



**LOST AND
GONE AWAY**

LYNN JENNER

The ring story
The panorama machine
Point Last Seen
I ring the bell anyway

More than a year ago a friend, who speaks five languages and reads several more, told me it would not be possible to write about the Holocaust from New Zealand. There's so little to say here, she said. You should go to Europe. But this is where I am, I said. That is the problem. This is where I am from, this is who I am, and this is where I am.

Between 2010 and 2014 Lynn Jenner made several related emotional and intellectual investigations. Lost and Gone Away is the record of these: a fascinating, ambitious hybrid text of memoir, essays, prose poems and poetry that becomes a four-part exploration of loss.

Mostly I find books and facts in my excavations. Books are my listening and viewing devices, my undersea cables, my hearing aids, my best friends in troubled times and my weapon of choice. I am not easily cowed by their origins or their methods, even when these are august. I look them straight in the eye and take them on if I think they are wrong and I mess about with them quite a bit. . . . Facts make astounding patterns when placed side by side, and are, in addition, much less self-conscious than anything writers imagine. Facts reek of human purposes. . . . Sometimes, rising up from a pile of facts or a book, and hovering over it, is something I think of as a moment of knowledge.

In the first section's gripping narrative, Jenner traverses a small but resonant loss during the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake. The second section, the collage-like 'The panorama machine', samples and sifts through the lost and recovered detritus of the ancient world in poems, prose and prose poems. The considerations of 'lostness' deepen as the book goes on: in its third section radiating its attention out from that epicentre of loss, the Point Last Seen, from which all searches begin; and then – quietly, finally, devastatingly – exploring in the fourth section, 'I ring the bell anyway', how one might think and write about the Holocaust, from far away.

The cumulative result is a fresh, sobering and searching intellectual journey – a tremendously powerful work of creative nonfiction.



Lynn Jenner's first book, [Dear Sweet Harry](#) – 'the autobiography of an obsession' – won the NZSA Jessie Mackay Award for Best First Book of Poetry. Her work has been widely published in the literary journals, here and overseas, including Carcanet's [Oxford Poets: An Anthology](#), 2013. Jenner was awarded a PhD in 2013 for the thesis upon which this book is based.

Contents

ONE	The ring story	I
TWO	The panorama machine	19
	<i>A boy called Joseph · As a child · 1938 · Everyday life · A list of all the books · Freud · Walter Benjamin's dream · The primeval word was a shimmering aura · Missing people · Sappho · Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt · the crocodile wrapped in words · LP67 · Huntley & Palmers biscuit tins · Mysteries and speculations · reconstructions · Yabrzeit · The poem about the candle · The muttering poem · Tree of Codes · The Street of Crocodiles · A warning · A disease of the eyes · Now again, grasses wave · Keas call for me · I'm not sure what to call what I have done · six degrees of freedom · The structure of human activity · Secondhand Sureshots · Everyone knows · It's only a dead tree · LP67 · Drohobyč · We bear the voice of an older man · The facts · Lost Art · October 2013</i>	
THREE	Point Last Seen	93
FOUR	I ring the bell anyway	137
	<i>Thinking about waves · Rats uncounted · Looking back from the Island · Hair · Time is the most artificial of human inventions · Speaking for those who were silenced · Stephen Schpielberg · Maps and guides · Belonging to the tribe · Everyone needs a handbag · Anglo-Celtic eyes · Home · A tchemodan · If only it were possible, I would get into the photo · More awkwardness · Abe's stories · This Crazy Thing a Life · For an hour or two I am a witness for the witness · Excuse me Madam · The facts · The hole · The Holocaust Gallery at the Auckland War Memorial Museum · A cake and a budgie · Do come to the City Hotel · I ring the bell anyway · How, exactly, will that happen? · Warning · The setting sun · A particular kind of conversation · The wind blows</i>	
	Acknowledgements	277

Christchurch, 29 April 2011

Of course, there are rumours that there has been much more looting in the Red Zone than is being officially admitted, the lawyer in Christchurch said when I phoned him about my mother's diamond ring, worth as much as a new European car, and last seen in a jeweller's shop in Cashel Mall five days before the earthquake.

Then there was a silence.

There are rumours that it is the soldiers, he said.

Another silence.

There's such a lot of property in there at the moment and no one really knows who owns it, he said. Most people have turned out to be very honest, he said. But some haven't.

Realistically, I said, what do you think the chances are that my mother will get her ring back?

Nil, he said. You should make an insurance claim.

Sooo, I said, feeling free to speculate now that we had received our advice, what's to stop the jeweller from keeping the ring, not telling his insurance company he has it, and selling the stone in Amsterdam?

Nothing, the lawyer said. I think you should make a claim.

He didn't respond at all to my next suggestion that we could perhaps retain a member of a motorcycle gang to shake down the jeweller on our behalf.

After a long silence he said, Let me know if you have any trouble with the insurance company.

*

Sometime in the 1980s my mother had inherited this ring.

A canny Scottish farming woman, doing very well, thank you, was the first owner of the ring. She was a big woman with strong hands. *She* wore the ring to church on Christmas Day and when she went to the races.

She kept the ring wrapped in cotton wool, in a round ivory box with a carved lid inside her wooden jewellery box on her dressing table which had been brought out from Scotland. Huge dark and shiny furniture. Carved edges. Solid brass handles. When she died, at the end of a good long life, she left the ring, along with her maiden name, to her daughter, who, when she died, left the ring to my mother. The huge dark furniture and the Highland flower name went somewhere else.

Himself, as the farming woman called her husband, had inherited one farm, and then he had four, and although he grumbled about the wharfies and their revolutionary tendencies and the effect of wage increases on the cost of shipping, over the years he made pretty fair prices on his mutton and wool. In his fifties he became ill with a disease that caused

unbearable pain. A long sea voyage was prescribed. That and morphine. Knowing he would never work again, he gave the farms to his sons, who lost them almost immediately.

My mother wasn't the sort of woman to go to church on Christmas Day or to the races, but for the sake of a farmer's wife from Palmerston and a Highland flower name, which had by then been lost in a sea of men's names, she would sometimes wear the ring. Mostly the ring lived in the ivory box with the carved lid, inside her plain modern jewellery box on her plain modern dressing table, its value something of a worry.

With my father lying beside her in bed, big and warm like a bear, she didn't worry too much. But after he died she took the ring into town and, with a certain amount of formality, placed it in a safe deposit box at the Westpac Bank and there it stayed, in a cool dark box, for a decade or so. Late in 2010 my mother received a letter from her insurance company, saying that the valuation on her ring was out of date. The value of precious stones and gold had been rising rapidly, the letter said, and she should have the ring re-valued. What a waste of money having insurance, we said. Surely items in a safe deposit box in the vault of a bank could never be stolen. We thought this was quite funny. We did not consider that the building itself might become a pile of rubble.

My mother decided she should follow the advice of the insurance company and get the ring re-valued, but there was a problem. Over the years she had lost the key to the safe deposit box. Some months went by, during which we turned out every corner of her drawers and looked for the key to the

safe deposit box, but we never found it. We did find a number of keys for which we could find no locks, but that was no help.

17 February 2011

My mother paid a locksmith to come to the bank, had a new key made for the safe deposit box, opened it, took out the ring in its ivory box and put the box in her purse. Then she walked down a couple of streets to the jeweller in Cashel Mall. I'm not sure why she took the ring to this particular jeweller.

22 February 2011: Earthquake Day

Our main concern was her, but her main concern was her house, her cat, and the fact that there was no power, water or sewerage. I don't know when she first remembered the ring – it might have been after a few days. It is also possible that she remembered straight away and spoke about it, but for a few days I wasn't listening.

I do remember that we talked about it a few times during March. She would use a pragmatic tone. Oh yes, she would say, the ring is almost certainly gone, but it doesn't matter really. People have had such terrible things happen to them. Then we would discuss those terrible things.

As time went by our discussions changed a little. We would each say that the ring was lost. I would say it was lost in the same way as I might refer to the scent of honeysuckle in an English country garden before World War I. She would say the ring was *probably* lost. It took me a few weeks to notice

this difference, more time to realise that the person who should do something was me, and more time again to actually do anything.

In the meantime I attended a poetry reading at which a woman collapsed, took out a new mortgage and read books about sculptural representations of the Holocaust.

19 March 2011

I phoned the jeweller's shop in Cashel Mall. There was no reply. I pictured the phone ringing in the Red Zone. Perhaps there were other phones ringing? There was an email address in the jeweller's advertisement in the Yellow Pages, so I sent an email.

Hello

I don't know how things are with your people and your business – I hope you are all alive and unhurt, and that you might be reading emails. My mother had a diamond ring in being valued on Feb 22. She has asked me to enquire about the ring. We assume it would be in your safe and that you can't access it. Could you please help us with any information on the ring? It isn't as important as people, but it is of sentimental as well as financial value to my mother who is in her eighties. It would be great to hear from you

Lynn

My email came back to me with a message saying the jeweller's inbox was full.

TWO

The panorama machine

In 2008 I made a list of all the books I have worn in and worn out to see if they had anything in common. How lifeless my fetish objects looked in this list, but how each had shimmered and glowed in its day.

The list of worn-out books exists. That is a fact. This list is a guide to my life and, at the same time a record of it, following every turn and twist as closely as my bank statements. The journey marked out by all those books is strange, unintentionally amusing and informative in its own way but, in another way, as puzzling as if there had been no record made.

At the age of nine I went on record, saying to George Ashton, the principal of my primary school, that I wanted to 'be' an archaeologist. He went on record too, saying that I could 'be' anything I wanted. (These were, in their own austere way, generous times.) Looking back, I see that archaeology has always been my intent, although my activities went under different names at different times.

Mostly I find books and facts in my excavations. Books are my listening and viewing devices, my undersea cables, my hearing aids, my best friends in troubled times and my weapon of choice. I am not easily cowed by their origins or their methods, even when these are august. I look them straight in the eye and take them on if I think they are wrong and I mess about with them quite a bit.

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Sometimes, rising up from a pile of facts or a book, and hovering over it, is something I think of as a moment of knowledge. I could use a word like 'nugget' to signify the value of a particular piece of knowledge and hint at the exhausting labour of finding it. But since I do not perceive knowledge as having edges or substance you can test with your teeth, a word like 'nugget' would be misleading. A shape in ectoplasm would be closer. My knowledge lacks authority, I'm afraid.

THREE

Point last seen

I am surprised and a bit embarrassed to say that I have had more than one experience of someone seeming to disappear on my watch. In one of these situations I cannot say that I did anything useful. In the other, I called the police to ask for help, but only after someone told me to. Unquestionably these experiences have sharpened my interest in departures, searches and rescues.

Some of you will be in the middle of a missing person incident at this moment.

If you are in the middle of a missing person incident right now, the conventional advice would be to contact your local police. Depending a bit on your life-style, you may believe the police can help with your problem and that you are entitled to use this resource. Contacting the police is often a good decision too.

We are sorry. We know you are looking for more straightforward advice.

In the interests of perspective I will add here that more than ninety-five per cent of people who are reported missing are found within a few days. Most commonly, missing people are found in a place with special meaning for them, often a place of peace and rest, and most commonly, although not always, they return or are returned, unharmed.

Of the remaining five per cent who do not return unharmed, some will have disappeared without meaning to; the whole thing making sense later when the person is found and the circumstances revealed. The missing person may have fallen, injured his legs and feet, had severe stomach pain or been unable to move because of a heart attack, some of these circumstances more life-threatening than others. A person who takes himself away to commit suicide, however, is reasonably likely to die.

I did not know any of these things at the time I called the police.

We find it useful to think of eleven possible scenarios:

Avalanche

Criminal

Despondent

Evading

Investigative

Lost

Medical

Near Drowning

Overdue

Stranded

Trauma

We could list these situations in order of frequency of occurrence, and in some ways that might be more useful. But each country is different, so we have stuck with the alphabet as an organising principle.

Note: We are always considering possible new categories. Overestimation of one's physical or psychological capabilities is one we are looking at this year.

FOUR

I ring the bell anyway

More awkwardness

Last week I found that I was talking with a woman of my own age, from my own country, but whom I don't know very well, about the Holocaust. She started the conversation by asking about a trip that I was about to make. Her question added a small risk of social difficulty to our conversation, as questions do. I could have answered this question in a general or evasive way but I chose in that moment to describe my intention to visit museums in Australia and New Zealand which have Holocaust exhibits. I added a thousand times as much risk of social difficulty by choosing to say that, and it is a measure of this woman's character that she chose to join me in the conversation.

A conversation like this is always a bit uncomfortable. Sometimes silences occur in these conversations which no one knows how to end. One of these silences grew between me and a German friend in 2002 and it has not been broken yet.

Last week's conversation went quickly to a bus tour this woman had been on which included Auschwitz as part of the package. She told me about her visit to the Jewish Museum in Berlin, which reminded her of Te Papa, and where, she felt, the building overwhelmed the objects. She also told me her impressions of the stone fields of the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*. She told me about height as a carrier of meaning in this memorial. In some parts of this field of stone plinths you can see people walking around and in other parts, as the height of the plinths increases, the

people disappear. She believes that this capacity to make people disappear is the point of this monument.

After a few minutes of descriptions of heritage sites and monuments, she stopped talking and looked away, downwards and to the right. After just a minute, the woman raised her eyes and looked at me again.

‘I remember how shocked and surprised I was when I met a woman at work whose parents had both been . . . you know . . .’ she said.

That these people had been in concentration camps. That is what she didn’t say. When I first wrote about this, I felt confident that I knew what she meant. She meant, and all this would have rolled off my tongue without hesitation, that she grew up in a country where she felt almost completely safe. I interpreted her unfinished sentence as a measure of the gap between her life and that life.

*

If you asked my colleague, now, if New Zealand really was as safe as we felt when we were young, she would say yes, for her, it was. Her adult self will know that not everyone in that country at that time felt as safe as she did, but I bet that when she thinks of her own childhood, it is a place of lamb chops, vegetable gardens, school milk, school journals and worries a person could live with. This picture of our bountiful nutrition is not a figment of my imagination. Just this morning I read that in 1936, Sir James Parr, who had recently retired as New Zealand High Commissioner in London, told a League

of Nations meeting in Geneva that according to the latest year's figures, New Zealanders ate, per person, an average of 37.7 pounds of butter, and a staggering 236 pounds of meat. Coming just a few years after the Depression, this was a matter of pride. Italians at the same time ate 2–3 pounds of butter and 35 pounds of meat.⁷²

*

I thought that the shock and surprise this woman felt when faced, in Wellington, in 1978, with survivors of the Holocaust, was caused by that bounty of milk and meat and the blueness and roar of the Pacific Ocean, known to drown out almost all other sounds.

*

When this woman and I were children in the 1950s and 60s, the War, as people called it, already seemed like something that happened a long time ago. Our parents spoke of it, but they seemed to be living with us, in the present. If, like our family, you had no direct connection to the people who died, perhaps the news of what happened in Europe really would take thirty years to arrive in New Zealand? I wonder if, despite constant reminders from the Jewish community, the news will ever really arrive?⁷³

*

72 Vincent O'Sullivan, *Long Journey to the Border: A Life of John Mulgan*, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books Ltd, 2011, p. 169.

73 A non-Jewish reader told me recently that this question is too highly charged. I think Jewish readers would find it absolutely reasonable.

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