

ADEN ROLFE

WRITER & EDITOR

CREATIVE PORTFOLIO

1

LIKE A WRITING DESK

Excerpt
from “Like a
Writing Desk”,
a radioplay
commissioned
by ABC Radio
National, 2012

SCENE 13 GALLERY INTERIOR – ATRIUM

MICHAEL, PAOLA and JULIAN are in the Atrium for what will later be revealed as the opening of ‘True Crow’. Polite chatter can be heard around them. Glasses chink and clank against trays, the occasional burst of laughter emanates from here and there.

MICHAEL I heard they’re everywhere.

PAOLA It’s true.

JULIAN I heard they learn from other crows.

MICHAEL Yeah, they teach each other things.

PAOLA And they remember people.

JULIAN And hold grudges.

MICHAEL I heard they lead dingoes to prey, knowing they’ll get the scraps.

JULIAN I heard they’re omens.

PAOLA I heard they’re sacred.

MICHAEL I heard they’re emissaries of the dead.

JULIAN What’s an emissary?

MICHAEL You know, like a, a messenger.

JULIAN What use is that?

MICHAEL I dunno. Benefits of the spirit world?

PAOLA What, like flying?

JULIAN They already fly.

PAOLA Seems a bit pointless then.

JULIAN Mm, yes.

MICHAEL Quite true.

SCENE 14 ACADEMIC OFFICE INTERIOR

ROBERT speaks as a talking head. He is in his office, where there are no overt sound features.

ROBERT There are tests – like the wire and bread puzzle – that chimpanzees just can’t get. They can be taught the answer, but they can’t figure it out. Not by themselves. So when a crow does, we have two very important consequences. The first is the question: does this make them more intelligent than monkeys, and, therefore, the smartest non-human animal? That would be a pretty big shift on its own, but there’s a bigger one. That’s the second thing. Which is that every time a crow passes one of these tests, every time they do something previously undocumented in non-human animals, we need to redefine humanity. Because when a bird is smarter than our closest animal relative, what is it that makes us human?

you heard i traded all my stories for seed packets
some grew some didn't but i forget which
 mint or basil tomato or jalapeno
by spring we'll be eating pesto or salsa
though which i can't say

a late afternoon indistinctness set in
the sand was greyer outside the photographs
and though alana brought her paints and offered to make some adjustments
 i was already knee-deep in mangroves

tie a key to a kitemstring just so something for once will happen
we lost something somewhere and had to drive round all night to find it
i admit it now pouring sand from my shoe i've never really known
 solitude

if we could start again wake up just a little earlier
 we try to watch the waves so that later we can say
 we watched the waves
 but vertigo takes hold
neither of us trusts the other
not to simply wander in

3

EXCHANGES

We expected more from the twenty-first century. Some direction, some push, some instruction for living in the present continuous. A cure for boredom, perhaps, self-annihilating or otherwise. Instead we set the scene, take the photo, update our status.

I should've answered your question with a question, I realise, with the same question, but the words escaped me, they slipped out and filled the car like so much regret, forcing us onto the side of the road, somewhere near _____. We stood and looked at it awhile, menacing like a wasp nest, bloated with idea. It was never always phatic with you, but always never a broken fiction, ready to shift unexpectedly, slip sideways like sunsets on towers of hubris, pleasantly cursed, stalling things for a time, night roads in monochrome, dawdling into another year, at least until we knew what to do. But at this moment I can't help think: what is hope predicated on exactly, what are its prompts? And in their absence, then what? And then, in the face of the babble and chatter, of the excellents and hahaha awesomes, would you even hear it intoning: interesting, interesting yes interesting? We are postsingular, polysemic, and approval means more when it's conditional.

Meanwhile, just outside of shot, the runner has arrived with iced tea and a jam donut and a list of things, thingness things, things I forgot to ask, now being the time of inquiry, _____ being the town of inquiry. I'll forget them again no doubt, I've forgotten them already, lost the slips of paper I wrote them down on, and I'll have to look them up again, ask you again again, walk them into being. Eventually, the pebblecrete palace and its seagull-surrounded towers, visible to the farthest corners of this city, even here, will cease to matter, along with plans, and ideas and where you were until now. We know what we face in uncertainty: It's a path laid out to escape oneself. But it's gone now, with the times, it's gone and returned.

Published in
*Melbourne
Historical
Journal* (#37)
and highly
commended for
the 2009 Judith
Wright Poetry
Prize