

Real Estate

Alex Sutcliffe

There is a vacant block next to the house where I live now. It was one of the reasons I chose to move in. The interview went well. One of the housemates, Alex, seemed pleased by my joke about the landlord and the guillotine. The other, Hannah, seemed pleased I had brought three small Berliners.

Is there anything else you'd like to know? Hannah asked after we had eaten the Berliners and exchanged all the usual information about the house and one another.

Yeah, what's with the vacant block?

The vacant block is divided from our block by a corrugated iron fence, but connected to our block by a network of burrows. The last housemate kept rabbits until one of them got into the vacant block and out onto the street, where she, the rabbit, was hit by a car. She, the last housemate, moved out soon after, but not because of that.

The vacant block is also connected to our block by overhanging foliage: loquat and pepper trees, nasturtium and blackberry. Neither the branches nor the vines are of any more use for a person trying to scale the fence than the burrows are for a person trying to crawl under it. Not from our side.

Through the cyclone wire of the front gate, a pedestrian can see half way down the block. There the screen of weeds grows too thick. The fence between our house and the vacant block is lower at the front of our house than it is at the back. If one places a chair—say one of the chairs on our front porch—on our driveway by the front length of fence, one could climb onto it and jump into the vacant block. The front length of fence is, however, older and running to rust, and nothing has been fitted to the top of it to prevent one cutting one's feet, should one try to climb over without shoes.

One could also, with the aid of a chair, climb over from the backyard; the burrows, however, have left little earth on which to stand a chair. When Hannah sees me place a board over the entrance to one the burrows, she apologises: We've been meaning to fill those in.

It has taken me some time to learn my housemates' routines. Hannah studies, but from home. She also works in retail. She leaves the house for at least half the day at least three days a week. Alex does not seem to have a routine.

I cannot remember leaving the chair in the driveway. When Hannah sees me dragging it back to the porch I apologise: I've been meaning to move this.

When I feel troubled, which is quite often, I return to the vacant block.

I have found nang caps, cigarette butts, and beer bottles in the vacant lot. I hope to find a used condom.

It is behind that screen of weeds that I have found the nang caps, cigarette butts, and beer bottles. It is also behind the screen of weeds that I go to read or nap.

There is not that much else to see in the vacant block: weeds, waste, dirt. There is an old corrugated iron shed at the back, but it is locked.

The owner flies in from Sydney. He whipper-snips the nettles and mows the grass and poisons the blackberries. He does not touch the loquats.

Why doesn't he hire a gardener? Surely a few hours of their labour would be cheaper than flights to and from Sydney and accommodation. Alex suspects the owner flies in in the morning and back out at night.

The weeds are a neat, close-cut lawn now. I still find nang caps, cigarette butts, and beer bottles, but they collect further back, in the corner behind the trees, as do I myself.

Whenever I see local kids, say on my way to the bus or the shops, I wonder whether we share the vacant block. Something in our countenance or comportment must mark us out, but I have never been very good at making eye-contact.

One evening when Hannah is at work and I am home with a bandaged foot, I hear something bang against the corrugated iron. Through my window, I see Alex land clumsily on the chair in the driveway, which tips slightly, before climbing down from the chair and dragging it back to the porch.

There was a vacant block by the house where I grew up. I returned to that vacant lot, too, whenever I felt troubled. One day, a Corflute sign for a real estate development company appeared, cable-tied to the front gate, then a team of construction workers erected a temporary fence around the fence. This troubled me, but the fence was easy enough to climb. Shortly thereafter, the stock market crashed. It was 2008. I did not comprehend how a stock market could crash or what that meant except that some people had to move into their cars. I did not see the construction workers again.

I asked my mother when the workers would return to build the house next door and whether some of the people now sleeping in their cars would live there when the workers were finished. She explained that the construction company could not afford to build the planned units because of the crash – because the people sleeping in their cars could not afford to buy them.

I returned to the vacant block.

The weeds, mercifully, grow back.

Today I woke in the vacant block. After I clambered up the loquat tree and jumped over the back fence, I found myself in an unfamiliar yard. As I looked around I noticed that the plum tree, the bamboo, the tipped over rabbit hutch, and the leaf litter were ours (or our landlords), but I was seeing them from an unfamiliar angle. If I am climbing over the back fence, I usually climb the pepper tree.

Sometimes I believe I will climb back from the vacant block and find myself in my parents' yard again, but, then I remember that a different construction company did eventually build three units on the vacant block there. Perhaps I will find myself in a different suburb or city entirely.

There are other good places: alleys, carpark fire-escapes, weed infested verges between conservation parks and highways. The sea. I like anywhere people illegally dump waste.

The owner returns from Sydney. He whipper-snips the nettles and mows the grass and poisons the blackberries. That afternoon, as he leaves, he fixes a Corflute sign to the gate with cable-ties. I never found my used condom.

An MPhil student in creative writing at the University of Adelaide, **Alex Sutcliffe** has walked down many but not all of Adelaide's CBD's streets. Alex's other writing can be found in *Cordite* and the *Sydney Review of Books*. Alex also writes gushing catalogue essays for talented artist friends.