

Oyster Shell Creek

By Rob Harle

I gazed into the translucent turquoise mirror as the houseboat skimmed gracefully towards Oyster Shell Creek. Each year I spend a month or so in a rented houseboat idly floating along isolated reaches of the Hawkesbury River.

This year was part holiday and part work. Parts of parts, parts of a jigsaw puzzle. Do we ever solve these puzzles? I needed the time alone to rest and to sort out some complex research problems.

Oyster Shell Creek is narrow, surrounded on three sides by steep hills covered with thick bushland. Here and there hard, yellow-red sandstone contrasts with the soft, dark green eucalypts. A silent place. I settled back in the deck chair and marvelled at the wild virgin country. Dense mangroves with tangled gnarled roots, stood guard, protecting the hills. I tried to imagine living in total isolation, wondering what happens to the mind when it is estranged from day to day communication and placed in solitude.

I pondered the fate of mystics and those Tibetan hermits who lock themselves in caves for years. Never speaking. Never seeing anyone. Some never come out, their caves become their tombs.

Suddenly I sat up with a jerk, for a couple of seconds I didn't know where I was.

"Must have dozed off," I mumbled to myself. The warm air caressed my bare skin as the blackness engulfed me. Leaning over the side of the houseboat I splashed my face with dark, cool water to clear the drowsiness.

Searching for the light switch in the darkness of the cabin I heard faint musical notes drifting past me on the breeze. I paused, holding my breath to listen more intently. There it was again. It sounded like a work by Debussy, I laughed at myself, there were no houses in this area at all. As I switched the light on the music stopped. The only sound was the peaceful lapping of the silver-green water against the hull.

Work filled the next day, checking and re-checking figures and calculations.

Feeling satisfied with my efforts I opened a bottle of red wine. The sun bathed the creek in a sensuous, soft red haze. I had barely finished the first glass of wine when the music started again, this time it was louder. My hand tightened around the glass, tighter. Now I knew it wasn't my imagination, someone was playing a violin.

"Who are you?" I shouted.

"Who are you? Where are you?" This time there was an aggressive tone in my shouting. The music continued, pulsating with the glow of the setting sun. I quietly stepped into the dingy and rowed silently, ever so silently towards the direction of the music. Approaching a rocky outcrop I drew the oars carefully, gently, silently. The music stopped.

"Who the hell are you?" I screamed at the blackness of the shoreline.

"Who the hell are you?".....

"Who the hell are you?".....

My voice echoed and echoed around the valley as I waited for an answer. I'll try a different approach I thought calming down a little. Calming, calming, calm.

"Whoever you are, your playing is magnificent." A faint female voice broke the silence.

"Thank you."

"What are you doing in this isolated place?" I demanded.

"I live here, if you must know!", she replied bluntly.

"I can't see any light or building," I yelled back rather nervously.

"It's well hidden so I'm not bothered by intruders." Embarrassed, I sat for a while in silence.

"Your playing is beautiful but I don't recall ever hearing that piece before?"

"That's because it's my own composition, it's not quite finished yet."

"What do you call it?" I enquired eager to become friendly.

"Lament to a Lost Soul', now please leave me alone!"

I rowed back to the houseboat feeling dejected and confused. Isolated.

"Still, suppose I am intruding," I muttered to myself banging down in the deck

chair. "Lament To A Lost Soul, Lament To A Lost Soul," I kept repeating to myself as the night sky stared down at me.

She started playing again. The sadness, the utter loneliness of her music began to frighten me.

I couldn't remember when the music stopped nor when I fell asleep. The new sun, already high in the sky, tore mercilessly into my half open eyes. I was about to make coffee, trying to think of ways to meet this musical recluse, when I spotted her rowing towards the houseboat. I restrained my initial impulse to rush out and greet her. Restraint, compose, calm.

"Just in time for coffee," I said, casually poking my head out the door.

"That sounds nice, thanks."

I went over to the handrail and reached out, sort of half to shake hands and half to help her onboard. She was quite an attractive women in an unusual way, about mid forties. I couldn't help noticing her pale, almost ashen complexion.

"My name's Karina, what's yours?"

"It's Phillip. Come in and I'll make the coffee I'm glad I've finally met you, thought I was going crazy for a while." She laughed as she stepped into the cabin.

Sitting down at the table she casually looked at my papers and reference books.

"What's all this about then?"

"I'm a mathematician, having a spell from university to try and complete some new work." Every so often I had to mentally pinch myself. I'd accepted her pale complexion but there was something peculiar about her eyes. About her whole appearance really.

"Where did you learn music? You play exceptionally well." She stared at the floor for a while, then answered.

"My parents had me taught from the age of three. I studied with various teachers, then went to the Conservatory."

I sat looking into her eyes, they seemed to see right through everything.

"But they didn't like me. They did not like me!"

"Sorry, who didn't like you?"

"The Music Establishment. I was too clever, too talented. They would never listen to my ideas or compositions."

"That's a shame, you....."

"Then I tried to kill myself, so the doctors put me in the 'Nut House'. I was happy there, people listened, they appreciated my music, they listened".

Intrigued, I sat sipping my coffee.

"My father died shortly after that and left me some money. I convinced the doctors I was sane so they let me out. For a long time I searched for a place to live that was private and near the water. I found this place and came to compose and play. Away from that horrible, horrible world."

She had been doodling on a sheet of paper whilst telling me her story.

"But what do you live in?" I asked.

"An old fisherman's shack. I fixed it up and now it's cosy and comfortable. Tell me about your work Phillip."

"It's pretty boring if you're not a mathematician."

"Mathematics and music are very similar," she said looking straight at me.

"They both spring from the same source." she added. I smiled in agreement.

"Well, I have a theory about the properties of musical vibration in curved space," I explained. She nodded.

"But I'm having difficulty working out the formula to prove my hypothesis."

"Do you think I'm mad?" she asked, changing the subject abruptly.

"Of course not, but who am I to judge another's sanity?"

"I think you're insane?" she said standing up.

I laughed loudly, although quite surprised.

"Where are you going?"

"I really have to put the final touches to my 'Lament'. You know the old saying, 'Time and tide waits for no woman'?"

"Time! Just what is time, how can it wait or not wait?" I mused silently to myself.

I followed her outside. She was already in her dinghy drifting away from the houseboat. I stood there feeling rather agitated. She waved as she turned in behind the rocky outcrop.

Tidying my papers I noticed she had drawn some overlapping circles. In the middle of these was a formula. I checked it, then checked it again. Checked, re-checked and checked again. It was the formula I'd been searching for. How could she have known? Who was this mysterious woman? I sat there my mind churning, tumbling over itself.

"Blast it," I shouted.

"I can't stand this any longer." I rushed to the dinghy and rowed towards the outcrop. An overgrown track led away from the rocks through the mangroves into the bush.

"Karina! Are you there?" I paused momentarily waiting for a reply. None came. I crashed my way through the bush until I came to the shack.

"What's going on?" I cried out. The shack was derelict. Most of the iron had rusted away, the rotting door hung dangerously from its hinge. I pushed my way past a decaying cane chair and cautiously looked inside.

There was nothing but a pile of oyster shells and a rusted bed frame.

Trembling uncontrollably I ran wildly towards the dinghy. The music started softly, then grew louder and louder. 'Lament To A Lost Soul' vibrated across the mirrored water and echoed through the hills.

Bio

Rob Harle is a writer, artist and academic reviewer. Writing work includes poetry, short fiction stories, academic essays and reviews of scholarly books and papers. His work is published in journals, anthologies, online reviews, books and he has two volumes of his own poetry published – *Scratches & Deeper Wounds* (1996) and *Mechanisms of Desire* (2012). Recent poetry has been published in *Rupkatha Journal* (Kolkata), *Nimbin Good*

Times (Nimbin), *Beyond The Rainbow* (Nimbin), *Poetic Connections Anthology* (2013), *Indo-Australian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* (2013) and *Rhyme With Reason Anthology* (2013).

His art practice currently involves digital-computer art both for the web and print. His giclée images have been exhibited widely. He is especially interested in promoting the inclusion of visual art in academic and scientific journals.

Formal studies include Comparative Religion, Philosophy, Architecture, Literature and Psychotherapy, his thesis concerned Freud's notion of the subconscious and its relationship with Surrealist poetry.

Rob's main concern is to explore and document the radical changes technology is bringing about. He has coined the term technoMetamorphosis to describe this.

He is currently an active member of the Leonardo Review Panel, Editorial reviewer for the *Journal of Virtual World Research* and an Advising Editor for the *Journal of Trans-technology Research*.

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