



DISEASED ESTATE

THEA COSTANTINO



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The native orchid possesses no scent discernable to the human nose. It barely resembles a flower. Waxy arabesques unfurl from textured flanges leading into a gaping cavity. The *Paracaleana nigrita* sports an egg-shaped tumour atop its spindly stem and extends an obscene protuberance. *Prasophyllum giganteum* is a rigid assemblage of black, sweaty tongues. *Drakaea elastica*, or Praying Virgin, proffers its hairy, pockmarked labellum to passing wasps, mimicking the female, duping the male into frantic copulation. They are not made for the pleasure of our eyes, indeed, they are barely legible to them.

Mrs Louisa Bradbury, *Qualities of Native Orchids: Unpublished Papers 1839 – 1843*, Viviparous Press

The package arrived in mid September, when the sodden specimens in the flower beds should have been in bloom. I'd been waiting for this delivery since those earliest museum visits on Custody Saturday, inhaling dust motes and perceiving something half rotten in the whiff of WW2 memorabilia, where chipped store mannequins smiled in khaki mourning weeds. Since donning the bonnet for a nineteenth century family portrait at Pioneer World, where we were instructed not to smile, I'd been awaiting this package. And through those antique fairs in that 'heritage rich' country town, accompanying the step-parent and eager to prove my passion for the antediluvian, the quaint, and the slightly foxed. The waiting grew even keener when the adjunct family receded into the mists of second divorce and estrangement and when I luxuriated like Carroll's caterpillar in plumes of intoxicating smoke, contemplating the junkshop cool of my student digs. Finally, rounding on the Archive with the predatory gaze of the researcher, I picked this thing up on eBay, of all places.

Had it not been so very old, had it not been crafted by Horatio Mordant himself, his fingerprints discernable in the surface of the petals, the artefact would be entirely without value. As far as botanical models go, it's a little naive. Generations of neglect had seeped into its skin, now the colour of a smoker's middle finger. Unlike a real orchid, the wax facsimile has a distinct and nagging odour.

Mordant's orchid arrived when I was completing my Masters dissertation on the Grubb Archive, a topic planted in my frontal lobes during my first year as an undergraduate, stroked and nurtured by the same academic until I found myself writing on a topic of her choosing, in her area of expertise, drawing on her research. Helen held monthly meetings at her house, all of us Higher Degree by Research students in attendance, husband Gary silently topping up

our glasses as she, swinging on a chair, revealed the arcane mysteries of the Archive. In retrospect, she was completely drunk, but her mouth and nose were a little like my ex-stepmother's. I was helpless.

Helen guided me down a trail already trodden by her purposeful heels; I reconstructed the pathological crisis of the early settlers as though it was my very own discovery. In ornamental prose reminiscent of Helen's I conjured the swampy textures of the Swan River Colony, embroidering the story of settlement and disease with accounts of daily life inspired by rather than derived from the records.

I wrote how Louisa, wife of Lieutenant Bradbury, cultivated the interest in botany proper to all educated ladies. I saw her trudging through the boggy pastures of her new home, flushed pink, gathering specimens and preparing once again to write to Captain Mangles. Her notes reveal an unseemly enthrallment with the generative aspect of these uncharted blooms, at least to my smutty post-Freudian eyes. Undeterred by Mangles' lack of reply, Louisa dissected, transcribed and labelled. I had the Lieutenant remark that he found all this slicing and dicing unsettling. And the sun had made her skin peel. Into this domestic tableau I allowed tragedy to erupt: without warning, young pink Louisa died. Always delicate, prone to coughs and colds, she had not yet borne her first child. She slipped away in the night after a protracted bout of vomiting. Sadistically, I noted that amidst his grief the Lieutenant had reflected that the final image of his wife slick with her own bodily fluids was not one that he wished to carry in posterity.

Such details injected life into the desiccated business of history; I'd learned this from Helen. The colony's population was small; within a few generations signs of inbreeding would become apparent. Almost all of the settlers were hypersensitive to light, their pink skins were ravaged by sores and they experienced persistent



thirst. A Mrs. Frederick Suett, the wife of a speculator, took ill in 1834 with what was thought to be scarlet fever. However, scrutiny of the doctor's report reveals anomalies: accompanying the characteristic strawberry tongue and peeling skin were colossal facial buboes and an unrelenting olfactory hallucination of boiling cabbage.

The litany of symptoms grew, decade by decade. Facial deformities proliferated—young women in particular developed disfiguring conditions, dashing familial marriage ambitions. Conditions of the eyes were common, inciting speculation about the injurious properties of the Antipodean sun, which induced squinting. At advanced stages of illness the skin of the neck and shoulders would split, forming folds and ruffles that were sensitive to the touch. Spontaneous abortions dropped like ripe figs. Worst of all were the acephalist births—infants born without a head. Miraculously, many survived to adulthood, nourished by orifices in the neck.

By mid century the growing pathological crisis was a source of public outcry. The Unsightly Persons Act of 1853 called for the confinement of the profoundly diseased according to the following criteria: the extent of the disease and its affront to public decency; the social standing of the diseased, to be supported by character witnesses; and the capacity of the diseased to undertake physical labour or otherwise useful activities. The first work house for the diseased poor was established in Fremantle in 1871. The site has long been rumoured to be haunted; such folklore supports a bustling trade in ghost tours.

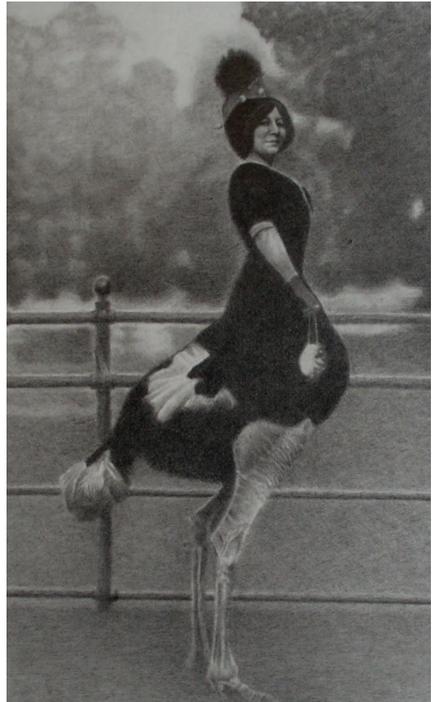
All this was necessary exposition. However, finding myself on a predetermined path, I was unable to deviate, to form my own inlet into the greater stream forged by Helen, who, as a result of her work on the Archive, was now Professor Hartnett. I replicated. I reproduced.

I wrote how, in 1872, a dissection was performed before an audience of specialists. The woman, an Irish wet nurse charged with a double infanticide, had been bagged and hanged after an extensive hunt in the forests of the South West. Dr. Smithson's report recorded the following:

The body was brought to us unclothed. Sores pocked the face and body. Those parts of the neck untouched by the noose retained the gnarled skin folds of the disease under investigation. I drew them apart with a pencil; this revealed the undersides to be a vicious red, the folds connected by mucous membranes. The genitals were externally normal. ... The first incision, through the abdomen and up to the throat, revealed lesions. Fine white tendrils, firm to the touch, wrapped around the organs, particularly the upper intestine, piercing them in places. We set about extricating this tangle; our audience craned forward in their seats, hands on each other's shoulders. The organs were sequentially removed—the liver and heart were enlarged. The organs of generation were grossly malformed, with supernumerary appendages and several lesions. The ovaries were coated in coarse fibres and burst forth pearlescent fluid when squeezed. When the organs had been removed, the truth of the condition was revealed. Milk white blooms of Oriental extravagance unfolded in the humid depths of the thoracic cavity.

This was the first sighting of *Prasophyllum mucormycosis*, the parasitic orchid indigenous to the state's South West. Horatio Mordant, botanist, was permitted to make a copy. The propagation of the orchid was unknown; its purpose in blooming in the body was a mystery. Mordant speculated that grazing kangaroos ingested the spores and that the growing plant, nourished by intestinal soil, burst through the gut of the animal to be pollinated by carrion feeders. No evidence was found to support this theory.

The botanists of the colony were fiercely competitive; Mordant's attendance at the dissection was a stroke of good fortune. Unable to draw, Mordant had chosen the Sisyphean task of rendering the alien flora in wax, a medium that was prone to melt in the warmer months. Autumns were optimistic, winters were productive, spring full of the promise of wild flowers, but the horror of summer would slowly unfold and eventually the waxes would collapse. In professional circles Mordant was viewed as a hack, persisting with obsolete techniques more appropriate to the funeral home than the laboratory. He enjoyed a brief fame as a result of *Prasophyllum mucormycosis*, and appealed for it to be named *Prasophyllum mordant*, however Smithson was ultimately credited with its discovery. Mordant elected for a slow death by consuming sulphur scraped from match heads. His apprentice, Edgar Grubb, found the body.



Grubb was Helen's particular focus and her meal ticket. Her four-hundred page work *Diseased Estate*, which won the Western Australian Premier's Book Award for Non-Fiction, was the undisputed authority on Grubb and the pathological history of the Swan River Settlement. Helen successfully campaigned for the state museum to dedicate a permanent room to Grubb. It contains mostly relics: his suit, a lock of hair, his dentures. The exhibit has not proven popular with visitors, who mostly come for the dinosaurs.

The state museum employed Edgar Grubb as a junior custodian in 1875, and he soon grew expert in taxidermy. In his memoirs he fondly notes his neophyte horror at drowning marsupial mice for pelts. By 1881 he gained his seniority; he managed archives relating to the diseases of the Swan River settlement. He cloistered the records jealously; only high ranking officials were permitted access to what he described as "inflammatory information". His contribution to the archives led to his appointment as Chief Investigator of Public Health in 1901. He oversaw the establishment of an Unsightly Persons colony and shrimp processing plant on Rottnest Island.

Diseased Estate remarks that Grubb's professional achievements concealed a desperate life. He lost his youngest daughter through a gambling addiction. He



was once discovered naked in the museum vestibule by the museum director, surrounded by taxidermy specimens. He reportedly scratched incessantly. His secretaries never lasted. When Grubb died in 1914, it was rumoured that his corpse emitted no scent. He was preserved according to the traditions of Russian orthodoxy; the corpse was tied to a wheelchair, and molten wax and cadmium were injected into the veins.

The conclusion of my dissertation speculates upon Grubb's attempts to monumentalise himself in life and death. I assert, following Helen, that careerism and a morbid fear of contagion drove his relentless clamber up the social ladder, his misogyny, his secrecy, and his confinement of the deformed. By ensuring that his body would not turn to dust, he secured immortality: a wax work in a state funded tomb.

Diseased Estate recounts that the Grubb Archives were founded in 1923 in recognition of Edgar Grubb's contribution to civic history. However, due to funding

cuts and the modernisation of museum practice, the collection floated homeless between institutions for more than forty years. In 1962 fragments were stored in the home garage of the premier, under suffrage. The Archives were rejected by several universities due to, in the words of one academic, 'a paucity of scientific, historical and aesthetic merit'. In 1980 the most valuable items were auctioned. Most of the collection was probably incinerated.

In the mid-1990s, Grubb enjoyed a revival amongst a small group of academics who celebrated, with some mockery, the marginal history contained in the Archives. Conditions with hesitant names such as 'gimlet eyes' and 'troubling deformity' were illustrated in numerous photographs. Particularly treasured were images of the acephalists, which the academics suspected to be a hoax. Helen photocopied her favourites and pinned them to her cork board, occasionally drawing speech bubbles which made the victims utter inappropriate remarks. An undergraduate student made a formal



complaint; the photocopies were taken down. On a frigid Thursday in early August, having endured an hour of public transport to reach the university, I poked the final draft of my dissertation into Helen's overstuffed pigeonhole. Riding the bus home I allowed the tinny din of undergraduate students' headphones blare without protest; I had ascended.

I heard nothing for a fortnight, then an envelope branded with university insignia appeared between utility bills. It was formal notice of academic misconduct: Level Three plagiarism. I had stolen the intellectual property of my own supervisor. I was permitted to revise my research and submit new work. Helen would no longer supervise; she blocked my email address and telephone number; didn't acknowledge my lengthy apology-cum-accusation letter. Associate Professor Glen Farradale was my allocated replacement. Two years off retirement, he hadn't yet "gotten onto the email"; he would accept only hardcopy written work which he would

return defaced with minute, illegible cursive within seven days of receipt. With imperial sobriety, his nostrils whistling as he exhaled, he would urge me to "interrogate, interrogate, Tina, uh, Pia..."

Obediently, I interrogated. I sought out Helen's primary sources—ephemera in the state archives, birth and death notices, hospital collections. I wrote to collections in the eastern states, the United Kingdom, searching for anything that would confirm the existence of Edgar Grubb's work on the Archive and the terrifying diseases of the colony. This yielded surprisingly little. The only evidence for Helen's entire body of research consisted of the Unsightly Persons Act of 1853, a photograph of Edgar Grubb, senior museum custodian, and the death notice that recorded the tragic suicide of Horatio Mordant, wax artist. The Grubb Archive was not absent because it had been neglected—it had never existed in the first place.



I inserted a note, folded in half, into Helen's pigeon hole. *Diseased Estate is fiction*. She agreed to meet. I suggested that she might lend her support to my current research, which was following a praxis model: an exhibition of artefacts from the Archive. Shaky primary sources are one thing, but it's hard to dispute flesh and blood. Although we were sitting inside, Helen kept her sunglasses on throughout the meeting, and, speaking in a murmur, revealed brief distress flares of coral lipstick embedded in her teeth. She agreed to resume supervision of my thesis. A week later I received a suite of images rolled into a cardboard tube sent by unregistered mail; antique photographs that had been artfully doctored with the aid of a 1990s-era photocopier. I had them transferred to vintage paper by an expensive specialist south of the river. I also contracted a sculptor friend to produce some wax works. She was grateful for the money but aggrieved by the unpalatable character of the material, which was neither solid nor liquid; she described it as *insidious*.

When Professor Helen Hartnett delivered her opening address at the exhibition, black clad, she described it as a landmark moment in the scholarship of Western Australian heritage. It was gratifying, she

noted, that her own work had inspired such interest in Grubb's legacy, so impeccably researched by this young curator. She avoided me for the rest of the evening; when the crowd was dispersing I overheard her arguing with a waitress who insisted that the wine had run out. I left without saying goodbye.

Thanks to the growing field of Grubb Studies, more artefacts have been recovered by collectors; no longer regarded as junkshop detritus or kitsch Westraliana, forgotten fragments of the Archive seem to emerge daily. As an undergraduate I myself owned an anatomical model of the female reproductive system that had been converted into an ashtray; a gift from Helen. Like the spores of the *Prasophyllum mucormycosis*, which is not a true orchid but a fungus that mimics its form, such wondrous relics are ingested passively but never fail to have a transformative effect.

I had planned to keep Mordant's orchid as a surprise, to unveil it to Helen when I graduated. Instead, I display it on a window sill, in full sunlight. I am monitoring its inevitable collapse.

Thea Costantino 2010

Images

Page 1 (cover)

Symptom (a) 2010, graphite on paper (detail)

Page 2

Condition (a) 2010, graphite on paper

Page 4

Disorder (a) 2010, graphite on paper

Page 5

Disorder (b) 2010, graphite on paper

Page 6

Malady (a) 2010, graphite on paper

Page 7

Symptom (b) 2010, graphite on paper (detail)

Page 8

Malady (b) 2010, graphite on paper

Page 10

Teeth 2006, graphite on paper (detail)



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DISEASED ESTATE

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