The Atticus Rosary

Mark Mordue[1]

"Star more." "New town." "Donal town!" "Ray fern." "Sendral."

My son Atticus recites the names of railway stations as we move through Sydney's inner west towards Central's Platform 19. At two and a half years of age he's still too young to get them perfectly right, but he catches the carriage announcements in his ear, looks up and purses his lips with the sweetest calligraphy God ever gave breath to.

I realize we're at the beginning of a ritual, a train journey to the city from our new home in Lewisham that he will make, back and forth, as he grows older. For some reason I start to imagine him as a young man, the stations carved into him as firmly as the recitative steps of a rosary. His places. His way into the world and back home again. *Come back, my son*, I find myself whispering, as if I am already in some future life watching him from above, *come back, my son, to me*.

I remember how important this journey was when I first moved from Newcastle to Sydney in my early 20s, to live in somewhat crazed inner city share-houses around Redfern, Newtown, Stanmore and Petersham. The same rail line coincidentally (or perhaps not) that we are travelling now.

Macdonaldtown Station always held the most power over me: bare and windswept and open, with horizon views that seemed to go all the way to the city's smudged end. Here was a place where great dramas must have happened. Like a stage for Shakespeare and all his openness to elemental turbulence, a perfect setting for an avant garde production of *The Tempest* that I'd love to direct myself.

At night, of course, this bereft-looking station could be a scary and lonely place, where it felt as if the whole dark world was watching, much as you might have felt you were watching that same world once upon a time in the day. How vulnerable and glad I would feel when a city-bound train swept me into its stale, bright lights and shunted me away from the emptiness.

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Not everyone found Macdonaldtown to be so grand or beautiful or imminent with stories. Someone tried to paint the whole station pink in the mid 80s, a brave effort that was 90% completed before security officers forced "the vandals" to scuttle. Something in me is still inspired by the noble whimsicality behind this action, that peculiar way people have of using an absurdist protest to colour our sense of community (in this case quite literally).

I must add I'm not alone in this affection for Macdonaldtown Station. Not that long ago I opened the pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald* to see a letter from a Martin Stott of Petersham. Under the heading "A timetable marked by years, not minutes," Stott wrote with feeling about the plane trees he'd watched grow from saplings amid the gravel, sleepers and graders. The fact they'd recently been bulldozed away prompted him to write, "I know my life was happier for 20 years watching those trees live and grow, not by seeing how quickly I got to work."

Those made of sterner or more practical stuff might find such sentiments laughable, but the fact Stott found time to mourn the loss of the trees indicates something valuable and worthwhile at work in his sense of what a city can be – and what *we* can be within it when we get lucky and find ourselves an anchor or two of unexpected beauty to identify with.

So yes, the trees are gone. But the wonderful thing is that Martin Stott holds them alive inside of him. And isn't that what our lives are so often about?

Think of the way we can't go to certain places without feeling the ghost presence of who we once were. Who we kissed, the arguments we had, the moments of revelry, our old selves traced into familiar territory and still, to this day, *standing there waiting like a photograph on our heart* as we revisit our hometown or find ourselves on a street where we used to live.

In moments like these the past is stronger than the present – indeed, it can be so strong it overwhelms us with feeling, and even drives us away from where we stand. What's that great Bob Dylan line? "I'm branded on my feet…"

Place names can be a little like this too. All of us know of places that aren't designated on any map, yet are spoken of freely in the common parlance of a community. Lovers' lanes, surf hangs, local bars … their official or non-existent names often melt into our daily conversations, our more intimate histories and take new shape.

My home bus stop back in Newcastle, for instance, was known as 'the Gully Line' when I was a boy. The name was a hangover from the days of the tramlines, which were closed down decades before in the 1940s. And yet my grandmother practically tattooed the phrase 'Gully Line' onto me every time I walked out the door. No chance of me ever not knowing where I lived or getting the wrong bus. Back then you could still see old tram tracks right where I jumped off, poking through the bitumen. The name itself is gone now - like those

vestigial tram tracks too - with only a few locals like me aware of its traces hidden beneath the smooth black tar of the present.

All this makes me think of the way home is not so much a place, as a map of how we move and relate to things around us. A few years ago I was reminded of this in a conversation with the Australian historian, Peter Read. We had been talking about the significance of 'the road' in Australian culture, how certain roads follow Aboriginal movement patterns, and how repeated travel along these 'paths' can have unconscious corollaries to the Dreaming movements that once inspired them.

Making too much of this unconscious force would have been foolish, and certainly hard to prove – much as the idea of a metaphysical hum beneath the road, beneath the land wherever we are, appealed to my sense of healing and identity about who we might be or become in Australia.

Read preferred to focus on something more 'solid', if that's the right word. Something as simple as a family road trip to explain his own thinking about place and movement and belonging: "It's clearest for kids," he told me, as he spoke of ritual journeys and how they shape us. "This is where you smell the holiday place for the first time as you get nearer to it, this is where you stop for lunch, this is where you say hello to a statue, the little bumps along the road you thought you'd forgotten, where you have a milkshake … it's the way-stations along the journey, like jewels on a necklace."

It is in this often humble way that stories of place rise up before our eyes and beneath us, and make their deeper claims upon us. The German film director Wim Wenders has a lot to say about this in terms of how we actually go about telling stories today, and more critically the manner in which Hollywood transplants stories *onto* places with little regard, in the main, for the resident culture – let alone the physical truths of the landscape it is colonizing with its 'dreams'.

Wenders spoke about these notions in a talk entitled *In Defence of Place* at the Museum of Contemporary Art here back in 2003. The lecture launched an exhibition of his photography, stunning five-metre panoramas of car yards, deserts, Buddhist priests, cowboys and stone. As slide-show images flashed behind him Wenders discussed his love of landscape and his appreciation for the power of journeying – as well as a willingness to improvise scripts and grow his films out of these dual energies in everything from *Kings of the Road* to *Paris, Texas*, *Wings of Desire*, *Until the End of the World* and *Buena Vista Social Club*.

"We all suffer, in this 21st century, from an insane amount of exchangeable images and exchangeable stories, and a terrible withdrawal from first-hand experience," he said. "It leads, slowly but steadily, to an ongoing loss of reality, and to the loss of belief once more, *in the story-telling capacity of places* [his emphasis]. According to the indigenous people of Australia places die if they

are not kept alive, and so do we, along with them. In my book, they're damn right."

It's why we're so lucky to have poets like Robert Adamson so lyrically connected to the Hawkesbury River north of Sydney, Tim Winton summoning up the beaches and fishing towns of Western Australia, the Aboriginal art phenomenon of the Northern Territory pulsating with desert energy, the Hill End painting movement still calling to us after all this time and somehow marking us with a sense of history, our cinematographers and their very particular sense of light in the world, musicians like Paul Kelly, Tex, Don and Charlie, and Powderfinger all painting the country and our lives in songs, even the urban heat and night force that somehow crackles out of a wild Dirty Three instrumental and feels utterly Australian. These artists seem to know our stories of place as well as how to 'create' or call them up – not just for us, but amazingly enough, *in* us.

In Aboriginal mythology, the Dreaming ancestors called the world into being by singing out names. I've always thought it promising that such thinking means we are living in a country, a landscape, quite literally woven out of stories and song. There's an obvious parallel in the Bible, in John 1: 1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God."

Whatever you believe, it's a fact we make our world up all the time, every day we pass through it. And that it too creates us as we respond to it. Understanding this reciprocal sense of place and why it matters feeds who we are. If we also feed it, name it, acknowledge it. As seems to be the case today. Here now. With my son. Rattling towards the city, looking out the wide windows of a grubby silver train, calling out the prayer of motion and connection: "Star more." "New town." "Donal town!" "Ray Fern." "Sendral." Home.[2]

2 McDonaldtown Station has now been walled off on both sides of the railway tracks by high, grey sheets of sound-proof fencing, blocking out the horizon view and the feeling of being on an island in the city.