

Christopher Allen

Trent Parke: *The Black Rose*

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, until May 10.

Listening to a baby wake crying, one could conclude that suffering was a universal or fundamental condition of life. Why does it cry? It may have a wet nappy, be hungry, uncomfortable in its cot, want its mother. But whatever it is, whether appetite or pain, it is equally experienced as undifferentiated and almost boundless distress, and all the infant can do is cry for relief.

As children grow up, they learn that some discomforts can be borne because they are finite in duration or, like the effort of study or exercise or games, they may lead to a higher gratification. They also begin to discover new dimensions of suffering in human relations and, as they grow a little older, in the apprehension of death.

Later still we get better at deferring gratification and tolerating discomforts, but we may also find ourselves living in that alternation of short-term appetites and anxieties that we commonly call stress. This is a condition that everyone complains about and finds uncomfortable but that is unfortunately also addictive, partly because it distracts us from a longer-term view of life and the inevitability of mortality.

The social and economic environment of the modern world exacerbates such stress and distraction and manufactures illusory desires, but at least it does not foster the paranoid terrors of spirit possession and black magic of tribal cultures or the elaborate and implausible scenarios of punishment and reward in an afterlife imagined by some of the more developed religions.

Philosophers in various traditions have sought for centuries for ways to free humans from the delusions of superstition and the distractions of our own minds. One of their main practical concerns has been how to deal with the inevitable and real sufferings of bereavement and the prospect of our own death. Philosophy, as Michel de Montaigne suggested, may be essentially a matter of learning how to die.

But hard as it is to confront any such experiences, some cases are harder than others. Death can at least be considered as natural and inevitable when it comes in old age. The untimely death of young people and even worse of children is much harder to bear, and is even more terrible if brought about by a deliberate action or in some accidental and unexpected way.

For a child to witness the death of a parent is comparable in horror but in some respects even worse, since the young mind is less capable of dealing with the experience. This was what happened to Trent Parke when, aged 12, he witnessed his mother's death from an acute asthma

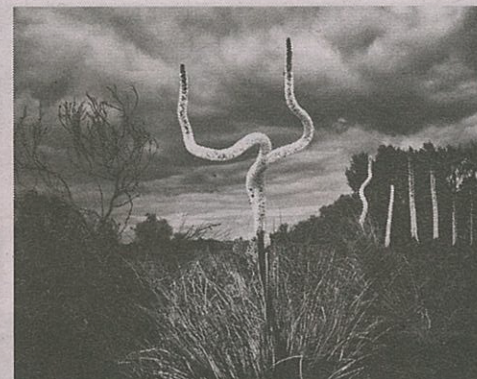


THE LOST CHILD

attack. As Parke relates, he not only shut out this memory but cancelled all recollection of the childhood years that preceded the traumatic event. Years later, as a successful photographer and member of the famous Magnum collective, he determined to confront and recover this lost past, and the result is the exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia, *The Black Rose*.

Roses are grown in different colours but not black. The archetypal varieties are red: dyed by the blood of Aphrodite, according to a mythical

account. The flower is associated with love and sexuality and, as a mystical symbol, TS Eliot's "multifoliate rose" could be a symbol of the divinely ordered cosmos at the end of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Perhaps all of these associations — of love, the feminine, the wholeness of the child's cosmos — are relevant here, yet the rose of the title is black because all of this was suddenly overcome by death. Appropriately, perhaps inevitably, the photographs in the exhibition are also mostly black and white, with



Clockwise from left, Trent Parke's *Fever, Dash* (2014); *Limestone Coast, South Australia* (2007); *Swan, Adelaide* (2007); *Cockatoo backyard, Newcastle* (2011)

a few exceptions, such as the shot of a tree bleeding a thick red gum.

The context is established in a short video narrated by the artist in the first room of the exhibition: he tells of the circumstances of his mother's death, then recalls a meeting with a stranger, much later, at a dinner, a woman who told him, like an oracle, that he would one day have to deal with these repressed memories. Otherwise this space contains only a few images: a suburban front gate, vividly white in the dark of the night and a similarly white obelisk near the place he was born. Nearby is a small surviving photograph of the artist as a boy with his mother on a merry-go-round.

After these first images, which represent the beginning of the quest for a lost past, the next room is a vast dark space filled with an extraordinary variety of images, the first of which is a greatly enlarged shot of dandelion seeds caught in a spider's web, which we read instinctively as evoking the scattered traces of memory. The narration from the first room follows us into this space in a way that could be intrusive but in fact suggests the obsessive repetition of a traumatic memory. Other photographs in this room are of shadowy human figures, the starry night, and nocturnal shots of scurrying crabs, turtles, a spider in its web and other creatures and plants.

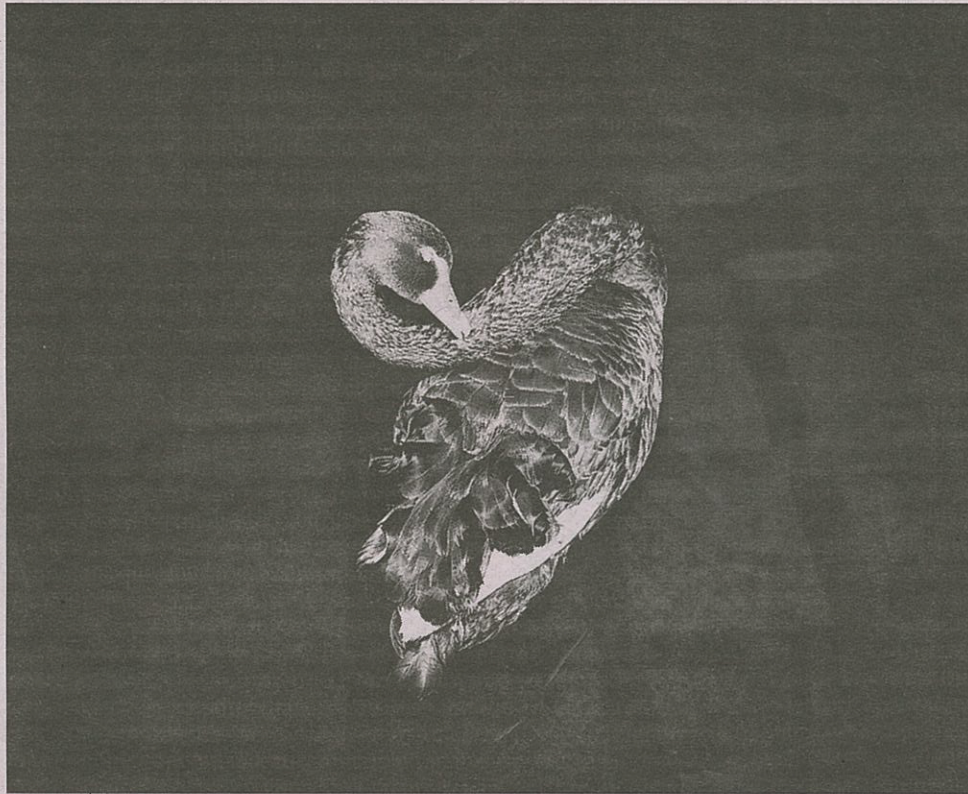
Amid the quest for the memory of a lost individual, or a lost childhood, we are surrounded by recollections of the proliferation and relentless generation of life.

The next room, in contrast, is light and we find ourselves before a series of almost white pictures. One is a shot of a single thread of his mother's hair, found tangled in one of her dolls and the only physical trace of her existence; she was cremated and her ashes scattered, so there is not even a grave to visit. Next to this is his father's watch, without a dial. The unexpected asthma attack that killed his mother occurred while his father was out playing squash with his friends; a photo of his trophy is nearby as well.

There are pictures of the family house, and wall texts that are excerpts of Parke's journals comment on the way things have changed, that his old room is now occupied by his younger brother, and so forth. There is a picture of the mirror in which the lost mother used to brush her hair and — a thought particularly poignant for a photographer — reflected her image back to her day after day, though without retaining any trace of her features. Nearby a projection in a developing tray reproduces, in contrast, the enchanted way an image materialises on the exposed photographic paper in its chemical bath.

It is a powerful metaphor of the recovery of memory, but the process of searching into the past seems to open out in unexpected ways. He ponders dreams and their significance, and he is alert to omens and chance events interpreted as ominous. He even produces a series of photographs of random patterns in dirt on white card, then proceeds to see how each shape in the series matches the events of the ensuing days.

In one case, a pattern that happens to look rather like a human head coincides with an unexpected and threatening encounter with a stranger in the dunes; the accidental picture he takes of this individual in a sandstorm feels like the record of a premonitory visitation. About



the same time he discovers that his teeth are badly decayed — something he realises he has in common with his mother — and then that he has a dangerous melanoma.

Other series of photographs echo the sense of menace and mortality. In one, variations on a dead snake are juxtaposed with shots of the progressive demolition of a neighbour's house that is to be redeveloped into a millionaire's seaside residence. In another, he gets up before dawn to photograph a rabbit that he first saw in the dunes with his young son, before re-

alising that the rabbit burrows have been tagged with red tape, presumably for baiting.

The final large dark room echoes the earlier one in a grimmer mode. We are surrounded by images of death: rotting carcasses, recently dead creatures, desiccated skeletons. Most dramatic is a very large photograph of a beached whale on a vast tidal flat, so extensive that one can barely make out the sea. The image of the dead whale is made all the more painful by the tiny figure of one of the artist's sons playing on the sand just a little farther away.

The same room includes a sequence of projected images with the narration of a night walk into the bush in Broome, in which the artist is surrounded by birds, bats and a huge kangaroo, and is threatened by a crocodile (he escaped unharmed). The episode is telling because it reflects the close attention to nature that is unmistakable all through the exhibition but also speaks of a willingness to embrace the randomness of the natural world.

Parke's view of nature, with its boundless generative energy and the ubiquity of death, is not of an orderly and rational cosmic system — nothing like Dante's rose — but of a wildly unpredictable alternation of contradictory processes; in the age-old debate over whether the universe is ruled by chance or necessity, Parke seems drawn to the former, and the ultimate source of that view may be the wholly unexpected way that his mother was taken from him.

In the last section of the exhibition, there is a colossal photograph of a white gum silhouetted against the night sky. It is in the garden of the neighbours and was saved at his mother's urging when they were building their house. He is surprised to learn this fact and to discover that they have given her name to it, so a tree to which he had never attached any special significance turns out to be an unsuspected memorial.

A final corridor is set up with illuminated walls like light boxes, and hung with hundreds of black-and-white photographic negatives: a reflection on the process underlying the exhibition. In an age of digital photos that are no more than files to be copied, altered, erased and perhaps never printed, Parke's negatives remind us that each of his images, however ambiguous, is an impression taken directly from the world and registered on a physical support: a tiny, seemingly incontrovertible fragment of fact.

A documentary, **Trent Parke: The Black Rose**, will screen on Tuesday, 10pm, ABC.