


CRAIG SILVEY  
*Rhubarb*



FREMANTLE PRESS



*this book is dedicated to Parvin Khan*

 *It seems that almost everyone has a patch of  
rhubarb tucked in a corner of their garden.*

*Rhubarb: More Than Just Pies*  
Sandi Vit, Michael Hickman

## *rapideyemovement*



A vigil slips. But only because it has to. Only because sleep can't always be staved.

Moongleam bleeds silver through cheap lace curtains. The window is shut, the trapped air hot. Dry and stifled.

This is a child's room. Still. With a child's adornments, but without a child.

On the wall is Mickey Mouse, redshorted and ringed by numbers. His arms frozen wide open. Splayed, like he's ready to be dissected. The thin red secondhand doesn't move or tick or tock. It just offers a determined, stunted flicker (stuck, stuck, stuck).

But Mickey grins a plastic grin and points gleefully at the numbers Three and Nine.

It's three forty-five. It's lightyears from midnight.

There is no music.

The bed has sloughed its covers. There are only two sheets (plastic under polyester) and there she lies. Supine. Thin and sweatglossed. You can see her rack of ribs embossing cotton.

She lies and she doesn't toss, doesn't welter. She's pinned rigid, like she's strapped down, held, like she's ready to be —

If you look close though, you can see how her eyelids fibrillate. Rapideyemovement. They flicker like a projection reel. Behind them there's mutiny. And noise. Things are surfacing from a shallow burial. Things are spilling from sacks, undone and unbidden. And she's pinned rigid. She might twitch.

Warren is here. Driven by duty and worry. He keeps watch, because her sleep is his vigil. A guard dog by night; because Warren can't go where she is, he can't weave her away from Things. Dreams don't need guide dogs.

So he sits: staunch and patient and a little thirsty. Eyes large and lazy in the dim light. He makes occasional nuzzled enquiries, but mostly he just sits. Head cocked, ears pinned, still.

It's later, when her breathing breaks into heaving, when lungs press brittle ribs; that's when Warren begins to shuffle with restless unease. That's when Warren feels queasy. And that's when Warren farts (poofffffft) and whines softly. He forbears a flurry of barking, like a fist in his chest.

And he'll trundle off to gather a ratty leather harness. He'll trundle back and deposit it carefully on the bed near her open hand. And he'll sit. Stay. And wait.

## *big red arrow*



It still feels dark when Eleanor eases the front door shut.

It's three forty-five. Her skin is moist from the shower. There are red scratchmarks on her arms and her belly. Warren is harnessed and Ready.

The pavement is cool beneath her bare feet. And Eleanor is ushered downhill by a thick easterly breeze bearing pollen, bugs, dust and monoxide. She moves quickly through streets she knows. This is a straight and wellworn path. She glides silently with somnambulist detachment. Roundshouldered and tilted forward, like she's towing something. Her chest is tight.

Warren does not glide. He has the detachment of the barely awake. His loose bodyfat jostles and his wet eyes are blinky. His head sways low to the ground.

There are four things Warren hates (in order of irritation):

1. Early mornings.
2. Seagulls.
3. Children.
4. Martha Gardener.

Warren yawns. His tongue curls, then unfurls; as though the yawn is a royal presentation.

There is no traffic, so Eleanor doesn't pause for kerbs or crossings. She doesn't Stop or Give Way. The breeze chills her back, makes her skin taut. She is ghosted by pale streetlights. Warren quells the urge to sniff roadkill. A cardoor slams distantly. Reticulation ups periscope and hisses. She charges beneath an overhanging jacaranda whose discarded lilac nipples adhere to her callused feet. Sticky. But she doesn't stop, because moving helps. And so does water. She's almost there and she knows.

Warren steers her past two hirsute men unpacking crates of vegetables. They watch her slip by round a corner.

Closer now. Past a sleeping cafe. Past the shadow of the hospital. Past the pungent fishwaft from the markets. She turns and her pace quickens. She smells baking Turkish bread. Warren lingers.

On the dewy lawn of the Esplanade Reserve they weave beneath Norfolk Island pines. She grips the harness tight because she can smell the salt now. Warren stumps along at her left. His hackles fan as seagulls wheel above and squawk discord. He harrumphs with feeling.

They whip through the railway labyrinth. Dip between parked cars. They jaywalk Mews Road, giving berth to a taxi pulling out of a nightclub. It whispers past, its back door streaked with vomit. A weak, incipient sunhaze spreads off the hills behind them. Warren stops for a flight of steps.

I know, she says. Come on.

And she's on to the thick boards of the harbour platform. Impatient and breathing hard. The nails of her dog clickclack as he canters alongside. The last crossing is four steps long. She pulls left, away from the listing shore of Bathers Beach, and follows the path beside the low limestone mole that looms close to her right. Blunt rubble peppering the sand ruins the rhythm of her steps. She sniffs. A tiny nosestud gleams. The breeze gets sharper.

She slows, then stops. Makes her estimation and bends. Clicks her fingers. Points.

Okay, is it here Warren? Look, where is it? Here?

She taps granite. And Warren's tail whips as he snuffles the clefts along the seawall. Metres away, he scratches at an open cavity.

Eleanor reaches in to her elbow and removes a handline and a small plastic tacklebox. She drops the harness. And Warren watches her calves flex as she climbs the rock wall in the half-light. The tackle rattles. He sets off slowly after her.

Eleanor quickly locates her rock; a jutting slab of granite with snug ergonomics. A wide throne in the lee of the mole. She sits and its smooth skin is cool. She cradles the cheap plastic container in her lap, wipes away the sand. Her fingers move with careful method. Pinching the line, she threads the sinker and hook easily, though her ties are messy. She clasps shut the tacklebox. Stands. Her back arches as she rolls her shoulders.

Eleanor's toes curl like a diver's over the edge of her rock. Biting her lower lip, she windmills the line and flings it deep. It uncoils from a beggar's hand. She hears the rig slap and fizzle,



and feels the swallowed weight slide. She sits, settles, and, leaning back, keeps the baitless line taut in her fingers.

Warren is at the crest of the seawall, negotiating his next Leap of Peril. The cumbrous harness hampers his mobility. He squints into the wind and assesses his options. He is heckled by vermin. He glares upwards malevolently. Their wingflaps are a pistaking applause. He growls.

Eleanor offers gentle encouragement nearby. Warren farts in distress. He leans, paws at the edge, overbalances, slips, recovers and scrabbles over to where Eleanor reclines. She shifts across. He lays his head in her lap and sighs with drama.

Nicely done, she says, and rubs his snout.

Below her, she can hear lapping files of wavelets; in rhythm with the weighty undertow she absorbs through this thread, like a pulse. Eleanor never winds the line, just holds it. She doesn't expect to catch anything and doesn't want to. Shutting useless eyes, she inhales. Wedged between a rock and a big, wet place. And she can't smother the thought that this, even this, is getting harder.



It is well into the morning when Frank clammers the groyne with creaking knees and a straight back. His arse is tingling unpleasantly. He is accompanied by a fetid white bucket and a thermos he keeps separate. He peers over to where she should be. Sees a short scruff of honeyblonde hair. The long tips of her ears are peeling pink. The polished tan of her shoulders is stark against her tight white singlet. So small and childlike she is,

seated beside that great dribbling lump of dog. Sometimes he finds her here curled and sleeping, still fisting the line.

I know you're there, Frankfurt.

Frank smiles. Morning Elly, love. Christ, you don't miss much.

You're not exactly stealthy over those rocks, Spiderman. Anyway, I've got eyes like a hawk.

Yes, and I've got a dick you could limbo under. I see you have a line out. How goes the world of perpetual disappointment?

Same old shit. Yourself?

Well, he announces, and rests his bucket. Speaking of shit, I've had a wonderful morning having my prostate digitally examined.

Eleanor laughs and turns her head towards him. Sorry. How was it?

Oh, you know, strange at first, but then he worked into a rhythm, you know?

I see.

We've set up another appointment next week. Booked a motel. I haven't told my wife as yet, but she'll understand.

Well make sure you wear something nice.

I'll try, but my arse swallowed my last G-string.

Good chance he'll find it for you.

True, Frank laughs. He has a high, infectious giggle. I'll tell you what though Elly, it actually felt very very pleasant coming *out*. And one good thing must be said about Dr Buggery — he loosened things up lovely. I've never crapped so smooth. It was like ... velvet or something.

I am truly enlightened to hear it, Franklin. So, how is Helen?

Frank shrugs. Yeah, she's well. Says hello. Flat out with the Christmas, you know. It's at ours this year.

So why aren't you helping?

I am, love. Trust me, I am. How's your mum then?

Estelle's good. Out and about, you know, same as Helen.

Frank bends stiffly, retrieves his bucket. Listen, you want some bait, or are you still praying on a suicide?

I'll be fine.

Well, I'm orf to get jiggy with some squid. There's a bit of a run owing to some recent vessel activity, apparently. I'm orready late.

God speed. Jig well.

You take care, Elly love.

You too. Bye.

Frank keeps his smile as he climbs down gingerly, propping his hands on his thighs. His stumpy stockiness is going to fat. A landslide of the chest. A slit of belly pokes out in a wide grin from under his greasy shirt. His thongs flick sand and crumb the back of his legs.

Frank walks like he's pushing an invisible wheelbarrow. He frowns and rubs his saltandpepper stubble.

She worries him, Eleanor. Always has, though he could never say why. She's not brittle. Volatile, maybe. And it seems her fuse is shortening. Maybe it's the heat, he doesn't know. But he's always had a concerned paternal urge to beat his sliding chest, tuck her under his arms and run with her. Alternatively, he knows, he could headbutt a landmine, which would detonate

just as thoroughly. He's seen her tumble badly from the top of those rocks, and the first thing she did was lash out furiously at the people trying to help her up. Frank has always sensed that abrupt boundary with her, and he's always been mindful of it.

Frank climbs the south end of the groyne, offers affable greetings to a row of anglers and leaves her be.

She reels the line on to the plastic spool. He worries her, Frank. She thinks of him, thinks of his wife, and worries because she knows.

Eleanor collects her tackle and spool, pushes herself upright and stretches. She can hear Warren snoring solidly at her feet. She smiles, sly, and turns slowly. Her foot finds a furrow and she sneaks over the seawall. Shelves the tackle. Then she whistles.

On the other side, Warren wakes, sniffs at her absence and scrabbles up confused. He circles. Panicking, he scans the mole before barking at the water.

He pauses; glares over his shoulder hearing his name called. And he belts up and over the seawall without reservation or vertigo.

She's laughing. He lunges in to nip her toes. Still giggling, she fends him off, takes his legs and tips him. Rolls him on to his back and scrubs his softwhite underbelly. Warren's pink slab of tongue lolls flaccid from his open mouth. Eyes glazed. Inert with ecstasy. He comes up schnitzelled. Shakes the sand from his coat and sneezes. He trots away and sits metres apart from her. His tail sweeps and he grins.

Okay. Very funny, Mr Guide Dog. Come on, let's go.

Warren canters back, point made.

The heat is thick. A waning breeze brushes her face. And Eleanor curls fingers round the aluminium harness to leave with her shadow behind her. The ribbed cloud overhead is like scattered sheepfleece.

They move back the way they came. Strolling. Less urgent. Restaurants yawn open for early lunch. Eleanor smells sunscreen and fatty batter. Rich men in high shorts boast their boats in the harbour. Tourists amble and reprimand their children. Warren quells the urge to maul a grounded flock of gulls.

The pavement is toasted. Warren stops her for a tight fluorescent cluster of middle-aged crises on bicycles (with shaven legs to lessen wind resistance) who clot the road. Behind them, motorists bawl invective and search for parking.

Away from town, Eleanor stops at a bakery to buy a loaf of sourdough and some water for Warren. He is sneaked some leftover pastry, like always. He chews with moist eyes.

The suburban streets are sleepy and quiet. She keeps to the dappled shade and weaves her way, choosing roads at random. She doesn't feel like going home just yet. She hears a distant whippersnapper and the piccolo trill of darting wrens. Freckled kids pull faces at her and giggle from their frontyards. Warren cuts his eyes at them.

Sweat coats her lean body satin. No hips, no thighs, no breasts. She has retained the taut, waifish figure of a distance runner, which she used to be; but that was before rhubarb, before sacks, before teflon, before Everything. She lost Running,

and kept Distance. And Appearance. She is the same size she was at twelve.

Eleanor wasn't always blind. She's seen enough, too much. She lost her sight the same year his cirrhotic liver haemorrhaged. He drowned in his own blood. It happened at an airport, where he worked. She wasn't there, she didn't see it. But she'd lost it all before that anyway.

When Estelle told her he was dead, Eleanor said: No. He isn't.

But she was a child then. With long hair. Jenny wasn't, technically, but she was gone by then. Jenny had always been the swimmer. It was like she was built for it. She surfed too, an excuse for early mornings.

Jenny sends a letter once a year; each as useless as the first one she left, the night she stole Running from her younger sister. But all she really wanted was the Distance.

And once a year, Eleanor doesn't reply. So Jenny doesn't know about Warren, about livers, about wombs, about rhubarb. About staying.

They wend stealthily through the streets she grew up in. Streets she explored as a child on a pink bicycle with an embarrassing florid basket (though she never shaved her legs to reduce wind resistance).

Though they are now gentrified and renovated, she *knows* these streets. At will, she can conjure a cerebral map of Fremantle, a network of space and place and roads. And always inside it somewhere, there's a Big Red Arrow pointing at a tiny figure, and three Big Red Words that say: **You Are Here.**

A map with a perimeter, a boundary; and like Frank, she stays within it. She knows her way west to the seawall. East to White Gum Valley. North to the river. And south to South Beach. This is her vicinity; the square she lives in.

She knows these streets because she inhabits them. She's in them every day. She depends on it. And it's not the warm lure of community, though people know her (first) name and call out to her sometimes. They speak briefly, harmlessly, with a fence between them and her. She is often vague with constant fatigue, so people think she's either stoned or stupid. She is ruthlessly evaded by the tight of arse, who assume she is a collector for the Blind. And on a good day, she is only curt with those who offer charity. She doesn't *need* community, or even want it. It's just a simple need to be outside. Moving.

Because Eleanor can remember that unbearable period of no movement that kept her inside, back then, after she lost her sight.

She had refused a cane. Refused all assistance from groups and associations. Confined, she went nowhere. After a vapid year indoors she broke. Choked by claustrophobia, Eleanor had burst outside and attempted to navigate her own way. Her chest was pounding. Incredibly, she rounded two blocks before she was hit by a parked bus. She was taken to hospital with mild concussion.

When she woke, only darkness and the reek of urine were familiar. She had no idea where she was. She screamed.

A week later, a patient, ruddycheeked Englishman called Clive arrived at her door and introduced her to a younger, wilder Warren. Despairing, she agreed to be helped.

That first day, Clive evaluated Eleanor's mobility. They set out

cautiously in the morning. She clutched his arm, but kept him apart. She had a straight, dead, unwavering stare. She scowled and spoke only in sparse acerbic mumbles, protecting a proud, childish dignity. But it didn't last. She couldn't contain her relief. They walked fast. Clive was astounded by her orientation. She was confident in her space. Stubbornly assured. He felt her soften and thaw as they strolled the main street bordered by peoplepeople. She was overawed and it stirred Clive to see it. They walked all day. She asked quiet questions.

Warren was about to be fired from school. He had just failed his exams gloriously. He just didn't cut the mustard.

He struggled with fitness because he didn't have any. He was always hungry. And he could never grasp the ability to piss on cue. He was scolded for skirmishes and chewed orange markers. He had tapeworms and attitude: the class badboy. But Warren's greatest weakness was Distraction. He weaved the straight line like a drunkard. He just had to sniff things, lick things, chase things, roll in things. He couldn't help it. He inhaled arses like they contained secret hidden treasure. And, despite being neutered to ward the temptations of the flesh, Warren maintained a discerning eye for winsome bitches.

This was his Last Chance.

Clive began training them at a park nearby. They adopted each other immediately. Their trust was instant. Separately, they were awkward to instruct, but together, the task was facile. He taught her to listen, because Sound, he said, was her semaphore. Clive was firm, funny and generous. They worked hard. And at the end of each day, he began teaching her braille beneath an old eucalypt.



She absorbed it hungrily. Reading was like being outside again. Another world at her fingertips. And the darkness was like a backdrop. Like a projection screen. It gave more room for illusion.

In Eleanor, Warren had suddenly discovered his duty. He slipped into his harness like it was armour. It was never again chewed or buried. He became fiercely protective and took his job seriously. He learned to quell urges. He led from the front. He took the bullets.

He remained overweight. He still pissed when he needed to piss. But he was never again Distracted whilst in the harness. Warren cut the mustard and graduated at the end of that summer.

Eleanor was moving again. And moving helped.

Now, nine years on, Warren is cocking his leg in a tuft of tallgrass, pissing for neighbourhood primacy at one of his many urinal checkpoints. He marks a broad territory. Sir Warren, (fearless) Knight of the Yellow Empire. Vigilant Protector of the Visually Impaired.

He uncocks, and trots on ahead.

Warren's lifelong gripe is the name Warren. He feels mocked by it. He'd like a name like Major or Boris or Conrad; something darker and harder. Something wolfish. Something that wasn't a habitat for rabbits. A name that invoked the respect he truly deserved as a faithful public servant. Because Warren has issues with Respect, too. The way he sees it, he doesn't get enough. He senses a distinct lack of civic reverence for his position. And it's the very reason he hates:

3. Children.

Children. He is assailed by them. In the street, under tables, everywhere, trilling masses of sticky poky fingers. They cuddle prod stroke hug, while he quells sinister urges and Eleanor is too happy to oblige. Like he's a showpony or something. They ask for his name and she tells them Warren-The-Pooh. Then assures them he *won't* bite. Tells them he *likes* children.

Couldn't they all see he was a professional? On duty? A working dog with responsibility? He should have fangs, a menacing scar, studs on his harness. He should be ploughing furrows among scissoring shins. People should be moving for *him*.

After all, he had someone to guide. And guard. And save.



It's noon. There are seven days to Christmas, thirteen left in the year, the century, the millennium, when Eleanor Rigby stops and hears it for the first time, carried on a hot offshore breeze.

(Yes. Eleanor, too, is mocked by her name. Though she's not too big for it. She's so small she's been jinxed by a Beatle. And in fact, it slaps her twice, front and backhand, because her first name, derived from the Greek, means *Light*.)

Faint it is, from here.

It competes with the click of insects, a million offbeat metronomes. It gusts in fluid snatches. She frowns, concentrates. Shutting useless eyes, she inhales. Breathes cloying heat. Smells carob and salt and frangipani. Her armhairs hackle. Her bloated lowerbelly crawls. She is strangely held by it. Sound, like voice.

Semaphore. Reverbs in her head, makes her suddenly restless. It's not a sound she recognises, but she's heard it, she's felt it before. Even knows it, maybe.

Bent and tentative, she moves closer.