

BASALT

Ross Gibson

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Lava flowing

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The town of Camperdown lies in a
 lull of land
 that is not quite a hollow.

Two hours drive west from Melbourne, the car
 spends
 fifteen minutes of
 odd exertion

crossing blustery plains

until a hillock gives the road a gear-changing

climb

and you ease over a crest,

down

to leeward calm

where speed-caution signs mark the civic
 boundaries.

Tidy houses and shops cluster around municipal
 bastions that are built staunch in the local

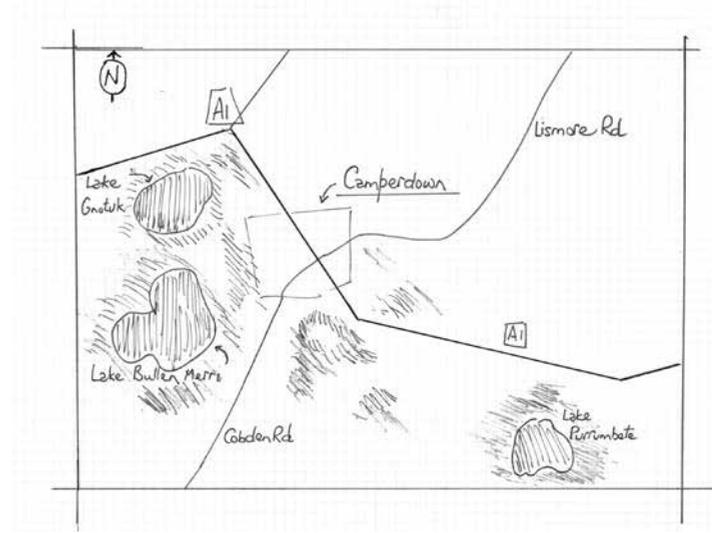
bluestone. The townsfolk are snug from the winds because the streets are cupped all around by rocky knolls and washaway pits. Life is cosier here than on the buffeting tract over in the east.

The world seems to settle, to ease still and rest solid.

Then as you travel northwesterly out the far side of town, there is a verge on another crest banking left

in a windward arc around

the volcanic crater-rim of neighbouring Lake Gnotuk.



The hills puckering here are part of a larger warp-and-weft that kneads westerly out into gale-driven country.

So the car lolls and rouses henceforth as it negotiates

the plain

rising

falling

rising

falling

rising

every five hundred metres

like a boat

cruising

the waves

of an agitated ocean.

This is the start of the district that is

extensive green

but

dappled

with

scattered chunks of black & grey –

the district known as

the Stony Rises

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known as

the Stony Rises.

In the Stony Rises the roads wobble loosely up and

over wide-set terrestrial

wave-peaks,

wave-peaks

that were formed eons ago by

surface-swelling perturbations

during volcanic seasons when all this plain was a

torrid smear of lava popping magma bubbles into

curved ridges and circular craters
that became lakes when the earth eased
and cooled slowly into something
SOLID.

The lava that gives shape and memory to the Stony
Rises: it is basalt.

The main laval activity, causing the country to
materialise from torrid magma fluid, occurred
ages ago. Estimators use 'one hundred millennia'
for the plus-or-minus margins when making the
guesses.

The last major eruption, though, was recent: a
splattered explosion breached the thin basalt crust
to create Budj Bim.

('Budj Bim' is an indigenous expression meaning
'High Head'. In settler-English, it is called
'Mt Eccles'.)

The explosion emitted the great ooze that is
known today as

the Tyrendarra Flow.

A new draft of lava was thus dispensed across
wavy basalt top-crust, like hot toffee drizzled on a
recently-baked tart.

Carbon-dating suggests the Tyrendarra Flow
occurred between 25,000 and 30,000 years
ago. So the Budj Bim eruption would have been
witnessed by local Aborigines. Those who were not
destroyed in the fallout would have retreated to
cooler ground and cleaner air until eventually they
could flow back into the homeland after the ash
and dust had become vegetal soil and the lava had
hardened into extra basalt rises and ramparts.

(This process of retreat and return has endured.
The peoples' generationally-trained and fabled
ability to flow back-and-forth through the laval
ribbing of the stone-pocked country informed the
tactics of the indigenous warriors in the late 1840s,

during the conflicts now known as the Eumeralla Wars, when the incoming colonists – horse-mounted and wagon-dragging – discovered how much unlike a pre-destined paradise the green country could be).

Minor volcanic uprisings have been occurring ever since Budj Bim was created. The spitting magma engendered Lake Condah eight thousand years ago. And geologists admit the turbulence might not yet be finished. Maybe, in the coming thousand years, somewhere else in the basalt skin will explode.

At the outskirts of Camperdown, you can scale any ridge to see how the roads in and out of town are a *record*. The roads are materialized, three-dimensional prints of the country's past liveliness. The roads are massy memories of hot fluid flowing and wobbling, cooling and solidifying. They flex in contact with deep time. They *remember* deep time. The past is right there on the ruffled ground, highlighted by the sheened tarmac ribbons that render it all the more visible in the troughy

topography of the Stony Rises.

In the mind's eye, see the lava oozing.

See the country holding its original fluidity in its present-day topography.

Undulation defines the Stony Rises.

(“Undulation”: one restless fluid inquires of another.)

The land-surface undulates. The sky-weather pulsates. Minute by minute, the wind and rain thrum, prompting the wild light into a slow-throbbing display as the sun's glare flares and bastes enormous bruised clouds tumbling stratospheric above glistening crater lakes.

The temperature rises and falls.

So does the humidity.