

Pornography and the Pool Room

Amelia Walker

Last night I spent three hours scrolling real estate dot com, starring houses I'll never so much as inspect. Wonderful houses. Preposterous houses. Houses I couldn't afford if I lived a hundred years and worked every minute of them. Houses in places it'd be an undertaking simply to visit, let alone live. I used to do something similar with dating apps. That, of course, was before you came along. Even though it's purely mental, I'd feel weird about it now. I guess real estate is filling the void of my need-to-fill-a-void.

'Got time to talk?' you came and asked as I sat, robotically scrolling.

'In a minute,' I mumbled.

'You've said that every fifteen minutes since half past six.

I glanced at the time. Nearly ten o'clock.

'Shit. Sorry.'

'What are you so engrossed in?'

'Porn.'

'Really? Let me see.'

'I dunno. It's pretty hardcore...'

'Let me be the judge of that.'

I surrendered the phone.

You erupted into laughter.

'It's a hole!'

'Excuse me. I believe dugout is the correct term.'

'Dugout means hole. And even if it wasn't, it's in Coober fucking Pedy. That makes it a hole within a hole!'

'What've you got against Coober Pedy?'

'Ummm... where to begin? Heat, dirt, dust, isolation... The bigger question is, what do you imagine it's got going for it?'

Until that moment, I hadn't on any slight level thought of Coober Pedy as somewhere I'd ever seriously consider living. But nothing makes me want to do a thing like being told I can't.

‘Living underground is good for the environment,’ I ventured. ‘And the budget too. I mean, the climate is regulated, so we wouldn’t need heating or cooling.’

‘Environmentally friendly!’ you snorted. ‘It’s a bloody mining town.’

‘Yeah, but we wouldn’t be mining.’

‘And just what would we do?’

‘Work online. It’s possible anywhere these days.’

‘Hmmm... okay... But it’s not just anything they mine there. It’s opals. Don’t you know they’re unlucky?’

You were joking. But jokes always trace something serious. That’s what makes them funny – ha ha or otherwise. When I was young, my grandmother told a story about her own childhood, growing up poor in the thirties. Her mother, my great grandmother, longed for fine clothes and jewelry like other women sported. One day, my great grandfather strode in the door with a grin on his face and a box in his hands: black velvet, tied with blue ribbon. She threw her arms around him, almost sobbing, before she tore the ribbon off to see what was inside. The next moment, her face changed. She shrieked in panic, holding up the opal necklace he had saved for months to buy. *How could you bring this thing into our home?* Then she was outside, raising a hammer from the shed and smashing the thing to smithereens. My great grandfather never dared try to surprise her ever again.

‘Unlucky or not,’ I countered, determined not to let some long-dead ancestor’s obsessive superstitions sway my reactions in the present, ‘it’s one of the few places in this entire country that’s actually within our price range. We could live the impossible dream of stopping renting. We could start paying off our own mortgage, instead of someone else’s. And it’s way bigger than this shitbox we’re squeezing into now.’

‘Hmmm... great. A mortgage on a hole.’

‘I told you, it’s a dugout.’

‘Looks like a cave at best to me.’

‘Well... cave. That’s not so bad a thing. Humans lived in them for centuries. There’s something cosy about it, something curved and comforting. Like these walls. Have a look. Isn’t it kind of pretty how the shades of pink turn to red, brown and orange? We’d never need to paint. And the way they wrap around the lounge room... it’d be like living inside a hug.’

‘Yeah. Really great. Until the cave starts caving in.’

‘Surely they do something to stop that...’

‘Do you know what else I’ve heard? If you live in one of those things, you can never be sure when someone’s going to come crashing through your wall, shovel and pick in hand.’

‘What on earth?’

‘That’s what they do out there when they get bored or could do with extra cash. It’s too hot on the surface to go take a walk, so they tunnel like moles. If there’s a bill they can’t quite pay, they chip away in hope they’ll run into a seam of opals or copper. Or maybe there’s a family with an extra little bundle on the way. Some bright spark thinks their joint needs an extra pool room. That’s how you extend a property, when you live underground. Instead of building stuff on, you just hollow a little more out. But the boundary lines are way trickier to navigate.’

‘You’re saying this all like it’s bad stuff. But don’t you see the flipside? We could do the very same thing. Stuff squeezing ourselves into two overpriced rooms with a leak in the hallway. We could make our place whatever we wanted, and renovate on the cheap whenever we liked.’

‘Okay, but jokes aside...’

‘There’s a certain poetry to it. I mean, when you build a house above ground, you raise a solid structure into previously empty space. When you burrow down, you carve space into what was previously solid, and through that process, a structure opens. You put nothing into something and so make something out of nothing. As in, the nothing is what makes the something. Space is created, and able to be filled, because it’s been hollowed out. The more you take away, the more you have. Do you see?’

‘What I see is...’

You paused, drew a deep breath, then let the air out slowly. I heard it whistling faintly and watched you emptying, becoming hollow like a cave. Except you weren’t opening. You were shrinking. Caving in on yourself.

‘I see you’re stressed,’ you continued in a small voice. ‘Look, I know it’s been tough since they hiked the rent and stuff. But we did the maths. You know it. We’ll get through.’

It was my turn to deflate. I felt my shoulders pulled forwards, as if by invisible hands, and my spine curling, my body drawing in like one of those bugs with the hard-plated backs and squishy bellies that spiral themselves into hard grey pellets whenever threat appears.

‘What’s so unlucky about opals anyhow?’ I asked, forcing evenness into my tone. You sighed again.

‘In this country, aren’t all minerals unlucky? At least when we take them from the ground? That’s what the Traditional Owners would say, I reckon.’

You had a point there. Implicit in it was another: what was I, as someone born on this land but not of it, doing thinking it was my business to own part of it, in Coober Pedy or

anywhere? *I'm only trying to survive*, a little voice in me protested. *I'm not dreaming of a mansion, just a place to live and be. Is that such an unreasonable dream?*

The voice was puny, whining. It sickened me with its whiteness, its privilege—*my* whiteness, *my* privilege. How preposterous, to think *survival* on such terms, when there are people for whom it means another day's drinking water, people whose impossible dream might be our rented shitbox. Or less.

What's more, it's invasion and colonization that poisoned the waters and genuinely threaten survival globally. What's a title deed, versus extinction? Real estate is itself an imperial concept. Home ownership is a programmed dream, instilled via bank ads, that song by the Carpenters, and cheesy films about white bread families with pool rooms and back sheds who eat Bunnings snags on public holiday long weekends and mow the lawn Sundays without fail. These families don't go to invasion day rallies; they don't cast their votes based on climate. Karen Carpenter died miserable.

The dream is more than unreasonable. The dream is a big bloody problem.

'You're right,' I said at last. 'We did the maths, and...' I trailed off, realizing you must have slipped from the room while I was deep in thought.

I remain unsure whether we ever got to whatever it was you wanted to talk about.

Amelia Walker has published four poetry collections and three books on teaching poetry in primary schools (in Macmillan's 'All You Need to Teach' series). She completed her PhD in creative writing in 2016 and currently lectures in creative writing at the University of South Australia.