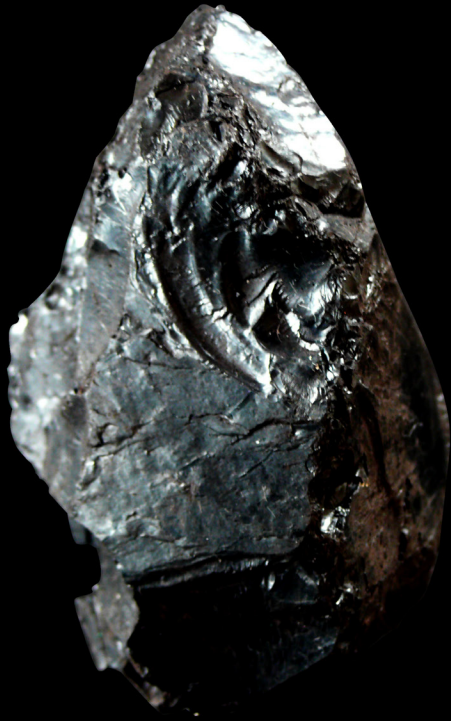
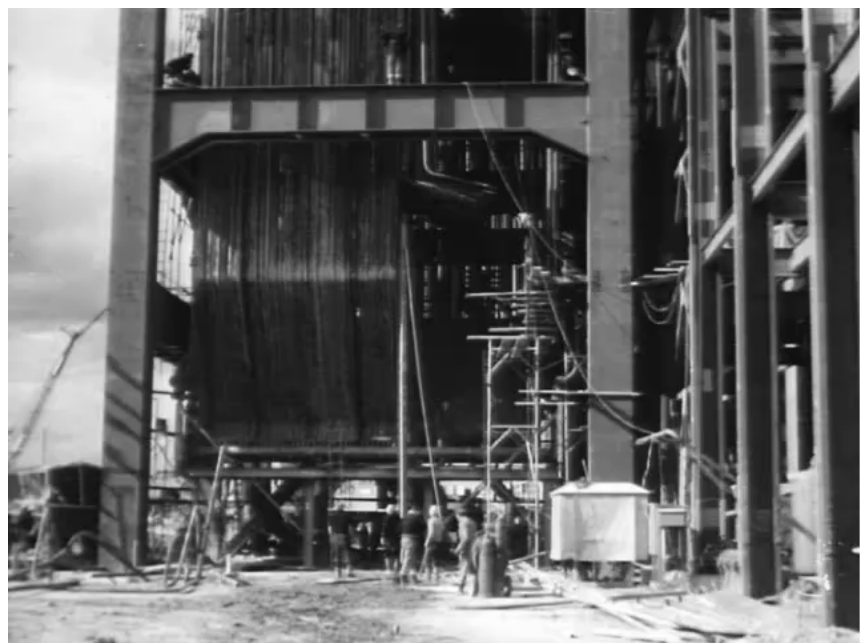


ancient air

















The gate to the road was open but the sign said *ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK* and *HIDDEN DANGERS*.

‘What could the hidden dangers be?’ I said.

The narrow road stretched as far as we could see. The warning sign was big, and as we drove past I realised it had bullet holes in the metal, which my mind read as fake joke stickers. But you could see on the back of the sign where the bullets had torn through.

The road was a single lane, rough and rutted. Every hundred meters or so, maybe less, there were large concrete slabs on each side of the road, square, some with short lengths of steel still embedded in the concrete. These pads had been the footings of the steel towers that held up the cables carrying the buckets of coal from the open cast mine a dozen kilometres away, to the coal-fired power station. There was toitoi and other swamp grasses, dense and rising high so that the road felt low and enclosed, cutting through the landscape. Occasionally a break revealed open wetland and the glint of water. The sky was high blue, it was sunny and warm. We were driving slowly. There was nothing to see ahead but the road itself. I was hopeful that we would drive all the way to the coal mine, which looked beautiful on Google Maps, concentric lines mapping the edges of massive deep holes, some filled with water.

We drove for several minutes, and then a car came in to view, pulled off to the side. As we got closer we saw it was a DOC ute and was empty. Large plastic canisters sat next to it, the kind that might be used to collect water samples, or store chemicals. We drove on.

The road became rougher and bumpier. The big footings came and went, the old concrete blackened and moss covered. I wanted to photograph them, but I didn’t feel like stopping. We passed another *HIDDEN DANGERS* sign.

We came to a flat wooden bridge. I slowed right down and eased on to it.

‘There’s a car up there’ said Greta. In the distance ahead was a white car, with the driver side door hanging open. As I looked, the door closed.

‘Oh, shit.’ I said.

We were so obvious, deep in the swamp. We were a couple of nosy parkers with a little dog. Did our phones even work out here?

Greta said, ‘And they’ve started their engine.’ Then she said, ‘What is that? A dead dog?’ On the road between us and the white car was a shape lying still. A pale shape, an animal shape, the size of a big dog. It was too far away to see what it really was, but it seemed to be lifeless.

I backed off the bridge. If the car up ahead wasn’t worrying enough, there was no way we were going to deal with a big dead animal. The road was too narrow there to turn around, so I kept going in reverse. ‘Are you going to back the whole way out?’ asked Greta. It was funny, ridiculous.

‘I’ll turn around here’ I said, swinging the car off the road onto a patch that looked solid enough. Once we were moving again I checked the rear vision mirror, but the land had dropped down a little and I couldn’t see the white car - couldn’t see if it was coming after us, or not. But why would it? We drove past the DOC truck, and finally reached the gate, the bullet-pierced sign and the proper road. At the gate I stopped. ‘I would really like to take some photographs of one of the pads. Let’s do that.’ Greta let the dog out, and we both got our cameras. The pads further in had been much more beautiful - the one I chose was littered with broken glass and gravel. I took some pictures. I crouched down and filmed the long grass moving in the slight breeze. Greta had disappeared down a track on the other side. It was still and quiet. The sun was warm.

I heard the car before I saw it, and I turned as it pulled to a stop. The white car and a man with a dog, but a smiling man. ‘What are you up to?’ he asked, through the open car window, but in a friendly tone.

‘Just taking some snapshots.’ I answered.

‘How did you get in?’ he said.

‘Just through the gate.’ I answered, pointing.

‘Oh, was it open? You know there is a DOC guy up the road, and he’ll get pretty pissed off with you if he sees you in here. There are

lots of holes, and busted up metal. I have some pigs up the back, wild pigs, and at this time of year they have babies, and they are pretty aggressive. So I would leave pretty quick if I were you.’ He is pleasant though, smiling. He is giving us some friendly advice. I’m smiling too. ‘Thanks, OK, yes we will. Thanks.’

He pulls away with a wave.

I can’t believe I said snapshots.

Greta comes back towards the car. ‘Did you hear that guy?’ I ask her. ‘He has wild pigs, and he reckons the DOC guy will be pissed if he sees us in here. We should go.’

We get in the car and she shows me the photo she took, a beautiful photo of a spider’s nest on gorse, with the sun behind it. Day for night.

It must have been a wild pig we saw on the road. A big pale pig, lying there in the warm sun. Maybe she was feeding her babies. She wasn’t dead, she just wasn’t troubled. She could hear us coming, but it was her swamp and her road, and she wasn’t moving for anyone.



Materials

- pg 3 Shelley Simpson, *Coal on black*, digital image, 2016
- pg 4, 5 Meremere under constuction, video still from historic video held by Te Ara <https://teara.govt.nz/en/video/27147/meremere-thermal-power-station>
- pg 7 Meremere under constuction, video stills from historic video held by Te Ara <https://teara.govt.nz/en/video/27147/meremere-thermal-power-station>
- pg 8 Meremere from the air, Whites Aviation, 1960s
- pg 9 Meremere from the air, Google Maps, 2017
- pg 11 Shelley Simpson, *Coal on light*, digital image, 2016
- pg 12 Meremere overhead tramway, GNS image
- pg 13 *Meremere Gothic*, text by Shelley Simpson 2016
- pg 17 Meremere and coal mine from the air, with the tram line, Google Maps, 2017

Shelley Simpson
2017