

Task for The Garret: Alex Miller

Extract from *12 Edmondstone Street* by David Malouf pp. 3–4

Memory plays strange tricks on us. The house I lived in as a child is no longer there. Like most of old South Brisbane it has been torn down and a factory stands on the site, part of a process that had already begun when I first knew the area more than forty years ago.

Edmondstone Street even then was 'mixed'. Beginning at Melbourne Street, not far from the Bridge, and skirting the south side of Musgrave Park – a dark, uneven place, once an aboriginal burial ground but later redeemed and laid out with Moreton Bay figs of enormous girth and a twelve-foot checker-board – it consisted chiefly of old-fashioned, many-roomed houses from the day when this was the most fashionable area south of the river; but there were factories as well, Simpson's Flour and the Vulcan Can Company, and a private hospital, the Yasmar, so called because it was the matron's name spelt backwards. I was born there, so was my sister; and in due course, after the fashion of those times, we went back and had our tonsils removed.

The Yasmar was pulled down in the sixties, along with two houses, the grandest in the street, where I had sometimes gone in the afternoons to play. They were houses like our own, but belonged to families who were better off than we were and could keep them up. One of them had a tennis court that was still mowed and rolled every Wednesday afternoon, with a formal garden and orchard beyond. Only the sagging wire fence of our tennis court survived. Behind it my grandfather had a vegetable patch and a dozen noisy chooks.

Nothing much remains of Edmondstone Street, and our house, Number twelve, went ages ago, though I recall it well enough; I can feel my way in the dark through every room. The trick of memory I refer to has nothing to do with that. It concerns the work my father did on the house towards the end of the war.

12 Edmondstone Street was a one-storeyed weatherboard, a style of house so common then as to be quite unremarkable; Brisbane was a one-storeyed weatherboard town. It stood on low stilts at the front, high stilts at the back, and was essentially a nest of open rooms surrounded on three sides by wide, cooling verandahs, ironwork to the rails, in a pattern of interlocking circles, and rolled venetians above. The ironwork was cream, the venetians ochre, the square wooden supports with their branches and volutes a spanking white, and the roof, which was of iron, that dull ox-blood colour that is so peculiar to Brisbane that it seems more dominant even, in the long view, than the green of the enormous shade-trees – mangoes, hoop-pines, all the varieties of subtropical fig – that darken every backyard.

South Brisbane then was already disreputable, too close to the derelict, half-criminal life of Stanley Street where the abos were and to Musgrave Park with its swaggies and metho-drinkers.

When they first came to Brisbane in the 1880s my grandparents lived in Stanley Street, in one room below street level...