

Where Angel Fears To Tread

ROBERT PERRIER



Where Angel Fears To Tread
by Robert Perrier

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Cover: *David with the Head of Goliath*, Caravaggio 1610

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Previously by Robert Perrier

En Passant CD 2012

If Not the Shadow short-listed for the 2014 Finch Memoir Prize

Breath by Breath CD 2015

The Weight of Love CD 2018

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Black and White Night Owls by Jordon Rothstein

Eccentric Voices: A scrapbook of Brisbane cultural history 1965–1995

edited by Anne Jones and Robert Whyte



That night in the Shorncliffe unit, Angel couldn't sleep. Just after midnight he got up, put on a coat and a beanie, turned off the lights and silently closed the door behind him. He crossed the road to the park lined with Moreton Bay figs, following a track to the beach access. He looked back through the park, across the road to the unit before descending the zigzagging path to the pier below.

The night was still and moonlit. Halfway along the pier a father helped his son take a fish off the hook, dropping it into a bucket. The kid watched the fish swim around in panic. Further along the pier, cigarette smoke drifted up. An old man was sitting on a folded stool, crouched over a hand line, braced against the cold.

At the end of the pier Angel leaned on the railing blowing clouded breath into the night. What would they do next? They'd have to do something. He knew his father too well. He was a cop. With every breath in his body, he'd be turning over clues, looking for leads, hunting them down. They couldn't stay in the unit. They would have to move and keep moving. Leave the city. How would they live? The wads of cash Angel had taken from behind the kick-board of his father's house would run out faster than the tide. Waves slapped against the pylons, then slurped as the waves receded. The moon's reflection on the water created a highway of light broken into as many jagged pieces as the thoughts in his head. He would pack their things tonight while she was sleeping. In the morning he would tell her they had to leave. If need be, he'd break into his father's house and take more money.

A reel whirled, then a moment of silence, before the

bait hit the water like a plucked string.

Hypnotised by the moon's reflection on the water, he shook his head. How long had he been on the pier? Too long. He turned to look up at the huge fig trees near the unit. The lower branches lit up with beams from a vehicle. The beams stopped moving, then turned off. A shiver went up his spine. He began to run, his boots echoing underneath the wooden pier as each foot struck the slats. The more he tried to pick up speed, the more his feet felt like lead. At the end of the pier he jumped the rail onto the path, jarring his feet on the concrete, running with his head down to the next bend, left, then right, then left and right again. At the top he crouched, hands on knees, calves burning. The unit was less than a hundred metres away. The lights were on. He was sure he had turned them off. A vehicle was outside. He took off through the trees, the winter wind cutting into his face. A possum ran in front of him. He baulked, arms flailing to regain his balance. He leapt across the road in three bounds and ran up the stairs two at a time, bursting through the front door, gasping for breath. His mother was convulsing on the couch, froth foaming from her mouth. He saw the greased-back black hair of Giuseppe Di Guardo beside her. He was taking an empty syringe from the crook of her elbow. Di Guardo turned his pretty-boy face towards Angel. His smile cut the air like a scalpel.

"Two for the price of one." His deep, hoarse voice seemed strange, coming from his pretty-boy mouth. Dropping the syringe to the floor, he reached inside his coat.

Angel saw a lamp to his left. He picked it up, pulling the cord out of the wall. With two hands, he brought the lamp down on Di Guardo's wrist just as Di Guardo pulled the gun from its holster. The gun dropped to the ground. Angel bent over to pick it up. His head was wrenched back with the full force of Di Guardo's knee smashing into his jaw. The room spun. He felt Di Guardo turning him over, a knee pressed into his back, then his head being pulled back. He saw his mother, her bruised arm dangling over the side of the couch, her body limp, her face grey, her eyes staring at the ceiling. He felt Di Guardo's face coming close to his ear, the muzzle of the gun pressed into the back of his head.

"You'll be with her soon enough," said Di Guardo.

The sound of heavy boots pounded up the steps and into the room.

"What the fuck are you doing?" said Angel's father.

"He saw it all," said Di Guardo. "We'll have to kill him. I know a place. You drive."

Angel hands were lashed behind his back, a tea towel stuck in his open mouth, held in with duct tape. Di Guardo's gun dug into his neck, pressing the side of his face up against the window. He caught a glimpse of his father at the steering wheel. The car lurched to the right, bumped along the gravel road and skidded to a halt.

His father opened the back door.

“Give me the fucking gun,” he said. “He’s my responsibility.”

“Do him in the holding yards,” said Di Guardo.

Angel felt his father’s hand grip tight around the back of his neck, pushing him forward through the empty paddock towards the abattoir’s holding pens, the sounds of the cattle getting louder until all he could hear was bellowing, snorting and the slap of hoofs in the slime. His father’s hand was pushing him to the ground. He pressed hard against it with his head. His knees buckled. He sank into the muddy sludge in front of a massive Brahman steer. He felt his head being pulled back and the gun’s muzzle against his temple.

The explosion of sound was deafening. For a second, he imagined the side of his head exploding. Then he felt the full weight of the great beast collapsing in front of him, legs and chest first. The last thing to hit the ground was the steer’s head, its eyes wide open and still. As it hit the earth, the piss and shit of the holding yard splashed onto Angel’s clothes and face. Angel couldn’t tell which shit and piss was his and which the beast’s. He heard his father’s fading voice. “You have to disappear. Don’t ever let me see you again,” then everything went black.

Angel’s eyes slowly opened to see the eye of the steer bulging from its socket like a giant marble. His mouth was still taped over. He ripped off the tape and took the towel from his mouth, gulping in air. His father’s words came back into his consciousness. *You have to disappear*. How long had he been blacked out? The cattle in the yard had backed up hard against the fence leaving an open circle

of sludge around him and the fallen beast. Blood seeped from the hole in its head, its eyes staring into darkness. Angel rewound what had happened that night until he came to the image of his mother, still as the steer in front of him, her eyes staring into the same darkness.

Staggering out of the paddock wearing the filth of the holding yard on his body like a heavy coat, he had no idea where he would go. His mother was dead. *He* should have been dead. He had seen it all. Why did his father intervene? There was no reason. Everything his mother knew, he knew, yet his father had spared him.

The image of the dead steer appeared in Angel’s mind. Tomorrow, the whole lot of them would go to their slaughter with the same sense of panic and dread he felt being marched into the holding yard with a gun at his head.

On the Shorncliffe foreshore he walked into the salty water until he was up to his chest. Slowly and methodically, he took off his clothes and rinsed them. He carried them back to the strip of sand, wrung them out and put them back on.

He was shivering when he crossed the road to the unit. The loud high-pitched descending *chiews* of a flock of figbirds in the Moreton Bay fig heralded first light. He climbed under a police tape, broke the seal on the door and opened it. He searched for the cash, but it was gone. He found some of his mother’s letters. He put them in a plastic bag and tucked them into his pants. He saw her cello on its stand. The concert was what led them to her. He had tried to tell her, but he hadn’t been forceful

enough. I can't let Josef down, she had said.

On the pier, he held the cello by the neck in two hands, swung it over his head from behind like a sledge-hammer, smashed it over the railing and threw it into the sea.

"Be careful what you feed the fish," a man's voice said.

Angel's rage rose in him and he lurched towards a blind man, opaque eyes searching for an answer to what was happening around him. Angel fell to his knees.

The blind man's skinny hand grabbed Angel's wrist.

"Shut your eyes," said the blind man.

He guided Angel's hand to the fishing line. Angel felt the nibble.

"You're me lucky angel," the man said. He let go of Angel's hand, reefed up the line and reeled in a fish. "This one's for me dinner plate." He unhooked the fish, picked up a knife and drove it into the centre of its brain. "No point prolonging the agony." He put the fish into a wet potato sack. "All creatures suffer. Even fish. Everyone fears the darkness. That's what keeps us alive."

Angel turned up at the Rutkowskis the next morning.

Peg was in the kitchen, in a dark dressing gown, shoulders slumped, hair unkempt, dark rings under her eyes. The cheeky, colourful pixie in her had disappeared. On the broadsheet in front of her was a photo of his mother under a headline, *Virtuoso Cellist Found Dead*.

Peg looked up and saw him. She folded the paper and put it on the empty seat next to her.

h a r p o

Where Angel Fears To Tread

ROBERT PERRIER



Frank Angel has twenty-two crosses tattooed on his upper arm, one for each person he has killed. Between kills, he lives in Brisbane, in a Highgate Hill penthouse, listening to Bach, looking at the paintings on his walls, reading the books in his library. A one-night stand with an art gallery attendant becomes a full-blown catastrophe when he tells her everything about his criminal life except the most important part — he kills people.

Where Angel Fears To Tread is the debut novel by Robert Perrier.



Robert “Bomber” Perrier lives in Brisbane, having lived in Melbourne, Albury Wodonga and other great cities of the world. After studying theatre at the Victorian College of the Arts he helped create the *Flying Fruit Fly International Children’s Circus*, taking up the position of Artistic Director from the outset. In 1984, on behalf of the company, he won the *BHP Pursuit of Excellence Award* in Arts and Literature.

Author photo by Mark Crocker

h a r p o

h.a.r.p.o. was created by Robert Whyte and Anne Jones in 2018 to publish the kinds of books they wanted to read, focussing on *Brisbane Noir*. h.a.r.p.o. also known as *How About Resisting Powerful Organisations* is a revival of the name Graham Cathcart and Bomber Perrier used for radical cultural activities in the early 1970s. For the h.a.r.p.o. story, catalogue and ordering details for both retail and trade, see www.h-a-r-p-o.com.au

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