the darkness. Even the foliage in my headlights is a 6HB pencil, as if it's all been coloured in by the same, sombre universe.

169.8km

Off on my imaginary rant again. So, perhaps the universe is an organism just like us? Maybe it's not even about us, self-centred, inconsequential humans, or even about Gaia. What if it's beyond that?

A meteor shower could be a fit of rage or joy, a solar eclipse a silent temper tantrum.

Shooting stars are bursts of laughter, comets are flashes of inspiration. An angry outburst is a hyper nova. Perhaps our egocentric earth-based darkness isn't anywhere near as bad as the universe's own, manic energy. That puts things into perspective!

I look down at my fellow traveller, the one that's showing inward signs of universal decay, according to the white coats. I don't feel any different, physically, than I did this morning.

Before the Conference.

A roomful of specialists, my brain on the overhead projector screen and my body in the seat beneath it. They were far more comfortable addressing the scans, the projection, than the flesh and blood owner of it all sitting below. The neurologist addressed the transparency. I sat a passive onlooker, along for the ride. In the end, it was more question and conjecture, than any conclusion.

*...an interesting case, well done Professor.... fascinating.... I haven't seen that particular clinical cluster
and the scans are quite unique in their presentation...*

As I make the last left hand turn up the dirt road (no GPS needed) I feel lighter. Pulling in, I kill the motor and douse the headlights. I sit in my small, white capsule, listening to the hisses and ticks of the engine cooling. Then silence. Blackness. Stars. I breathe in the smell of eucalypts and soil; the terroir. I don't feel fearful, nor vulnerable or defenceless. Just very small. Right now, I am a tiny mote in the universe. Yet I am at ease with my place in the scheme of it all. I send a silent blessing to Tjingal.

Leaning over to pick up the envelope, I am tempted to toss it in the boot, or leave it lying there on the seat. No, face facts. I tense my biceps and lower back, in readiness to pick up the weighty package. But when I lift it from its resting place, the envelope is almost weightless. It's not the same hefty package that I carried it out to the car earlier in the day. As if it's shed something along the journey.

I walk towards the house, the white envelope tucked easily under my right arm. So, do I still believe the Science, the boffins? Go along with their rational, logical, statistics and studies? I think I'll get a second opinion, maybe even a third. Perhaps I'll have some more scans, more tests. After today's drive, I see there can be many interpretations for a single phenomenon. And no more dark energy. Walking away from my car, towards the house, I see the lights are on in the kitchen. I'm home.

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