

Tom Petsinis

Prospecting

Median aged with respect to this young nation's greying population, you were recently made redundant from a position you had competently filled for more than half your life, and in which you expected to remain until retirement. At the time, you were surprised more by your own reaction to this turn of events than by the dismissal itself. Instead of feeling anger at the clinical manner of your termination, you were genuinely sorry for the young personnel manager who delivered the news, not only because you detected a diffidence in his inability to look you in the eyes, but perhaps more so for the way the afternoon light angled into his office, betraying a scalp that well-groomed thinning hair endeavoured to conceal. Instead of cursing the changing times and being resentful of the new breed of salesmen (where you had travelled around the country bound to a suitcase heavy with samples and pamphlets, they were now flying through cyberspace at the speed of intuition, lighter than a thought, finding markets in undreamt of places, recording figures that have translated to soaring company profits), you left the office with a lightness of being, wishing them well with heartfelt sincerity, while in the background a host of computers farewelled you with a joyful choral hum.

The Town Hall's clock was counting to five when you stepped onto the crowded street passing through the very heart of city's central business district. Each toll struck out a round-bodied sound that quivered for an instant before being absorbed by the next, until the last, which reverberated for some time, stirring flags and winter trees, filling a busker's clarinet, brushing facade and forehead – all in thinning out to silence. Where only yesterday the hour's metallic touch sent a chill down your spine, now you were surprised again by the turn of your emotions: instead of succumbing to hopelessness, self-pity, inadequacy in terms of finding employment in this brash, new world (the image of your suitcase kept flashing to mind), you saw in your termination an act of providence. At that instant, you happened to be passing the Stock Exchange, sidestepping people checking

prices through the window, when your attention was caught by a mineral company whose shares had dramatically increased. You were not an investor (in fact, you refused to gamble, even when colleagues invited you to join their Tattslotto syndicate), but that company's name, Gem Explorations, and the fleeting glimpse of its figures on a screen, confirmed your intuition.

In the weeks that followed you withdrew your savings (a confirmed bachelor, you had always lived modestly), cashed in a large component of your superannuation (you suddenly realised that the future was now), bought a van and equipment, and set out for the great desert, which some have called the soul of the country. Years earlier (perhaps going back to your idealistic youth when words like God and Truth resonated with meaning, or perhaps further back, to your impressionable childhood when all seemed possible, or perhaps further back still, to a fleeting dream that brushed your lashes and left a few grains of sand in the corner of your eyes) you had heard or read or glimpsed that buried in the vast wilderness lay a precious gemstone which rewarded the finder with visions that transformed one's life forever. As a concentration of natural light, the stone (it did not have a name or a classification) was said to possess a refractive property that revealed wonders, just as a drop trembling on the tip of a black branch revealed the wealth of the rainbow. Now whether or not the story of this gem was somehow influenced by the legend of the Philosopher's Stone and its alchemical qualities, you were unable to say; in any case, unlike that stone, which people sought more for material gain than personal good, your gem was said to disclose that which the finder most wanted, and that in a metaphysical sense, like the Manna that fell from the biblical sky in the wilderness, which assumed the taste desired by the eater.

And so, your worldly possessions packed into the van, you drove off the main highway, and rattled for days along red-dust roads, until the desert edged closer - flat, stretching to the shimmering horizon, forbidding. You had found the wilderness, but in the absence of detailed information, where would you dig for the gemstone? What feature of the landscape would favour one spot over another? Should you dig near an outcropping of rock, taking advantage of its

precious shade? Or among the gnarled shrubs that clawed the barren land? Or in one of the many natural depressions, which may have once been watering holes? Yes, the chances of finding the gem were infinitesimal, but not only this, you knew nothing about its physical appearance - it might be at your feet and you would not know to pick it up. To make this encounter with the desert even worse, you had set out on this journey of discovery without a map. At the time (perhaps arrogantly, perhaps idealistically) you reasoned that the work of others could not possibly guide you to your goal, and that in such matters your dreams and intuition must serve as a map, your will as a compass.

After years of prospecting, beneath a sun whose remorseless stare cracks stones, through nights that chill your breath so it drips from the tent, you have pushed so far into the desert that even the lizards remain inert as you pass, perhaps mistaking you for a shadow. With arms strong from all those sales trips carrying the heavy suitcase (nothing is ever wasted in life), you swing the pick with conviction, striking rock, at times liberating a shower of sparks that spices the air with the smell of boyhood's firecrackers. You shovel out piles of soil, opening ever deeper shafts, throwing each scoop with greater vigour, occasionally breaking out in song, surprising yourself by the tone of your voice, made mellow and resonant by the depth, like the brooding of a didgeridoo. Yes, you have found opal blacker than charcoal, struck veins of gold that flashed like lightning, unearthed sapphires that once lay at the bottom of an ocean long turned to sand, but there has not been even a glint of what you seek. As for the finds that would excite and satisfy others, delivering them from desert to the comforts of the city, those treasures barely quicken your heart, and then only because of the thought of food and supplies and the continuation of your search. Of course you feel disappointment (blood still runs through your veins, as confirmed by a recent accident with the pick), but like the alchemists who sought the Philosopher's Stone in elements, and viewed each failure as a step closer to their inevitable success, so you have always looked back at each abandoned dig as proof of one less hole to explore for the gem's ultimate discovery.

And so more years pass, during which your hair and beard have grown in a neglected tangle, and your body has become closer to shadow than substance. Having no-one to impress, away from society's demands for an image of respectability, you have been discarding objects along the way, which has not only made travelling easier, but engendered a pleasant feeling of lightness, a buoyancy not experienced since your schooldays, especially in spring. How you rejoiced in throwing away your shaving equipment, particularly the silver razor, a gift from parents on your eighteenth birthday, for prior to that you had been sharing your father's. Standing on a rock, you threw it as though a ball and watched it arc against a sky scoured by the sun, your lips turning in a parabolic smile. And some months later you renounced the mirror, which you had bought brand new before embarking on this quest. (Now you see that all mirrors are used after the first reflection, and that they are new only before the quicksilver settles, and then in a place without light). You spent some time thinking how best to dispose of it. Should you break it with a hammer into countless pieces and scatter these in the dust? But something held you back from this, not fear of bad luck (like gambling, Lady Luck has never stirred your heart), but more the thought of multiplying the mirror's duplicity. Should you leave it flat on the ground, facing the sky? In the absence of water and other reflective surfaces, the desert sun had become arrogant, forgetting that it also was subject to death, as your science teachers taught. Confronting its image once a day, and then precisely at noon, would have the effect of bringing it down to earth, rendering it less harsh on humans. But then myth of Narcissus sprang to mind and dissuaded you from this. What if the sun should fall in love with its own image, pine for it, become pale and introspective, and lose the strength of its life-giving force? You, a mere shadow, would be responsible for plunging the world into perpetual night. (Were these thoughts nothing more than whims, the desert playing tricks on your mind, as it did with mirages, or were they the first signs of something worse - madness arising from solitude?) In the end, you took the mirror into a shaft, breathed on it, wiped your reflection clean, and buried it down there. After filling the shaft and planting some spinifex in the loose soil, you walked away feeling liberated, light-footed (you even

did a jig around the mirror's grave), as though freed from someone to whom you were chained since birth.

It was a short time after this that cracks of doubt began appearing in your stubborn determination. At first you sought to address them by swinging harder with the pick, singing louder in the shaft, but when they widened and a sense of hopelessness seeped through, you felt your resolve weakening, beginning to give way. At that point your enterprise would have been undermined, your dreams collapsing under the weight of reason, but for a distant memory, a recollection of a sentence from that story about the gemstone that suddenly echoed in your ears (was it really a memory, or a flutter of blind hope borne of the present desperation?), whose words passed through you like a breeze through dry grass: continue seeking and the gem will appear on your third last breath. Not thinking twice, you sped off, keeping to a straight line for several days, before the van sputtered, choked, and stopped dead still. The way back now impossible, there was only one course of action: loading yourself with supplies and equipment, you continued on foot, fully aware that your very life depended on raising the gemstone to the light.

After days of trekking, you are struggling with the weight on your shoulders, back, and hanging from the broad belt around your waist. The sun clashes against your forehead; thirst has cracked your lips, your shadow is shrivelling. But you tramp on, discarding more objects to lighten your load, and in so doing realise just how many useless things you stuffed into the backpack. Here you are, on a mission of life or death mission, and you have foolishly taken an alarm clock, a diary, even a pen inscribed with your name. You are struck by the thought: the things that define us are in fact the greatest obstacles to truth. It is late afternoon when, having reduced your possessions to the barest essentials, you find yourself gasping for breath, unable to take another step. Is this to be the end, here in this depression, witnessed by this unblinking lizard whose throat pulses with anticipation? You drop to your knees and dig wildly with a small pick. Is it sunstroke? A last desperate attempt to find the gemstone? Or are you digging your own grave? Just then a trickle of water springs from below like a wriggling

snake and fills the hole. Providence, you think. The strike of the pick that brought up the water must have coincided with what was surely your third last breath. This is the spot! You scoop and drink in celebration. The water is cool, a little brackish, but refreshing.

Surviving on birds and animals attracted to the water, you have been living and digging underground for years, opening a network of galleries and corridors, yet finding nothing with the property of the gemstone. You have not been disheartened by the situation (after all, the water is daily proof of your conviction, warding off that earlier sense of hopelessness); on the contrary, your resolve has steeled, your blows with the pick stronger in anticipation of the successful strike.

In excavating yet another shoulder-wide corridor, you suddenly stop and steady yourself against a sense of disorientation caused by the palpable darkness in the mine. Panicking, you drop the pick and make for the opening, only to find that you are unable to locate it in this labyrinth. But even if you were to chance upon the shaft of outside light, you are struck by the thought: having dug so far into the depths of the earth, you could never climb out. You are now a prisoner of your own work! And if someone were to come across the shaft by chance (though the vastness of the desert and the laws of probability would preclude this), he would not see you in the dark, nor hear your cries for help, but would more than likely fill it as a precautionary measure.

Somehow, you find your way back to the pick and resume digging, determined to strike the elusive gemstone on your second-last breath.

Tom Petsinis is an Australian poet, playwright and novelist. He was born in Macedonia, Greece, and immigrated to Australia as a child. The Australia Council has awarded him a Writers' Fellowship and a Residency at the B.R. Whiting Library in Rome. He was recently a Creative Fellow at the State Library of Victoria and a writer-in-residence in Lavigny, Switzerland. He has published work in various genres. Poetry: *The Blossom Vendor*, *Sonnets: Offerings from Mount Athos*, *Inheritance*, *Naming the Number*, *Four Quarters* and *My Father's Tools*. Fiction: *Raising the*

Shadow, The French Mathematician, The Twelfth Dialogue, The Death of Pan.
Plays: *The Drought, The Picnic, Elena and the Nightingale, Salonika Bound.* His work has been translated into a number of languages. He has participated in national and international literary festivals, including Struga, Rotterdam, Maastricht, Vilenica and Dornbirn. He lives in Melbourne with his wife and two daughters and lectures in mathematics at Victoria University.