

# **PART ONE**

# 1

## **Where are these cunts?**

Too hot, bro,  
                    too fucken long without rain.  
Two by two they troop in,  
                    the madness of summer in the brain.

In the dying light,  
the crowd looks like hundreds of bobbling balloons,  
waiting to be unfastened.

                    Sweating tinnies and foreheads –  
                    sadcunts and sorrowdrowners the lot of them.

I stand up,  
six-foot-two and shining,  
                    yawn,  
twist side to side on my hinges  
                    and survey the crowd.

It's not like the boys to be late,  
especially on a day like today.

Summer,  
the deepest season,  
throbbing with danger and promise,  
every scallywag, seedthief and skatepark  
wrapped up in a white hot skin.

**And here come the dogs . . .**

Strange, smiling creatures,  
lean-flanked and  
ready to race.

An old bloke turns around and grins  
with opalised eyes.

'Nothing like the ole dishlickers, eh?'

I smile and flick a fly from my knuckle.

'Fuck noath.'

The dogs' barks detonate across the track.

The trainers are gruff people,  
but now they coo to the hounds,  
straightening their racing silks,  
crouching to check and bend their ankles.

(one says a prayer and kisses  
his dog on its narrow head)

A dry wind scythes across  
the stands and I reach up  
to keep my hat on.

‘Bushfire weather, ay?’

The old timer is right.

The Town is a powderkeg,  
a perfect altar for a bushfire –  
the sole god of a combustible summer.

### **B-Boy Fresh**

But I’m crisp tee fresh –  
black on black, snapback,  
toothbrush on sneaker,  
throwback fresh.

But fark me dead,  
the joints and muscles ache nowadays.

Sign of the times, ay?

I look at the old timer  
and immediately touch the  
muscles under my shirt  
just to make sure.

I grin –  
Solomon Amosa, you vain, vain bastard.

## The big news

Jimmy ain't hard to spot in a crowd.

With all the grace of jangling keys,  
my half-brother lurches  
through the mass of drinkers and gamblers,  
sharp Adam's apple visible even from here.  
His eyes cut left to right,  
paranoid and grim.  
Walking behind him is Aleks,  
smiling and nodding at people that he passes.

What a crew –  
a Samoan, a Maco and my half-brother, a *something*.

The only ethnics at the dog races.

When Jimmy sits down I smack him  
across the back of the head,  
harder than I mean to.  
'Oi, what took you so fucken long?' I say, taking my cap off and passing my hand over my dreds.  
'I had shit to do, bra.'  
Aleks looks away and checks his bet,  
already bored of the bickering.  
'Like what?'  
'I don't fucken have to tell you everything, do I? Jesus.'  
Jimmy looks like he's gonna say something else  
but instead he conjures two ciggies from behind his ear,  
lights one and passes the other to me.  
We smoke for a minute  
and listen to the announcements.

‘Conditions are ideal tonight, ladies and gentlemen.  
We have a perfect track for racing.  
Good luck and good punting –  
may the racing gods be in your favour.’

Jimmy ashes his durry  
and then looks sidelong at me,  
lips expanding into a frog-like grin.  
‘Oi, guess what?’  
I’m watching some lads on a stag’s night stumble along.  
They’re dressed in a bright-yellow uniform, wearing wigs.  
Jimmy and Aleks look at each other and grin.  
    They’re already wasted,  
    sour bourbon vapours practically hissing off them.

‘What?’

Jimmy clears his throat, then announces, ‘Sin One’s gonna do a come-back show. With the DJ Exit on the decks.’  
My eyes cut back. ‘Sin One? You serious?’  
‘He’s moved back, brother,’ nods Aleks.  
I blow out smoke. ‘Ohh, man. When?’  
‘After Chrissie.’

Sin One is almost universally recognised  
in the underground  
    as the greatest rapper Australia has produced –  
    a prophet, nah, a god.

And he comes from our Town.

Can you imagine how fucken proud we are?

## Drinks

When I bring back the tinnies,  
Aleks and Jimmy are embroiled in an age-old argument –  
who the best Australian MC is.

I take a black marker from my pocket  
and begin to draw on a five-dollar note as I listen.  
Jimmy, who loves lists,  
reminds us yet again of the five main criteria  
you judge an MC by.

- 1) Flow: how do they ride, bounce off, play with, sound on a beat?
- 2) Lyrics: how do they play with words, use metaphors, create memorable images, tell stories?
- 3) Voice: were they naturally gifted with a voice that just *cuts through* and gives you shivers, that booms or rasps or honeys?
- 4) Consistency: have they produced quality work over an extended period of time?
- 5) Live show: can they rock the fuck out of a crowd of people, big or small?

Added to this are more nebulous criteria based on online rumours,  
freestyle abilities, face-to-face encounters and gut feelings.

Jimmy and Aleks prefer grimier, old school Melbourne stuff,  
samples and dusty loops.

I'm more into synths and instruments,  
newer, smoother Sydney shit.

'All right, then. Top five best MCs,' says Jimmy, who reels off his list immediately. 'Brad Strut, Trem, Geko, Lazy Grey, Bias B.'  
Aleks, too, is ready. 'Trem, Strut, Pegz, Delta, Vents.'

‘Hm. Fucken hard one.’ I think for a second. ‘All right, um . . . Solo, Mantra, Suffa, Tuka, Hau, Joelistics . . . That new Briggs shit is heavy, too. And that dude One Sixth from Melbourne.’

‘I said top five, bro,’ snaps Jimmy.

‘Oi, relax.’

‘Storytelling, mate, *lyrics*, that’s what it’s about,’ announces Jimmy.

‘Yeah, yeah, you always say that. Then Solo from Horrorshow or Mantra’s number one,’ I say. ‘Deep shit. Mad flows, too.’

Aleks and Jimmy shake their heads in unison. ‘Nah, that shit’s gay as, always singing and shit. That’s not true school. Plus, Solo looks like a tennis instructor,’ says Jimmy.

‘You’re one to talk, you preppy cunt! You’re stuck in the nineties, bro. Music moves on,’ I say.

‘Now, Trem. That’s an MC. Tells it how it is – graff, crime, darkness. Voice is like a fucken . . . like a diamond cutter,’ says Aleks. ‘Strut too – apocalyptic.’

‘You can’t dance to it, but,’ I counter. ‘That shit’s too serious for me. When it started, hip hop was about getting a party goin’. Sydney shit does that better.’

Jimmy is getting heated. ‘Sydney shit is weird. Their accents sound American. They say “days” like “deez” and “mic” like “mark”. Hate that.’

We laugh.

‘What about a chick?’ I venture. ‘None of us even put one in there.’

‘*Tsk*. Ya PC cunt. Been hanging with that femmo girlfriend of yours too much. When chicks rap, I just don’t *feel* it.’

‘What ’bout Lauryn Hill? Jean Grae?’

‘Aussies, I mean’

‘Layla. Class A.’

The boys shrug. As Aleks leans forward, a blue bead swings on a leather strap around his neck. ‘The Hoods sold more than anyone else,’ he says.

‘Fuck sales. It’s not about sales; it’s about impact and the quality. If you use that argument, you could say Bliss n Eso are more important than Def Wish Cast.’

‘Or Vanilla Ice is better than Kool G Rap.’

Jimmy turns his glittering eyes on me. ‘Those private school boys must’ve taught you about hip hop, ay. That’s why you’re not into the hard shit.’

Cunt.

The private school thing is always Jimmy’s trump card,  
no matter what the argument,  
and it always works.

Aleks frowns.

‘Fuck . . . I went for basketball, you know that.’ I say, lamely. Then I return to the name that kicked off the debate – ‘Sin One. *Orphan Slang. Fire and Redemption.*’

The others nod.

‘Yeah, goes without saying. Should be top of every list. Pity it’s been so long since he released an album,’ says Aleks regretfully.

I look at the five-buck note –  
Queen Elizabeth now has a crown of thorns  
and a timebomb on her shoulder.

‘You seen our dog yet?’ asks Aleks.

## **Mercury Fire**

Tonight is Mercury Fire’s last race.



he has that pirouette of smoke  
in his eyes.

At age five he moved here from Macedonia  
and despite limited English  
quickly established himself  
as king of the kids  
with his fast, big fists.

At age thirteen he knocked out an English teacher  
who tried to make him  
spell his name with an 'x',  
not a 'ks'.

It was around this time he found  
another use for his hands.

One day, when a graff crew from Sydney  
painted a wildstyle piece under the bridge  
over the river,  
Aleks discovered a love  
to replace the sweet science

(though if lessons needed to be taught,  
cunts needed to learn).

From then on it was burners/  
boltcutters/  
blackbooks  
and  
guerilla expeditions to Bunnings  
to rack paint cans/

And don't forget  
that rush that makes your dick hard.

## The Old Timer

‘When I was in England,  
I visited Old TRAFFORD,  
the home of MANCHESTER UNITED.’

‘We can hear you, mate –  
we’re right here.’

The old timer’s been talking frog shit for nearly  
fifteen minutes now.

Sad bastard –  
desiccated look of a dedicated drinker.  
Threads from a cheap Western –  
ten-gallon hat, bolo tie,  
spurs on boots.

‘Johnny No-Cash,’ says Aleks in my ear.

I stifle a smile.

‘The coach told me I had the BEST LEFT BOOT  
he had ever seen.’

Bullshit artists  
come a dime a dozen in this town –

it takes one to know one, ay?

## **A message from Georgie**

*Good afternoon, beautiful boy.  
In boring lecture having naughty thoughts about u.  
Can't wait 2 c u 2nite. Luv, Porge x*

Love?

I pocket the phone.

When's this race gonna start?

## **A little something to rev things up**

I wipe the top of the cistern  
and bring up my hand –  
there's white powder on my palm.

I love doing that.

It's almost like I've busted someone in the act.

Aleks takes out a marker  
and writes his tag on the cubicle wall  
with a flourish.

## **JAKEL**

Meanwhile, Jimmy racks up  
three lines  
with a seasoned hand  
and his keycard.

My brother Jimmy, who could never

even handle his beer back in the day.

Aleks does a line and blinks.

‘Dearo fucken me! This is good shit, bro. Aryan white.’

I roll up the drawn-on five-buck note  
and Hoover a line.

The cocaine hits immediately –  
a cold zoom in the guts,  
a perfectly timed tackle.

I backflip  
into a glacial crevasse.

## **The track**

The track smoulders.

Thick lights shine down  
holding within them insects  
and motes of dust.

The dogs’ feet articulate  
on the soil of the holding pen.  
In part dieted on honey, vegetable oil and eggs,  
their coats glow.

Tinny announcements over the loudspeakers.

The trainers are hand slipping the dogs now,  
one hand on the collar  
the other arm hooked at the base of

their undercarriages  
shuffling them forward into the traps.

Like everyone else,  
we riffle and check our betslips.

In the stands,  
we can hear the dogs' high-pitched  
whimpers and yelps  
as they scrape in the traps.

We begin to cheer.

### **The race**

Bang goes the gun,  
zoom goes the artificial rabbit,  
off go the hounds  
like water out a  
sluice.

They are a rumbling mass at first  
but as they round the corner  
they separate into surreal, spear-headed things  
that lope and arch through the air –  
feet, dust, sound.

The crowd rises  
and we do too,  
ten-feet tall and charged with powder,  
seeing the race in jittering frames.

Here comes Mercury Fire!

A grey streak of  
ribs/  
sinew-lashed muscle/  
light.

Right down the straight  
he looks like a young dog again,  
propelled by furious, otherworldly energy.

He's neck and neck for the lead with  
two black hounds,  
                        loping forward, urging/  
                        and we're screaming, screaming/  
'Come on, boy. COME ON!'  
and Mercury Fire is straining onwards  
every muscle working for the one goal,  
courage and conviction in the blood,  
launching over the track for the last time.

He comes in third.

I realise that I've been holding my breath  
the whole race.

### **What happens to a racing dog past its prime?**

Jimmy says they find them homes  
where they get retrained as house pets.

Aleks says he's heard of a bloke  
in Wollongong who's killed over five thousand  
healthy hounds with a captive bolt gun  
once they lose speed.

I say they get their ears cut off  
(cos of the ID tattoo)  
then let go in the bush  
cos owners don't have the heart to kill them.

## **Jimmy**

Jimmy is arguing with me about money again.

'Jimmy, it's five fucken bucks, mate. I'll pay ya back tomorrow.'

'That's what you always say.'

Jimmy –  
catfood-hearted,  
jelly-spined motherfucker.  
Cheap-deodorant, call-centre Jimmy.  
No good with his fists  
but uses rumours like napalm.

He's family but,  
so what the fuck can you do?

## **Outside the racecourse**

Eyes tick like a stopwatch/  
People head home or out/  
A cop car smears by/  
Then a Ninja Turtle-green Supra  
with two chicks hanging from one window/  
techno pumping/  
'Ay, boys, show us where ya piss from!'/

We're cracking up  
and our middle fingers go straight in the air/

This is good shit/

'Oi, I'm tilted.'

'Me too.'

I'm trying to keep it together but  
Jimmy and Aleks not so much.  
Chewing like mastodons,  
they must've taken pills, too,  
the sly cunts.

People are milling around the entrance.  
The old timer is rabbiting on to someone  
and we swerve to avoid him.

'... the best left boot he'd EVER seen.'

## **Gladys**

I chase her down in the carpark.

Red, wary face,  
god-awful turquoise windcheater  
and a cockney accent.

But there's something about the old duck  
that chokes me up.

I introduce myself,

squat down and pat Mercury Fire.

‘He did good, yeah? Especially for his last race.  
I trained him since he was a pup,’ she says.

Mercury Fire studies me with  
his one good eye, grinning and panting.

‘I know, I know. Me and my mates have  
been watching him race for the last year.  
The best there was, seriously. I mean is. Was.’

I’m talking too fast. Slow your roll, Solomon.

She’s looking away now –  
‘Yeh. Probably gonna send him to a new home, or . . .  
I’m moving back to England in a few weeks.’

Why at that age? Are those tears?

She keeps talking –  
‘They like it, you know. The dogs. They like racing.  
People reckon it’s cruel but we treat em better  
than most owners treat their dogs.’

She’s looking directly at me now.  
I wonder if she can tell I’m out of it  
but then she looks past me.

I shake her hand awkwardly. ‘Best of luck, ay.’

‘Yer, you too.’

She smiles and I smile back.

'Hey, can I ask you something?' I say.

## **A phone call**

Georgie's busting my balls  
and it's ruining my high.

'It's cruel, Solomon.  
They exploit those poor animals.'

Hasn't she got something better to do?  
I thought she was studying.

'Can we talk about this later? Please.'

I hear Jimmy behind me  
singing 'My Cherie Amour'  
like Stevie Wonder.

I throw a crushed tinnie at him.

'I'll be back at yours a bit later, all right, babe?  
Don't wait up for me.'

## **The cypher**

On the way to get chips and gravy  
we see a cypher –  
a circle of youngsters rapping.  
Seven kids, seven heads bobbing,  
some of them sipping on longies  
as they wait for their turn to rap.

The lad beatboxing is a Koori fulla –  
I used to play ball with his older brother.  
He's supplying a steady, boombap beat.

A few of them nod at us  
and we observe from outside the circle.

I always thought that, from above,  
the circle of heads  
would look like bullets loaded in a chamber,  
each MC ready with his percussive, weaponised voice,  
some rapid fire,  
some jamming.

A pretty brunette is up first.  
She's got a dope flow  
but it's obviously a written verse.  
Next is an African cat  
who's using an American accent –  
we all wince.  
Someone else takes over the beatboxing  
and the Koori fulla starts freestyling,  
clowning on people in the circle.  
He's a cocky cunt, just like his bro.  
His flow is a bit off  
but his punchlines are hitting  
and soon we're all laughing.

I make a mental note  
to keep an eye out for him.

I look up and for a second  
I swear I can see skulls swinging

from the trees above us  
but then I realise it's a trick of the light.

Jimmy and I step forward  
and rap for a bit  
but we're rusty.  
All it takes is a week off  
to lose the edge.

Plus neither of us were ever MCs.

But it's part of the game –  
gotta give it a go.

Afterwards, we smoke a joint with the youngsters.

'You lads aren't going out tonight? Heaps going on, uce.'

The Koori lad and the brunette are arm in arm  
and he says, 'Nah, brus. Can't get in anywhere, ay.'

The brunette pipes up, 'Would rather be doin this anyway.'

We laugh.

'True.'

### **Fights are freight trains**

You can see em coming a mile off,  
and if not,  
make em happen.



and Aleks is grimacing as he punches  
and the methhead is shrieking like a berserker now  
and some of our punches are landing on each other  
and one of us is yelling same team, same team  
and Jimmy is on his feet unsteadily  
smiling eagerly,  
and he says 'white cunt' but we all know  
it's not about that well it may be  
and he starts to kick the shardhead in his face  
but that's not cool so Aleks edges back and is shaking his great head  
and the chick is screaming  
the cops are on their way fuckheads  
so we wrestle Jimmy out the door  
and into the early morning darkness.

### **What's got into him?**

These swings are too small for us.

Aleks is throwing tanbark into the dark –  
he hasn't said a word since the fight.

I roll a joint and pass it round,  
Pete Rock playing from my iPhone.

Jimmy won't shut the fuck up  
about the fight,  
reliving it over and over,  
as he always does.

Without warning, Aleks stands up,  
walks to Jimmy and stops in front of him,  
faces centimetres apart.

Jimmy looks confused at first  
then stares back,  
face hardening.

Aleks searches Jimmy's face,  
holding him squarely with his stare,  
breathing, searching.

'I'm off, brother.'

Jimmy starts after him but I grab his forearm.

'Leave him alone, bro. Jimmy. James, leave him alone,' I say.

Aleks is now a slash of ink,  
darkening into the crosshatch of trees.

Jimmy sits back down –  
'What's got into him?'

### **Wish we had a white person with us**

Ten empty cabs have passed us by.

### **The cabbie**

His breath smells of cardamom tea  
and a twelve-hour shift.

He eyes us warily –  
'If you need to vomit you tell me, yeah? I'll pull over.'

‘Nah, nah. No worries. We’re big boys, mate.’

There is a diamond-shaped,  
gold-tasselled passage from the Qur’an  
hanging from the rear-view mirror.

The cabbie smiles tightly. ‘Big night?’

‘Bro, you don’t know the half of it. Fucken hektikkk.  
Ay. AY! Turn this song up!’ slurs Jimmy.

‘Where you from, mate?’ I say.

‘Here.’

‘Nah, nah, I mean originally.’

‘ . . . Pakistan.’

‘*Assalamu-alaikum*, brother.’ The words sound strange coming out of  
my mouth.

His eyes, framed by the rear-view mirror, widen with surprise.

‘*Wa-alaikum salam*. You Muslim?’

‘Yeah, once. Um, I mean, yeah.’

‘His name was Sulaiman,’ Jimmy crows. ‘Now it’s Solomon again.’

‘Sulaiman? Ah, a good name. A wise man.’ The man nods.

I wind down the window  
and blow my breath out subtly,  
hoping he won’t smell the alcohol.

Too late, probably.

When I get out at Georgie's college,  
I shake the cabbie's hand –  
*'Assalamu-alaikum.'*

He turns to smile  
and I see for the first time  
the right side of his face is  
scabbed and bruised.

*'Wa-alaikum salam.'*

### **Drunk sex**

The arch of her foot  
on my teeth,  
her thighs move apart.  
Erykah Badu's voice curls  
around us.

The heat unbearable.

'Fuck.'

One of her heels is digging  
into my flank  
and in a shudder of moonlight,  
I realise she has cut her hair  
into an ashen wedge  
She holds my face close,  
and I try to smile

but her presence is crushing,  
it almost makes me scream.

Instead I keep moving,  
deep, shallow, deep, shallow,  
and I'm relieved when she closes her eyes.

I watch her eyelids,  
and notice for the first time a crooked lower tooth.

Afterwards,  
watching a dreamcatcher spin on the ceiling,  
my skin sticking to hers,  
I say, 'I bought a dog tonight.'

'A dog?'

'Yeh. A greyhound.'

She pauses before laughing uncertainly  
and kissing me.

'You mad bastard. You've got nowhere to keep it.'

### **A dream about Georgie**

I'm the only passenger on a plane –  
the sky is the colour of Turkish delight  
or suicide bathwater.

Shirtless,  
tattoos alive, swarming,  
jostling down my forearms.

There's a gin and juice on the tray –  
strong.

I hear a sound  
akin to birds chirping,  
but can't tell where it's coming from.

Georgie appears –  
stepping down the aisle solemnly,  
as if at the head of a procession,  
carrying something heavy and square.  
She's wearing weighted pendants in her lobes  
and a headdress of feather flowers.

She looks beautiful and sad.

The plane starts its descent.

I can see rivers, lakes and dams,  
holding within them braided veins of light.  
The land looks both rich and barren.

The plane is low now, about to land.

In a glance I observe an extraordinary scene  
in Munro Park.

A man is kneeling on the kick-off line with  
his arms behind him.

Another man is standing close, one arm outstretched,  
and a sudden flash leaps from his hand.

The kneeling man jumps backwards  
and lies with his arms outflung as if crucified.

It takes a second to see this.

I try to scream to Georgie  
but I make no sound  
and I see that I am tied to the seat  
and can't move so I bang  
my fists on the tray table.

The gin and juice bounces in one motion  
all over my lap and the smell of it becomes intense,  
more like diesel than liquor.

My hands are shaking  
and I stare at them for a long time.

When I look up  
I'm standing outside the airport.  
There's nobody else  
and it's cold.

Eventually a cab pulls up.  
The Pakistani driver opens the door.  
He smiles  
and I see that his mouth is full of gold teeth,  
his scabs gone.  
The drive isn't long into town  
and when we approach Munro Park,  
I tap him on the shoulder.

I walk to the centre of the rugby field.  
There is no body, no blood.  
Just a briefcase lying on the cold soil.

I open it  
and see that it's full of colourful birds of song –  
nightingales, swallows, babblers.

They are all dead.