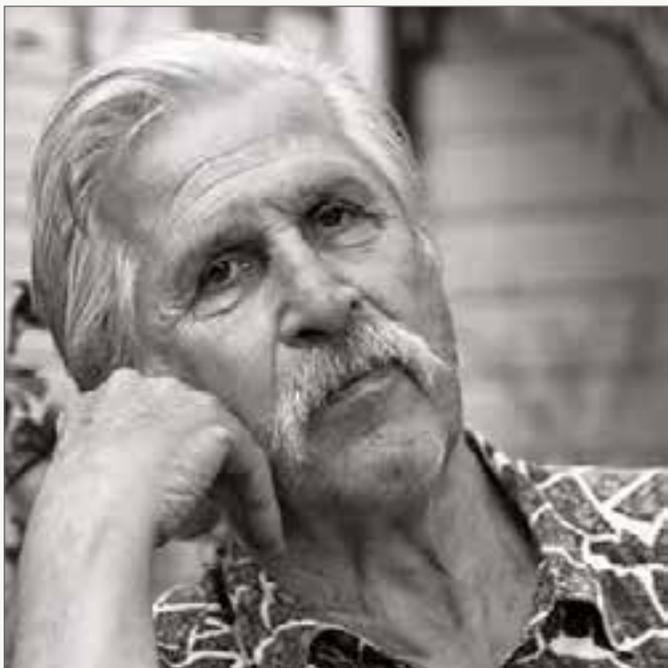


BOOKS...



FRAGMENTS OF A JOURNEY

Jose de Koster

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Write, son. Even if only one line a day, keep the flow going. Just as a river needs water otherwise it becomes a dry bed, so too does the brain need the stimulation of a word, a thought, a line, action. Energy and action.

Thus spoke my mother, hoping I would become a journalist.

As a boy I would watch those hard-bitten journalists in B grade American movies, Dan Durea cigarettes hanging out of the corners of their mouths, alternately witty and sardonic or jaded, cynical and melancholy. I did not want to be like that.

I dreamed of a quiet room and sitting at a big, polished mahogany desk waiting for the fires of inspiration to stir me into a feverish tapping of the typewriter keyboard. She was right, of course – every day, just write something. So I have kept a diary for years, sometimes extremely prosaic, at other times a lovely flash of life.

One line a day, each new one reflecting life as it was and now is, in my skull, full of images and living dreams, some shattered, some floating on the Blue Danube of Strauss (now playing on the radio in the year 2005) each line following another.

I live in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. Today it is cold, the frost has died and turned into water; soggy earth underfoot. A landscape which I had set out beforehand in sketches and in the mind is now becoming a painting, oils dripping off the brush and the mind, like a sentry on duty allows no other movement than what it orders.

I prefer to be in this slightly colder climate as the heat saps my energy and at seventy odd years of age energy is to be preserved even more than before when the lithe young body recklessly abandoned caution. At the same time I do not feel old. My mind has not caught up with my body and is full of the vitality and exuberance of youth, suddenly aware of its age only when I see the reflection of myself in a mirror or shop window and am startled to see the old man that I am. Born in 1929 is nowadays a past so far removed that it feels like a fantasy or story to be told.

Sometimes small extracts of the past arrive on the screen of memory and I see garden parties, my father playing tennis,

soccer, flirting with the ladies, his giggles causing a heaving of fluttering hearts whilst my mother's wise eyes hooded over, storing all she saw. As a child, small and fragile but temperamental as well, I would hang back in the shadows and watch. And always feel alone.

My mother, an indomitable woman of aristocratic bearing, one of six children, was born in Blitar, approximately 70 kilometres from Malang. It was there I spent some of my youth on the island of Java in what is now Indonesia but which at the time of her birth was known as the Netherlands East Indies.

Her father boasted an empire on Java, establishing a series of plantations, growing rice and sugar, aided by his brother and nephews brought over from "the old country". He was adored and idolised by his wife and family and especially by my mother and my older brother Ed, who resembled him in both features and temperament and was consequently favoured by him. He was not keen on me as instead of the rosy cheeks, forthright eyes and fearless nature of my brother, I was dark of skin, quiet, and therefore moody in his opinion, and easily intimidated.

The feeling was mutual but did not worry me as I was adored and loved by his wife, my grandmother. In contrast to her husband who was a huge man, towering over her, she was a tiny woman with the charm of a coquette, constantly smiling with her small Asian eyes which she inherited from her half French, half Vietnamese mother.

The family were all musically inclined, plantation life creating that necessity, and were adept with ukulele, guitar, violin and piano. My mother showed great proficiency in piano and became a concert pianist performing throughout Europe.

From the Introduction



Jose de Koster, Red Haired Girl

The idyll of childhood in Java ended with the Second World War and the invasion by the Japanese army and the family's internment. This is an excerpt from the Fragment titled The Camps.

My father went first to Kesilir then was transferred to Banjubiru and finally to Tjimahi where he joined my older brother Ed. All of these were men's camps. My older brother had been sent first to the Marine Kamp in Malang then transferred to Tjimahi. My mother, younger brother Guus and I were sent to the de Wyk camp in Malang then transferred to Lampersari camp in Semarang, a camp for women and children.

The diet in all camps, apart from de Wyk, was the same – a bit of kanji (tapioca) early in the morning, some bread, dry with nothing on it at lunch, a few spoonfuls of rice or bug-eaten maize and some vegetables floating in a watery soup. Any meat eaten was the result of having caught some poor passing animal, usually mice or rats or sometimes bugs.

At the start of the occupation only government officials and civil servants were interned. Before long, however, the Japanese began arresting first the European men and then the European women and children (the totoks). For a while we were spared as we were Indos, people of mixed race owing to my mother's Vietnamese ancestry. We were part of the population who were issued with blue cards that declared we were part Asian but eventually we too were interned. Perhaps we were lucky for shortly afterwards, in camp, we heard that six of our mates (my

older brother's and mine) not yet incarcerated because they too were of mixed race, were publicly beheaded. Had we still been free we might have shared their fate. My older brother by this time had already gone, where we knew not, having been caught in a razzia, creating an outpouring of grief from my mother and us two younger boys.

We farewelled our servants, many tears on both sides, and rumbled away on the dokkar which was loaded with the gear we figured we would need in the camp. This would be our first camp and it was less a camp and more a closed compound, a ghetto of houses covering several streets which were cordoned off with barbed wire – the de Wyk. We were allocated a room in a house in Tampoemasweg. When we approached the street I heard the song, "Hear my Song, Violetta" sung by Jozef Locke on an old record. This song has forever stayed in my memory. We set up our sleeping arrangements. Mum had brought along a makeshift bed whilst we kids slept on mattresses on the floor. Shortly afterwards we were joined by a young pregnant and terrified woman.

We played soccer in the first camp, the de Wyk, and held athletics meetings. The food had not yet been reduced to almost nothing as it would be in the next camps. Life was hard but not yet unbearable. Although we were not really aware of it, Kamp de Wyk was merely a holding area from which we would be transferred when the other camps became functioning. The sergeants who were our guards were nicknamed Jan de Mepper (John the Basher) by us. Some Jan de Meppers would trail a whip



behind them as they prowled around looking for someone stupid enough to be in the way; others used sticks, one particular guard a hockey stick which he used often and gleefully. Whack! Whack!

I was told to report to the kitchen which was in Welirang Street where we had lived at one time and given the job of being the "horse" pulling the large steel cannon wagon on which we would place huge drums of food (mostly soup) to distribute amongst the camp populace. Some of us were in front pulling the wagon whilst others would push from behind and maintain balance. On one of those days the wagon almost toppled, jarring my back in such a severe manner that it still bothers me to this day. When it happened, however, there was no time for tears, the food had to be delivered – and it was. Life is simple; it has its needs and they have to be attended to. Basta.

We had taken a tiny kitten, a grey angora, with us when we were interned. It had been a gift from my brother to his girlfriend who had left earlier for another camp and left the little creature in our care. Its life was short-lived however as one day my brother ran into it accidentally and broke its neck. Worse was to come though, as, seeing the poor little ting was suffering and not going to survive, we had to kill it. With Stavie, the pregnant woman's help, we took the kitten into the back yard and drowned it. The message of death within those hands of mine haunted me for the rest of my life. We dug a grave and quickly put the kitten into the hole, covering the grave with old rubbish and scraping it smooth, working quickly and fearfully in case we were discovered and questioned. From then on every time I passed the grave, I was filled with feelings of horror, fear and nausea.

One day the woman in charge of the soup kitchen told me to come to her house as she was being shifted to another and she had a KNIL shirt for me which had belonged to her dead husband— a green cotton shirt, thick and strong. "This might come in handy for you," she said. How handy it would become, she had no idea. Later on, in the next camp at Lampesari, I was in line to get belted with a whip and that shirt on my back captured the whip's bite. I was not altogether spared however, because the dissatisfaction of whipping cloth forced my torturer to shift to my bare legs.

I told my mother I was going to visit the woman and collect my shirt. Even in the camp my mother had total control of us and we had to tell her at all times where we were going. She looked at me with some unease. "Beware son, she is alone." Her warning was unnecessary I thought as I made my way to her house. To my adolescent mind, the woman was old, at least in her thirties. When I arrived I noticed that apart from her, the house was empty. All the inhabitants, like the rest of the street, had been trafficked out onto the next camp, street by street. Why she did not join them I had no idea and was too afraid to ask.

I noticed that instead of her usual shorts, she was wearing a skirt, a flowery one which accentuated her legs and bottom. And as she sashayed away from me into the next room to get the shirt, my little toughy ascended into heaven. She called me to help her find it and so I did, with hands in my pockets, trying to keep the little bastard down. She was on hands and knees under the bed requesting I join her in the hunt. I bent down, slid under and found myself pressed into her body as her wet mouth clamped itself into my mouth. Still clinging tightly, she pushed me out from under the bed, turned me over onto my back, placed her hands on my wet, spotted shorts, rubbing me gently until I squirted joy into my strides. Whilst this was going on, her free hand had pulled up her skirt and her fingers had moved her clitoris to heaven, there to join my toughy.

After a few minutes she left and returned almost instantly with the shirt and a pair of her husband's shorts to replace my wet ones. They were of almost identical colour and fitted me well— certain, I thought, to fool my mother. She helped me dress, walked me to the gate and gave me a long, lingering kiss on the lips.

I shook all the way home and was met by my mother with her accusing eyes and escaped to the bathroom, not merely to avoid having to answer any questions but also to jerk myself into a long, drawn out sigh, a child playing adult games. That night, my nightly vigil with an assortment of heroes—Tom Mix, Buck Rogers, Beau Geste—was introduced to a new element. It began with the usual roaming of the corridors of my imagination, on our fine horses performing all sorts of heroic feats but thenceforth I was rewarded at the end with the arms and body of some beautiful angel whom I had rescued from utter distress.

Some nights my heroes abandoned me and I would ponder my situation, trying to figure out who was to blame. Was it those in charge who neglected to tell us the truth, who kept the enemy hidden from us until it was too late and who kept us ignorant of the superior power of those forces? Or was it our ill-equipped army of ragtag soldiers reluctant to fight, or the British soldiers, mostly older men who fought perfunctorily, convinced that barbed wire surrounds would be their future.

I thought about the day I first spotted the tanks in Wilhemina Street, the little flag of red ball sitting on a white base, the soldiers sitting on top with their dark, slit eyes and their barking voices, the tramping of the infantry behind the tanks, the samurai swords hanging nonchalantly at the side of the green-clothed officers. The soldiers of death marched into my hitherto secure world and destroyed in one fell swoop all myths which had surrounded us. For a while we hoped for salvation but when the sky became flecked with planes, hurricanes and zeroes, leaving Singosari with our defence forces, our children's hearts realised that Gary Cooper was not going to come riding on a white horse, nothing was going to happen but that which would overtake us and steal our childhood.

Excerpt from Jose de Koster's autobiography

An exhibition of the paintings of Jose de Koster will be held at NOLAN Gallery in Katoomba from 10 February 2018

In 2004, Jose de Koster participated with other wellknown Blue Mountains artists in an exhibition at the Penrith Regional Gallery and The Lewers Bequest in Emu Plains, entitled *Land Out Of Time —The Blue Mountains Landscape Then and Now*. This is what Jose wrote for the catalogue about his rendition of the famous waterfall at Govett's Leap in Blackheath, his home town.

Govett's Leap ... how often have I been there, seeking the ghoists of the past and the smell of the new. Plastic floating above the trees, anger in the teeth of the rocks, wet moss silently eyeing me.

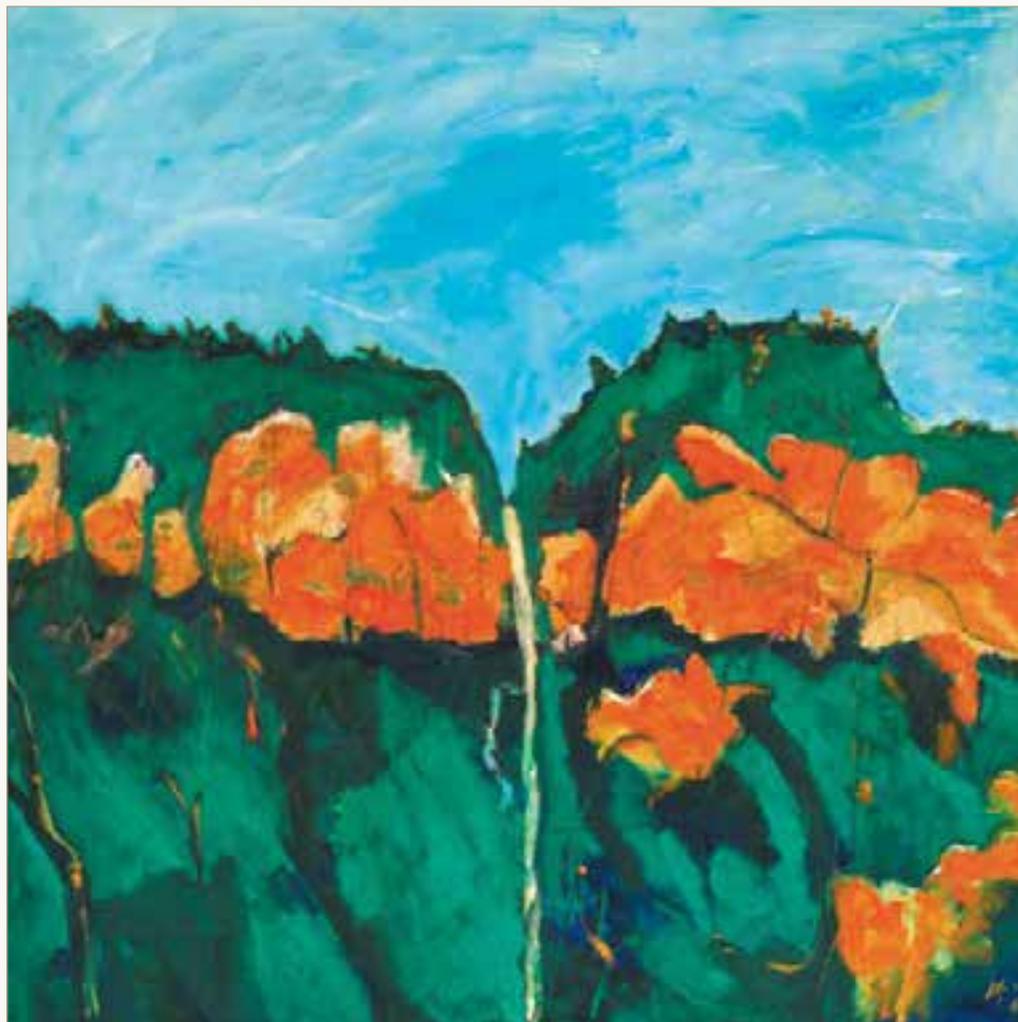
If anyone had told me that my homeland would be here, looking into the rocks, trees and seeing parrots glide past chased by currawongs, I would have laughed, having been born in the jungle of Sumatra of Dutch origin. I even became a Kiwi during my migrating years. Then 38 years ago ...

The Leap is under my gaze and shadows fall from me, like a graceful waterfall. Oranges hit my eyes, deep greens and blues ... the echo of my soul.

So I had to paint it again, for a show I was told. OK. All those years though accumulate styles of thought and seeing AND painting those thoughts, feelings and echoes of myself.

Nothing is the same. Each time something adds to what was. A new life. I even ran up the path for a short film (I am also an actor). Out of breath and with pain in the chest, but still, I knew the way of the early people here. Nothing is easy. My body felt as if the angels of hell were tearing it apart. Bloody Lucifer himself trying to wrest the brushes out of my hand, trying to beat the Gods of time immemorial. For there, deep in the shadows of the Leap, the path to Sydney so to speak, the voices of time shout back at me.

When I am alone there, waiting for the night for instance, I see better the colours needed to paint this place. A painting is the straightforward soul of the moment it is created. In my hand the pen and pencils are always busy. And when the canvas and I meet, white, staring at this heaving mess of passionate dreams. Well everything happens. Hey! you are looking at it... so why ask me to write it all down! Now I wait...



Opposite page:
Jose de Koster,
Aurora
This page:
Jose de Koster,
Govett's Leap
According to Me,
2003, acrylic on
canvas