Somehow it seems fitting to turn 30 in Canberra. It’s not the town one would choose to turn 18 or 21 in. Such occasions mark a triumphant assertion of adulthood which only makes sense when one takes youth for granted. They are about fun, full undeniable fun. They require cities dedicated to pleasure, or at least where one can get properly intoxicated, drive down freeways absolutely ripped and lose oneself in a vibrant crowd. But 30 is to 21 what superannuation is to any notion of anarchy.

30 marks the end of youth with an unarguable whimper. Government deems that youth ends at 26. But 26 really blends into the middle 20s quite unobtrusively. I thought I was 25 or so until I suddenly saw the three in 30 reaching out like a fist punching me. Or perhaps the three denotes the embryonic lines at the corners of my eyes, like the wings of the crow whose feet may soon caress the skin there.

The rituals of ageing have taken on a new rigour since the big three-oh loomed like a wrinkly unwelcome siren calling me towards the rocks of senility. What used to be a random purchase of moisturiser and miracle tonics has become more calculated. I wrinkle my brow considering which is the most effective de-wrinkler advertised among the flawless skins of the 18year-olds in Vogue. Exercise is approached as a necessity, not as a joy.

Now some readers may well be muttering about patriarchal oppression and the commodification of the female body, and the inability of women to display their (our) age openly in this society. Apart from pointing out to such readers that muttering causes unattractive lines around the mouth (not unlike the pursed vertical lines detectable on smokers’ skin) I would simply say that the intellectual explanation of anxiety bears very little relation to the lived experience of same. You can’t wish away the desire to stay young, or dissolve inequality like a nasty stain with the Omo of feminist awareness. There’s no neutral ground one can take up in terms of age. You either revel in it or deny it, or try to develop a way of embracing it stylishly, without looking desperate.

I will never forget the comment of a 50 (or so) year-old woman in the waiting room of a plastic surgeon in Toorak, where I, at 26, found myself having a small blemish removed from my back. She ran her eyes over my face, and down my body before returning to the aforementioned magazine in its French edition. After flicking through a few pages she turned to her equally pinched face friend and said “Breasts seem to be back. I’ll have to get them done next.” The “them” made my flesh crawl then, as now, at the idea of going under the knife for aesthetic purposes. And yet, what is an aesthetic purpose? A culture that draws a line between the intellect and the body and places women on the side of the carnal makes such an industry all but inevitable.

But let us leave the surgical strike of Toorak for the spreading hips of Canberra. Many would applaud the fact that there are very few images of women on billboards in the ACT. Advertising is all but absent. So, unfortunately, is any notion of the life of the body as a cause of celebration in itself. People who accept Canberra’s elevation of work above pleasure, tend to spread into their offices, to leave off concern about their physical life.

The fatness of the ACT tends to be a complacent stodgy fatness, rather than a revelling excessive fatness. It is mirrored by the obsessive jogging thinness of other public servants who slot exercise in as part of a busy day, to keep the body machine functioning smoothly. Respectable Canberra is the most body-hating place in Australia (how this ties in—or up—with the X-rated video industry is a question worthy of further study). It is perhaps because of my desire to define myself against the comfortable fat of Canberra that I enter my 30s 30 kilos lighter than I was at 28. Breasts, it seems are back.

And when I move back to Melbourne, a place where one can live on good food, get a good massage of the decent variety and sit in a cafe where people care how they look (men and women both), then perhaps I’ll find my youth hidden in the coffee, rising like steam from the cup, flexing muscles and wit. Canberra’s anti-body, anti-pleasure ethos has made Melbourne seem like the epitome of indulgence, a lady lying back on an embroidered cushion of desire. And, if I examine her closely, perhaps she isn’t so young, but just given over to pleasure and the quest for sensation, rather than the creation of policy, paper and permanence.

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