

PLOD ESSAY:

Sounds of Silence by Kit Sleeman

When he was just five years old Kit Sleeman had a “botched” tonsillectomy, from which he had to convalesce for almost a year. Just after he finally started school, he was, “on the block getting [his] appendix hacked out”. Again he found himself relegated to bed where he read lots of books and, “stared out the window for ages.” What he saw and heard from his sick bed during those months will take you back to a wondrous Wonthaggi:

It was a nice view through the window: across the front garden, Murray Street, a row of big gum trees, paddocks, the train line, farm and scrubland to the Bass Hills. There were lots of birds to see, cows, steam trains hauling coal, the ‘Lizzie’ from Dudley Brace dumping rock waste from twenty shaft and smoke rising from the chimney at Archies Creek butter factory.

There were also lots of sounds to keep me company. Murray Street had very little traffic and if you paid attention, all sorts of sounds could be heard. Even when I was not sick, I used to like lying in bed and listening to the nighttime or early morning sounds:

Unusually, Wonthaggi had its own power station. Its construction started soon after the town was founded and it was operational by about 1911. Installed high on a chimney was a steam operated whistle exactly of the same design as that on the *Titanic*. It was loud enough to be heard all over town and was sounded at particular times each day to give warning of mine shift change times. In earlier times it was also sounded as a long repeated warning blast after a fatal mine accident, but I did not hear it in that mode. There was a special sounding at midnight on New Year’s Eve.

When the mine closed in 1968 the power station closed with it. The whistle made its final sound with the last of the steam from the powerhouse boilers. The blast started at its usual pitch and volume with normal steam pressure and slowly trailed off over a few minutes like a dying beast as the steam was exhausted.

I liked the mine whistle: it was a comforting certainty that was always ‘there’. There was a second town alarm, whose test sounding at

ten each Sunday morning also provided some comfort. It was the local CFA.

At times other than Sunday, long repeated soundings represented a real fire or alarm and was not comforting at all.

Perhaps the sounds I listened for with most excitement were those of the trains. The train line was only about five hundred meters away from my window and ran parallel to Murray Street. To the east, the Wonthaggi train station was about a kilometre away and to the west a similar distance away was a level crossing. Train noises could be easily heard from my bedroom. The morning train left for Melbourne at seven thirty and returned at nine thirty in the evening. On several days each week trains left and arrived in the opposite order in late morning and early evening. Goods trains and coal trains could pass at any time of the day.

The Steam trains, which made far superior noises than the diesels that replaced them, tooted their horn as they left and arrived at the station and as they approached the level crossing. They made a nice clickety-clack sound as they went by. When I was little, if I was out of bed, I would stand on the front gate and wave to passing trains. With the old steam trains, the nicer drivers would wave back and even give a little toot sometimes: that always made my day when it happened. When steam trains left the station, they were an impressive sight (and sound) as they passed our place. They were accelerating and you could see and hear the effort involved in their clouds of steam pumping out and the loud ‘choof-choof-choof’ noise.

On New Year’s Eve when the night steam train from Melbourne neared the level crossing, the driver would start playing ‘Auld Lang Syne’ on his train whistle and kept it going all the way to the station.

A downright frightening sound, heard most clearly at night, was the banks of large above-ground fans pumping air down the mineshaft and/or pumping air out so that the environment underground was sufficiently oxygenated for people to work and so toxic or explosive gasses could be removed. At least some of the fans worked all of the time regardless of whether men are working below. They made a noisy whirring sound and at night sound could travel long distances.

If you happen to be a young kid who has been terrorized all day with tales about the Bulliphant, a monstrous creature who ate naughty kids, leaving only their clothes and buttons behind, it was not impossible, when lying in bed alone in the dark, to re-imagine the sound of the fans as the breathing of the beast as he searched for his prey, If there was a gentle night time breeze, the sound of the fan came and went in waves; just as if the beast with laboured breath was moving about, sometimes nearer and sometimes further away. At these times, you clutched your blanket tightly and pulled it over your head.

The Bulliphant's stronghold was said to be Tank Hill, to the south of town near East Area mine. It roamed nocturnally looking for naughty kids to eat, making use of dark laneways to travel about unseen. It also made use of old mine workings as routes and might unexpectedly emerge from underground. The central area/station area mine workings were shallow and there were consequently numerous ground subsidences or 'fall-ins' within this region: likely spots for a Bulliphant to emerge from. There was a large 'fall-in' a couple of hundred meters from our house in the paddock opposite: that used to worry me.

By far my favourite sound at bedtime was the chorus of frogs from the wetlands near our place, and after rain, from the garden as well. It was quite loud and both constant and varied. It became louder at particular times of the year when frogs were breeding. On hot summer nights when house doors were left open in the hope of getting cool breezes during the night, the noise was very loud. There was a constant background sound of thousands of small frogs all calling together and individual large frogs would make distinguishable individual calls over the top of that, like a solo performer at a concert.

Large numbers of black crickets (plague numbers some years) also joined in during the hotter months making similar noises that were hard to tell apart from the frog chorus. After rain, mole crickets joined in too but their sound was quite different and unique to them alone. Mud-larks and wagtails sang at night during breeding season. Blackbirds sang in the evening. Magpies and/or kookaburras also sang

at sunset, but more importantly they greeted the dawn most days

Sometimes at night, but not often, an owl would be heard, and more often, the hyper-excited cries of plovers from the wetlands added to the Wonthaggi chorus.

West and southwest a sandy coast of surf beach stretches between Kilcunda and Harmers Haven. The coast is barely more than a kilometre from town. When the wind is in the right direction and especially when the surf is high as well, the crash of the surf can be heard. Sometimes the sound is very clear and individual wave crash can be distinguished. It is a very nice sound to go to sleep to.

There is always wind at Wonthaggi but it does vary. Sometimes it is a raging gale force wind blowing the muttonbirds to and from Siberia and sometimes it becomes a gentle zephyr.

The pine trees to the west were originally planted to provide a windbreak and they did that job. But in doing so they created a particular noise that only wind through pine trees can. When the wind hits a certain speed and the sound becomes of a particular volume it sounds spooky, or it did when I was little. It used to give me the creeps.

Sometimes stormy winds brought other sounds like the crashing of falling branches from the gum trees opposite or the clanging of roofing iron as it works loose and threatens to blow away. I can remember Dad being up on the roof in the middle of the night once, dressed in pyjamas and dressing gown hammering down loose iron as a storm raged. On another night a loud crash signalled the end of next-door neighbour, Webb's fern house that collapsed in a storm.

As well as wind, there is always rain in Wonthaggi. Often drizzle but some heavy downpours and hail.

I liked to snuggle further into my warm bed as the rain pounded the iron roof.

I have been long gone from Wonthaggi but sounds of my childhood all elicited a particular feeling and left very vivid memories. I can hear them in my head still.

- Edited to fit the space by C.R. Landon; the full version can be found in the Bass Coast Post