Chapter 16.

Illusionary *Homefullness*

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Biography:

Hickinbotham is a writer, singer, song writer and performer: I like to paint and create images on Photoshop. I'm finalising my PhD in Fine Art at RMIT University in Melbourne Australia. I'm still living in Ballarat, Victoria, although I'm spending time with my mother in Williamstown, Melbourne as she is diving deeper into Alzheimer's disease and struggling with things like heating meals in the microwave or using her phone. I'm writing songs and making a video called *Song for Sue* for an exhibition at Bendigo Art Institute, curated by two Monash University PhD candidates who have focussed the exhibition on the Art Access Studio established at Larundel Psychiatric facility (Naarm/Melbourne) in 1986 and closed again when the whole facility closed in 1996.

Abstract

The concept of *Homefullness* – that innate sense of comfort and belonging within one's surroundings – serves as an anchor for this chapter. It is not merely about physical space but also about emotional security and personal autonomy. Jenny Hickinbotham's path to discovering this equilibrium has been fraught with challenges. There were times when unstable living conditions and external pressures left her feeling unmoored, disconnected from any semblance of stability. This chapter navigates themes of belonging, identity, and resilience as she reflects on how environment and mental health intertwine deeply. It explores the profound impact of homelessness as an experience that forces the mind into a relentless cycle of obsession over finding a safe haven. For Jenny, living without a home was the hardest challenge she ever faced – it drained her focus, disrupted her concentration, and left her yearning for the reassurance of a place she could truly call her own. Here, she unpacks these reflections and the coping mechanisms that have shaped her journey. The songs in this chapter serve as an extension of the narrative.

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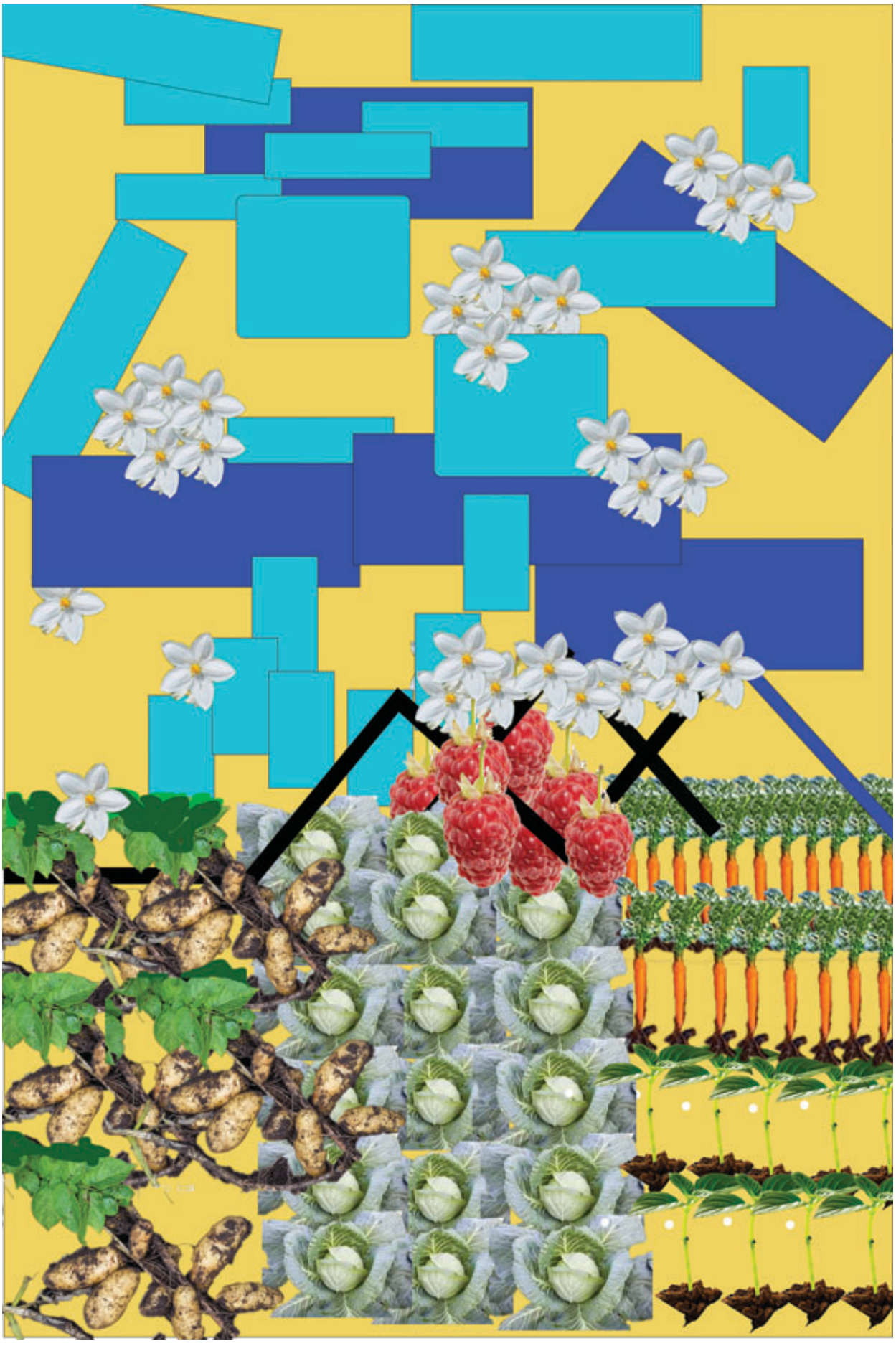
Finally, I have a home, a building, within a complex of twelve. ‘Beautiful’, well can I call a house ‘beautiful’? I call it beautiful in the sense that I ‘feel’ comfortable and at home within this building, and finally, at the age of 67 I feel like I am within the walls of my own home. Is this *Homefullness*?

I want to add more. I’ve owned a couple of houses in Australia, including one in Somerville, Victoria. I bought it in 1988, at the age of 31 years, it was a beautifully period home. But after paying, moving in and finding my father’s best friend in the space I imagined was a kitchen, a laundry really, I realised this house had no kitchen. My father’s friend wordlessly installed the basics for me. This house had a huge backyard and required a lot of time mowing and caring but those things did not bother me. I had savings from working for ten years, I was ok.

The most intimidating thing about this house was the voice hearing I endured; voice hearing I’d coped with for a few years now, as a hostile, cruel, demeaning and demanding experience of the voice, which later I was told by two psychiatrists was my mother. Now, at 67 she still talks in my head, demanding me to tell her what I’m doing, giving me advice in relation to those non/actions – I spend a lot of time in bed. I cope a lot better with this voice knowing it’s my mother. Sometimes, when I get distracted I think it’s my tutor or my brother, or someone I can’t identify, I get emotionally distressed. This can be very life challenging, and lead to all sorts of thoughts. The fact that I am usually in control of this mother’s voice, or not control, but aware, makes it a lot easier for me to apply my strategies of self-care and to shift my thoughts or actions. Today, I got out of bed at 11am and now at 1pm, I’ve started focusing on writing this chapter.

I can usually manage the voice I hear while living in this home and this makes the home, *Homefull* to me, a working, functioning home, within which I don’t feel possessed, but assured that I am myself, within my own body. But I can be moody and I find it difficult to start things. I have autism, diagnosed when I lived in Gisborne in regional Victoria. I have very poor executive functioning, that means starting tasks and similar skills, so it’s not all about the voices I hear. But in my opinion, my superior understanding of

focusing on who originates a voice and what they are trying to say to me helps me understand myself and my moods. And in this house, my *Homefullness* mood is comfortable, safe and reassured.



<Figure 16.1. here>

Figure 16.1. The VegeGarden. Image by Jenny Hickinbotham, 2023.

I think I was attached to the huge yard of the Somerville house because it was structured and reminded me of my grandparents' yard. My grandparents, Julie Mary and Charlie, lived the last years of their lives in Alexandra, Victoria. They had two sections of a garden. At the outhouse, the garden was divided, above was the snippet of a paddock for the horse, the milking cow, the chickens and a sheep or two – I think. Inside the green grassy part of the house garden was an extensive vegetable garden my grandfather maintained. My grandmother proudly showed me around and taught me the names of the vegetables. Grandpa had a shed too, his own men's shed, which was common in the 1970s. Grandpa worked alone, he built me a doll bed. I remember racing round the house paths in the billycarts grandpa made. I held grandma's hand as we tackled the chook shed. She put the eggs into her apron pocket, where they were safe and warm. I'd say grandma and grandpa found *Homefullness* at this place. Margaret, Julie Mary's mother, was married to a miner, who worked at the Whroo Gold Mine. He fell sick with silicosis, a lung disease from being down the mines too long and died when Margaret was quite young, so she benefitted from her daughter and son-in-laws shared *Homefullness*. A related story was about Hector, the man who helped them in the garden. He was asked to pull down an old shed one day, and as he and the five girls began to pull the boards away half pennies appeared beneath, covering the ground. The family thought they were rich.

After I lived in Somerville for a couple of years, I was accepted to Flinders University to study a BA in English and Drama in Adelaide, South Australia. I enjoyed this study but all the time I was looking for security, a new life, assurance of selfhood and confidence. My voices continued to harass, and I tried all the time to find a therapist with whom I could develop understanding and rapport. I couldn't find anyone at Flinders University, so I developed my own strategies for studying and relating.

In my second year, money owing to me arrived in my account and I bought a little wooden cottage on the top of a knoll in Eden Hills, a small suburb near Adelaide, where there were no footpaths, but lots of bush for me to walk through with my dog. One Christmas I took a back-packing trip to Coolpin Gorge in Kakadu National Park. Unfortunately, after only one day of walking I had to be flown out after the leader,

raising his arm to me to pull him up a cliff face, pulled me down. We both got caught in a water flow on the way to the lagoon below. He had to push me across the lagoon on a lilo because my pelvis was broken in two places, sacrum break and lower vertebrae break. He had to run out to a place where he could get contact and organise a flying doctor. Mobile phones did not exist in the early 1990s and the leader didn't have a radio. Six weeks in Darwin Hospital before I was back home.

Next year, I tried to take my life by cutting my wrists. The voice I heard was a Drama teacher, who had told us about her daughter, that she brought the girl up , this chilled me. I had to think why, perhaps it was something that happened when my father travelled to Europe for six months leaving mother to care for we three children alone – local men and women dropped by to help my mother and she allowed them.

I never felt *Homefull* in this Eden Valley Hills home, it was too close to my childhood home in the Barossa Valley. I didn't know how to handle being alone. I have finally figured that out now that I'm in my own public house, my own public housing house in Ballarat. In a sense my voice hearing until this time was more than a two-way thing, because lots of people engaged with me. I no doubt initiated lots of the voices I engaged with – a stress resulting from being lonely and isolated.

In 1995 I was accepted into the University of South Australia where I studied Library and Information Studies. One essay involved observing people in the library queue. The teacher asked if she could keep my essay to use as an example for other students. I was not confident about that because half of it I just made up from my imagination.

After graduation I became very ill because I didn't have any structure in my life, I had no idea what to do with myself. I got a job interview and arrived 45 minutes late, terrified, shaking, anxious and of course, in those days we did not know how to explain these behaviors, so it was assumed by the assessors that I was simply incapable.

While at University I met a great psychologist and talked to her every week. This was an incredibly new experience for me and I told her all sorts of stories about the Barossa Valley. Then later in the year I met a social worker who agreed to be a voice in my head, to provide therapy using internal means. This turned

out to be a disaster, it continued for about six months, but I went crazy, which led to further unease in my Eden Hills Cottage. Finally, I went back to Melbourne, unable to use my bladder freely, and unable to speak capably. I sold the house in Eden Hills.

I had ten stable years in Newport, where I provided homestay to foreign students. Again, this situation of sharing my house, being a landlord of sorts, providing food for the three students to fix their own breakfast and lunch, while I cooked and provided dinner. This was certainly not a *Homefull* situation for me, probably not for the students either who were adjusting from living with their families and home-country friends.

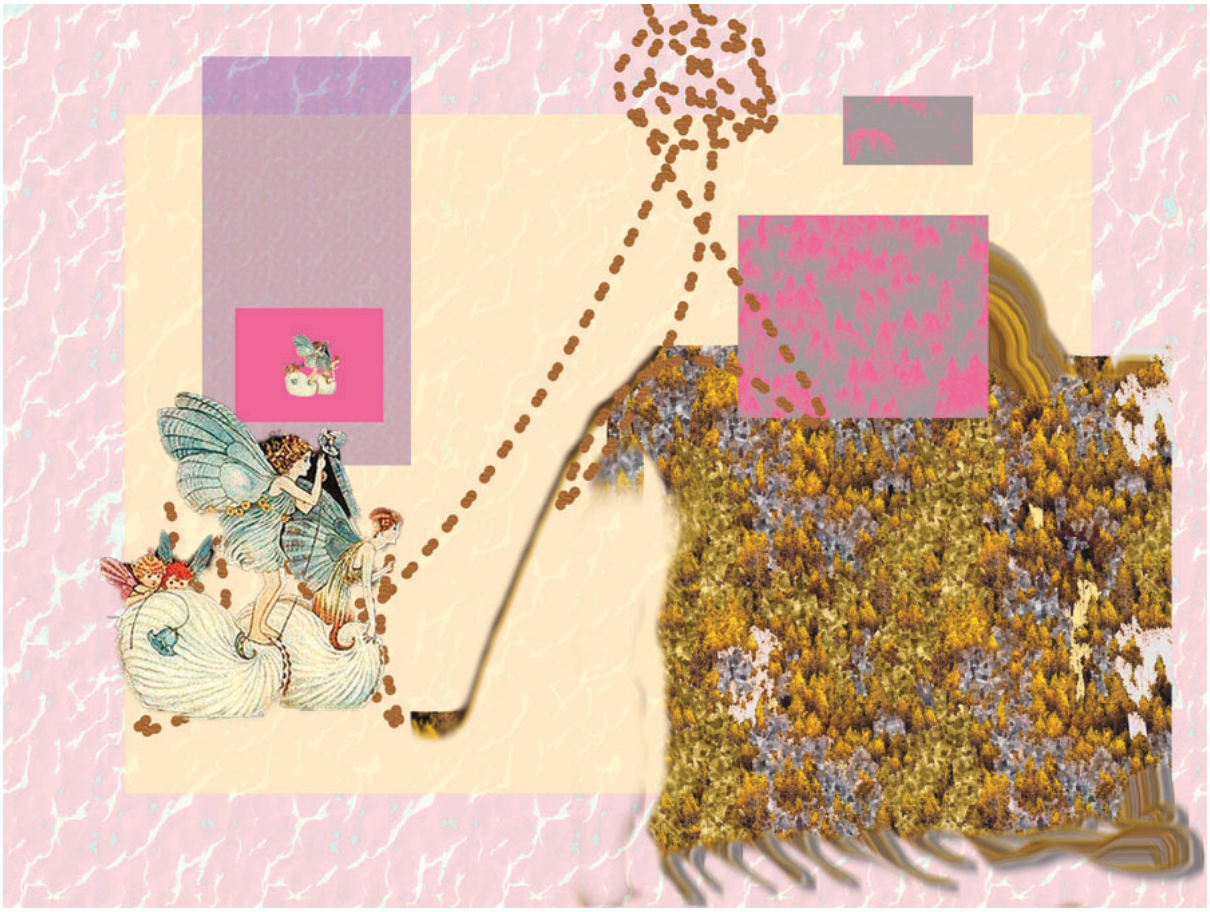
In 2004 I was working with a demeaning and cruel psychiatrist who told me I would never get a better job than the one I had in accounts – stay at it. He would not help me get the disability pension. He told me Cognitive Behaviour Therapy would not help because I'd had schizophrenia for too long: ten years. He lied and told me the medication he prescribed did not cause weight gain. I put up with these abusive therapies for six months before attempting to take my life. The foreign students never knew. I think this shows that the only space in that house that was really mine, was the bed/lounge room and probably a share of the kitchen. My home had become my work.

I took three months off and started to paint. This was the best therapy I could have undertaken, and in fact, it was therapy for my room and my spaces as well. I made art, using sticks and little wooden critters, ducks and chickens, and stuck them on backings, like paper and board, whatever I could think of, until I went back to work at a women's refuge, which of course, involved supporting others, and helped my spirit immensely.

I sold the Newport house and bought into a retirement village on my mother's encouragement. I loved the vegetable garden but within three years I put it on the market, I couldn't afford the ongoing costs. I rented a little house in Seaholme which was also in Melbourne. I painted as much as I could. People around the neighbourhood, the guy who rode the Harley, I charged him $150 for his canvas. Another guy, Hek at the Queen Vic Market, I'm regretful I didn't just give this painting to Hek, it was pretty good, just like him. You know something that stopped me was my concern that Hek would have no home to house the

painting. I assumed Hek would be homeless at least in some form of homelessness – of course I should never have made such an assumption.

Covid-19 imposed her grip on us in 2020, I was living in grandma's old look-alike house in Gisborne in the country. It had an Aga stove and a huge backyard with two old sheds, one I used for chickens and one for ducks and there was a brand new shed for tools and a car, though I couldn't get my car down the side of the house, because the trees and vegetable growth was too intense. I wonder to what extent the replication of my grandparents' house in the buildings and the way of life I chose to live impacted my senses of wellbeing and *Homefullness*. I was certainly very comfortable in this house and yard during the Covid -19 years, going to the tip for materials to build coops and things and Bunnings to get tools and materials. Buying and selling chooks and ducks which I drove all over Victoria to purchase for interesting varieties which I could breed. I lived outside the Covid metropolitan boundary so was allowed to drive further than 5 kms. I also had bees and a friend who helped me with them, because as they stung me more and more I got more and more fearful of working with their hives, taking the honey and checking their health. I also grew vegetables for the three years I lived here. I wonder to what extent all this grandparent type work/interests impacted my feelings about living in this house. You could not call this situation *Homefullness* because of the house. At this place, *Homefullness* is also about the property, working, cleaning, growing, caring about the land, produce, family and home.



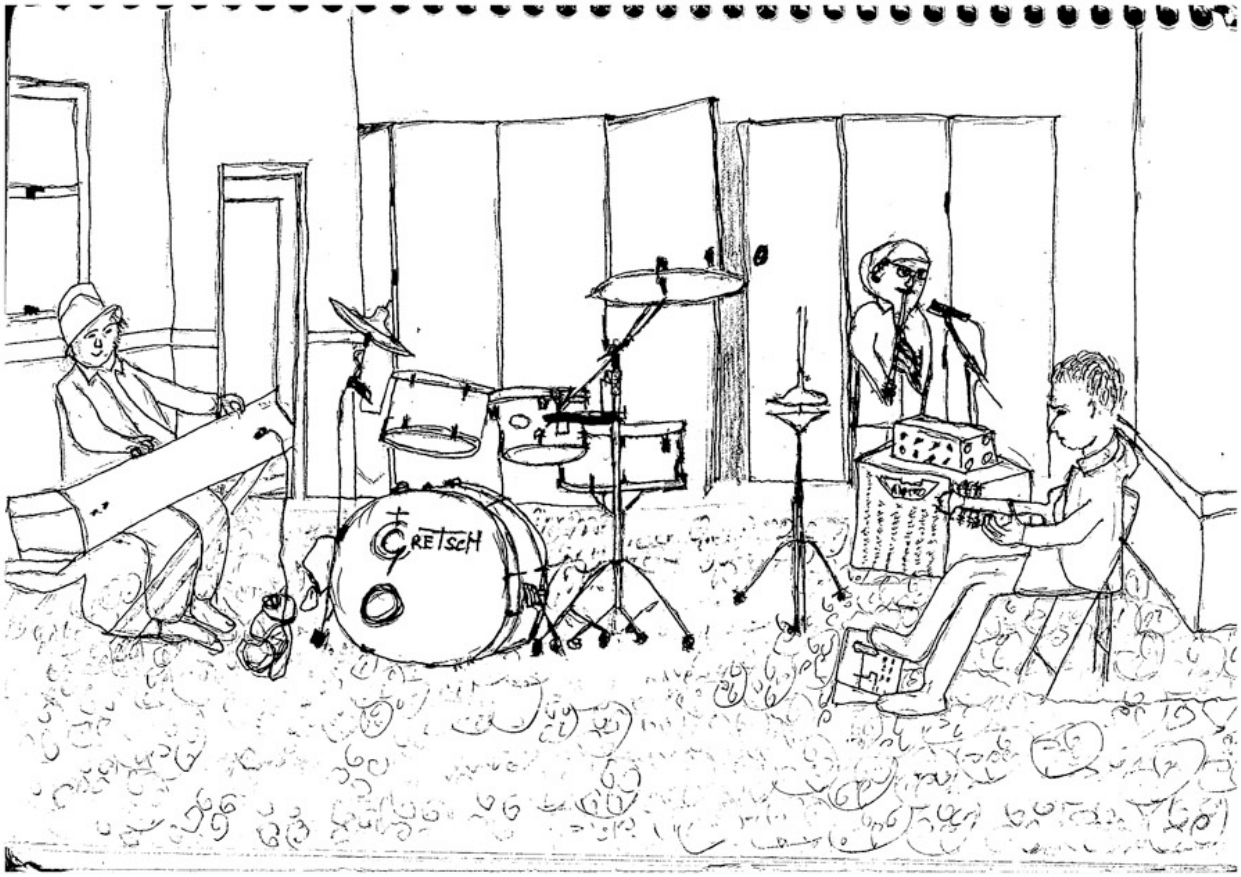
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Figure 16.2. Fairy River. Image by Jenny Hickinbotham, 2023.

In late 2022 I became very unwell, barricading myself in the house and being reported to the police by my family for welfare checks. I started clearing up all of my granny's property, selling poultry and produce, holding garage sales, taking offers from people online or over the phone and being available at all times of the day to help them load materials into their trucks. This was difficult, but I had some helpers and I ended up driving off into the sunset with my three Tenterfield Terriers and a trailer behind my Honda CRV. I headed to Bendigo where I tried out all my equipment, tent, gazebo and cooking gear and met up with my cousin. This was the beginning of my homeless period of nearly 2 years.

Bare feet, shoed feet, flip flop feet, tripping along singing a song, bye bye, you guys back there in the East!

After this, I ran away to Western Australia, having been commissioned to create artwork for DADAA Gallery in Fremantle; they specialise in supporting people with disabilities. They have a gallery, a theatre, workshop spaces and a café serving in the courtyard. The staff also do external work for other centres. My experience with DADAA was as a singer/performer in The Ball produced by Tina Stephanou and presented at Carnamagh, three hours north of Perth in the wheat and sheep district, in November 2023. DADAA workers from Perth came and ran a ballroom dancing workshop for the locals in the middle of all the performances.



<Figure 16.3. here>

Figure 16.3. The Band, Taraleah, Tasmania with Australian Arts Orchestra, 2022. Pen drawing by Jenny Hickinbotham, 2022.

In April 2024 I flew back to Fremantle to the Audible Edge Festival to launch my album sponsored by Tone List, East to West with Fight Flight Freeze, available through Bandcamp. Below are the words of my *Song of Dust*, one of my favourite compositions. I'm not going to write a lot about my journey from the East Coast to Western Australia because the story is in the songs, and you can access the zine through Bandcamp. In reality, it was time spent on holiday using my tent until one night it blew away.

The Song of Dust

Jenny Hickinbotham, 2023

I'm immersed in the dust and dirt of Australia

It skins me

Australian dust Australian dirt it's in my tent it's in my bed,

It's between my toes, Australian dust, Australian dirt

It skins me

The caravaner next door tells me he's a nuisance

Is blowing dust with his motorized wand

It skins me

Let's race off to the beach for a sublime swim

In Australia's clear waters, wash the sand from our feet

It skins me

We walk in Australian deserts, bushland, forest

Wearing shoes, to avoid dirt between our toes

It skins me

The farmer is tilling his dirt with his plough

He's working his dirt to grow crops, make money

It skins me

Gina is blowing great gaping holes in our Australian dirt

Dirt she discards after exploiting every treasure

It skins me

Like you, she sweeps her manufactured house floor

Removing any dirt, any dust, any Australian earth

It skins me

She regularly wipes, or pays someone to wipe,

Dust from her home, horizontals

It skins me

Ridding the material home of any natural earthly connection

Xcept what she can cultivate in her imported garden dirt

It skins me

A cultured life, cultivated, systematized

Like the manufactured material 'home'

She skins it

And chooses to live this fanciful construct

Constantly sweeping Aussie dirt from her life

She skins it

After my time in Fremantle, I drove to Rockingham where I'd booked emergency accommodation with my NDIS, but on the way, I stopped at a service station, opened the boot and a bottle of cooking oil fell out, the result of living in the car. After I paid the bill, I walked back around the car and slid in my thongs through the oil landing with my left leg twisted up and I was unable to walk. A very friendly man came to my aid. He was excellent, suggesting shifts to my posture but he was not pushy at all. I couldn't move. My dogs were quiet in the car, and I said to my friend, I've got three dogs in the car. He said, no stress, my wife and I do pet caring and they took the dogs for five weeks. The hospital in Rockingham got me into respite accommodation for four weeks, and got me walking again, essentially talking my body into moving again after this shock.

During my time at the respite centre, I made a video for a crowdfunding campaign *Help Fund a Safe Home for Artist Jenny Hickinbotham*. In the video I said, homelessness is the hardest thing I've ever done. It impacts my mental health, I can't focus, can't concentrate, I'm obsessed about finding a home, that's all I can think about. Two years later, after I had recovered from my stay at the respite centre, I joined a social group which eventually supported me to get a small job. I sold the trailer and researched, investigated, then finally took all my money out of my superannuation, borrowed a couple of thousand from a very good friend and bought a 2006 Avan Cruiseliner caravan.

Hampton House, my respite home, was quite comfortable after the first couple of nights spent on an adjustable hospital bed. Someone had a dog with them in their room, so I asked if I could bring my three dogs. They said no, but I could bring one. I was driving by then, they had got me walking in the hospital,

where I stayed a week. It included a long weekend, so medical appointments were delayed. I went to the dog-sitter's house and took my female breeding dog, Trinky. She had two litters and was very attached to me, she demanded lots of attention. Her baby, Hero, was only one year old, but happy and joyful, while also disobedient about coming back or doing what was demanded. She was very spoiled and my old fella Puck also stayed with the baby sitting couple. They ended up having their favourites, the guy loved my old boy and the lady loved the pup. These people were my mood-savers. On hot days, or if I wanted to attend a late-night concert or event, they would offer to look after the dogs. It was really important for me to have breaks from the four-leggeds. I don't get that now and I feel it.

Sometimes I feel like my songs tell my stories better than the literal words. Here's one of my favourite songs, because it encapsulated my life over a month when I lived in my tent and then in the respite centre. I was living in my tent and my gazebo and the weather was hot and dry. I had a fence for the dogs, which worked pretty well, but I never left them alone. Finally the tent and gazebo, attached to each other blew over the fence during the night and the dogs and I had to escape into the car.

Breakfast for Bear

Jenny Hickinbotham, 2023

Every morning she searched the real estate sites and apps

Signed up to view any house in her pitiful weekly budget

Sipped at the bag-tea in the only cup she owned,

petted her dog, fed him the pellets he ate in protest,

it's only for breakfast she promised,

we'll have meat for dinner, she hugged her bear

every third day, was her accepted practice on having a shower

breakfast if she remembered, she and dog got into the old car

off to the first open rental, she looked at every available studio,

home, stable, no bedrooms, one or two, even three,

it's only for breakfast she promised,

we'll have meat for dinner, she hugged her bear

she looked at new subsidized rental homes, renovated, fibro, wood,

bricks, gardens, courtyards, she had to think of her dog, she looked

from midland to Mandurah from the coast to the forested mountains

York, Mount Barker, Albany, Narrogin, Carnamagh

it's only for breakfast she promised,

we'll have meat for dinner, she hugged her bear

when the petrol ran out she said to bear, sorry meat tomorrow night

She pushed on, kept registering through apps, applying with all her documents,

Collected during the early days of searching, birth certificate, passport,

reference, rental, work, personal, bears rego 'n microchip numbers, name, age, gender

it's only for breakfast she promised,

we'll have meat for dinner, she hugged her bear

She was invited by colleagues to play a set at the State Library,

She had to say no, she couldn't, she just couldn't, no energy, no motivation.

No money coming in, no money, no career, no work.

Day after day, in the car, driving from house to studio, to house

it's only for breakfast she promised,

we'll have meat for dinner, she hugged her bear

She had no money for petrol. Phoned the State Government's housing hotline

They gave her numbers to phone, don't forget Fremantle Shared Housing Facebook page

They said joyfully, round and round, St Patricks, No sorry we have no housing available,

Try Anglicare, or the refuges, no I've got a dog she said, they won't take me.

it's only for breakfast she promised,

we'll have meat for dinner, she hugged her bear

round and round she went, back to Salvation Army, sorry we haven't got

any accommodation, sorry, try another number, and another, and another.

Her car was the only place she felt safe and secure now, she didn't have

To pay rent any more, just find a toilet every morning, and bear was eating meat.

it's only for breakfast she promised,

we'll have meat for dinner, she hugged her bear

I lived in the caravan at *See and Cee Caravan Park* in Rockingham for six months, until a woman, drunk and stoned, attacked me for driving too fast. Yes, I was perhaps driving in the caravan park a little too fast, but not as fast as she accused me of doing. Anyway, the next thing was the owners told me I had to move out. There was a confrontation between part-time stayers and full-time livers, who owned their houses (often they still had to empty ablution facilities). Another guy was asked to leave, he lived in a little gnome house, so he had nowhere to go.


Cruiser

<Figure 16.4. here>

Figure 16.4. Jenny's Avan 2006 Cruiseliner. Photograph by Jenny Hickinbotham, 2023.

The best thing about *See and Cee* was that my friend Linda and I could walk across the road to the leash free dog beach. We walked nearly every day, she had a little fluffy chihuahua. My caravan was really in a great position. The worst thing about caravan parks is the shared ablution blocks, many people have overcome this with bigger vans and inside facilities, but not me. Getting this public house in Ballarat is the best thing that has happened to my body and health since buying the caravan.

I made the caravan work for me, put the dog fence around and had bought enough sheets/doonas. I had one set of crockery: one coffee cup, plastic plates shared by dogs and me, I just kept everything to the minimum, one tea towel, one shower towel. I bought a floor mat cause I hated stepping on the wet floor in the group showers.

The next song conveys a satirical and critical perspective on Perth, addressing various social, economic, and cultural aspects of life in the city. It uses humor and biting commentary to highlight issues such as housing affordability, environmental pollution, urban planning, and societal values.

This song is not just a critique of Perth but a broader commentary on urban life. It challenges readers to reflect on the trade-offs of modern living, questioning whether wealth and convenience come at the cost of fairness, sustainability, and quality of life. While the song doesn't offer solutions, its purpose lies in raising awareness and encouraging a deeper evaluation of the urban experience.

Her Riches

Jenny Hickinbotham, 2023

Why Perth?

It's rich

There are many rich people in Perth

The flying in and the flying outers

Pocketing the profits made from

Resources dug from the earth

And if you've got pets

Forget about renting

You'll have to buy a tent or a bungalow

To enjoy your Fido or Fifo's cuddle

McGowan says rentees don't need better rights

He says those with the money

The fifo workers and their managers are doing ok

Taking advantage of the capitalist opportunities

A second, third, fourth house

McGowan probably has a few houses.

We complain that real estate for sale is promoted below its market value

What about the rental properties, advertised for $350 per week,

But accepting the highest rental bidder, $550 per week.

As you're rushing from the office at 5pm

Don't worry 'bout traffic, there's so many roads

Cause there's a Law which dictates that so much money

Earned from the exploiting of natural resources

Must be invested in roads – there's roads galore.

And as you're rushing from the office at 5pm

Don't worry about dinner cause all the strip-shop

Supermarkets are closed, shopping center supermarkets

Might be open, till 9pm. And don't think you can buy

your new car on Saturday afternoon or Sunday

They're shut, as are the galleries, restaurants, most everything else

I haven't investigated the churches.

When you get a speeding ticket in the Perth region

It's always $100 with no demerit points.

So why is that, no demerit points?

Cause everyone would have lost their license

And there would be no legal drivers left

To raise the greedy revenue.

And when you're speeding make sure you listen to 96fm

And take advantage of those adverts promoting

Your gun shooting prowess, they're inviting you

And your mates to go practice your shoot-outs

At their shooting ranges.

Smoke stacks line the coast from Fremantle to Mandurah

Belching smoke and pollution into the blue skies

Turning the sunsets purple, burgundy, ruby, burnt orange

The guy next door says, 'look at that, I have that every night'

Sure, I said and the lung diseases to accompany it.

No one talks 'bout pollution, 'That's not pollution'

another fella said, 'it's bushfires'. No pollution here.

There's another good thing

Fenced in dog parks, separate

For biggies and littlies.

Parking at the art centers so cheap

For all those wealthy arty folks

Too late, pay heaps in the street.

FIFOs advise kids to get into the mines

Earn money

Stop complaining.

One great design initiative

Is the huge swaths of natural bush

Between suburbs

Which supports the life of Bilbies,

Quokkas, Tassie Devils,

west of the dingo fence.

But anyway, guess death is upon us all

Upon every species in this world

Why complain – suck it up.

Perth's endless balmy blue skies

Won't keep you alive

When the WA culture's got-cha.

Until January 2024 I lived in the caravan at Golden Pond, where they farm Marons, a West Australian crayfish. I had a good spot for the van, with two spindly type trees providing shelter. I felt safe here, unlike *See and Cee*, 'cause the guy next door kept wanting to have a relationship, even when he found personal time with the woman who assaulted me. After I'd been in my spot at Golden Ponds for a couple of months a big, big rig arrived across the grass from me and a couple from Queensland, I think, with their little toy poodle set up camp. They were quite friendly, allowing me to use their clothes line and gave me some milk one day. People didn't form friendships very much, although this couple did go off drinking in other vans. I was quite comfortable, keeping my cooking simple, mainly using the microwave and the two gas stove pilots inside the van. The people who owned the van before me said they never cooked inside and they never drank the tank water. But I always drank the tank water, it seemed fine to me. The dogs drank it and stayed resilient.

My mother coerced me to go back to Melbourne. My Bendigo cousin flew over and drove the van back with me from Western Australia. Mum and I set the van up at Macedon Caravan Park, she was living in her retirement village in Williamstown but I was not allowed to live with her.

It’s really weird making a home in a caravan, especially when Centrelink considers you homeless. Meanwhile, as life’s tendrils trickled about as I searched for life’s opportunities. And it got hard, because I started to feel claustrophobic. The thing I missed most was a desk, to stash my laptop gear, my study papers, my rent docs, books, etc. Since I got into this public house in Sebastopol (which is in Ballarat), one of the first things I did was set up a desk and a folding table. I went to the op shop to buy a chair, got one of those kneeling chairs, which I quite like. And the space in this house makes it homely, the people I get to wave at and chat to from the other thirteen units – I’m trying to teach my dogs NOT to bark at them all. Having a decent sized working fridge – JOY. But I will never mind sleeping in the van as the mattress was very comfortable.

Finally, I have a home, in a building, within a complex of twelve. I feel like I am within the walls of my own home. Is this *Homefullness*?