



Northern
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*Northern Territory
Literary Awards
2009*

Northern Territory Literary Awards

The awards acknowledge written works of outstanding literary merit and reward the achievements of Northern Territory writers.

The aims of the awards closely align with the Northern Territory Library's crucial objective of promoting greater literacy through the 'telling of stories' to entertain and inspire. They also contribute to public recognition of literature's importance to our identity, community and economy.

The NT Literary Awards endeavour to cultivate a prosperous creative writing industry in the NT by recognising great talent; they have a further aim of fostering and inspiring a new generation of writers.

Entry Forms are available from the Northern Territory Library and **ONLINE** at www.ntl.nt.gov.au

Northern Territory Literary Awards 2009

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CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY BOOKSHOP
TRAVEL SHORT STORY AWARD

Castronomy

Barbara Eather

For Evelyn O'Donnell, Cuba began with a touch. It was nothing special, merely a handshake, although later she told herself that she should have paid more attention. The hand that she shook belonged to Paulo. He had stood at Havana airport with her name on a sign and said, 'I'm here to look after you for the next seventeen days.' But, although perfunctory, it had been a fortuitous meeting. She had flown from the other side of the planet and felt as though she had deep vein thrombosis of the head. Almost incapable of pouring herself into a taxi and pronouncing the name of the hotel she had booked into, she had surrendered herself willingly to him.

For Evelyn O'Donnell, Cuba began also with two questions answered ambiguously. In the taxi on the way into Havana Vieja, the colonial quarter of the city, she asked Paulo how much a bottle of water cost. Evelyn knew a scientist who, in his travels around the world in the 1970s, had used the price of icy-poles to compare economies. In more recent years other travellers had used the Big Mac in the same way. But that would not work in Cuba – a Golden Arches-free zone. A few days ago Evelyn had converted a mountain of Australian dollars into a small hill of Euros. Moments earlier she had exchanged some of these for Cuban Convertible Pesos. The money changer had been a hypnotist. Although Evelyn had fixed him with her best evil-eye, after he had counted out the first hundred, tapping his index finger methodically while she nodded in time, he had pulled her mind into somewhere between the thunderous clouds that bore down on Havana that afternoon and another stratosphere. The rest of the deal had been a blur. Now she nursed a brick – that felt about the right amount – of one of the two local currencies and she wanted to know what it could do for her.

Evelyn preferred to use the cost of water as her fiscal barometer. Water was less likely to be affected by climate. An icy-pole in Anchorage surely had a lower value than one in Casablanca? Evelyn figured also that water was lower down the food chain than frozen treats or beef-burgers. All that it needed was filtration, bottling and labelling. And a straight-

forward answer to her question. But this was Cuba – and Paulo. He inferred that water could be one price in a hotel, another in a Convertible Peso store, something else in a Cuban Peso store – in the unlikely event that it was even available there – and then there was the *mercado negro*, the black market – a galaxy within a galaxy. And finally, if she didn't value her gastrointestinal health, *aqua natural* was free out of the tap, although, as most houses in Cuba had running water for only five hours every second day, she would have to get her timing right. Maybe, thought Evelyn, as she sat rolling her eyes, it would be easier to talk about politics.

'So how is Fidel? Is he likely to appear at the May Day Parade?'

Fidel Castro, now eighty years of age, had not been seen in public for a year. Since 1959, when he and his revolutionary forces had toppled the Batista regime, he had ruled Cuba until recently. Now he was rumoured to be either dead or gravely ill, or ready to resume the power that he had handed over to his younger brother Raúl some months ago.

'You know, no-one really knows,' responded Paulo, 'Fidel doesn't announce these things. Even where he lives is a secret. There have been six hundred and thirty-eight assassination attempts against him. Some years he turns up at the parade, others he doesn't.'

Evelyn was not dissuaded easily.

'But my tour notes say that Fidel seems to be recovering and that May Day could be his final public appearance. That would be huge. Isn't there someone we can ask?'

Paulo laughed. Evelyn was silent. She didn't like it when things were not straightforward.

Even the weather was not what she had expected. She had arrived in Cuba, with an excuse for a cardigan, in what Paulo described as a cold front. Although hours from sunset, the sky was already dark with dust whipped up by the winds leading a line of thunderstorms. Lightning flashed above and then Havana was awash as the clouds burst. Soon the windows of the taxi fogged and her view became the back of two heads – Paulo's and the driver's. They conversed in urgent Spanish. Although Evelyn knew only enough *Espanol* to get herself murdered, she understood the universal language of tension. Paulo wiped patches of

windscreen clear for the driver to peer through. Evelyn's palms sweated as she shivered – Paulo had been right about the cold in the cold front. Evelyn pressed her nose to the window. She glimpsed awnings, arches and the shadowy figures of people. Outside was a city that some said was in a time warp. Inside it was just the three of them, breathing together, inhaling Havana at bath-time. Tail-lights of other vehicles floated out of the gloom, drifting by like sharks dancing ballet. Dim grey shapes of buildings, ancient and etched, slick with rain and grime, loomed above and around them. The taxi twisted and turned through streets that became narrower and narrower. In one of these corridors they stopped outside a small hotel where Evelyn stepped out ankle-deep into a river. She was hit from above by a wall of water that cascaded over an ornate edifice. The stonemason should have been laughing in his grave. Welcome to the April sun in Cuba!

Evelyn O'Donnell's second day in Cuba began at two in the morning when her internal clock, riddled by supersonic travel through time zones, decided that she should be awake. Now was not the hour to bounce out of bed and walk the unfamiliar streets of a city enveloped in darkness *and* a cold front. Although ensconced in a windowless room deep in the bowels of a refurbished palace, she could hear the storm unleashing its fury outside. And inside. Drafts swirled around columns and atria and rattled the gigantic door of her room. At first she thought that she was being visited by *un homicidio hacha de Cuba* – a Cuban axe-murderer – until she remembered that nothing exciting *ever* happened to her.

The weather niggled at her mind. Wasn't Cuba meant to be tropical? After all it was slap-bang up against the Caribbean and, as far as Evelyn knew, that was all about sun-kissed beaches and large, black, scantily clad men. It was then, in bed in Havana, that she read *properly* the trip notes that the tour company had provided. Cuba was described as *sub-tropical*. In this month, three days of rain could be expected. These revelations were overshadowed by the unexpected news, also discovered in the tour notes, that Cuba was near the Tropic of Cancer. She wasn't even in the hemisphere that she had expected to be in! Evelyn had glanced at maps before she had left home and had been convinced that Cuba was lower down the globe, almost on the same latitude as Australia. She laughed at her sudden middle-of-the-night-thought that, had she been Christopher Columbus, the New World that *she* would have discovered would have

been in a different place. Right now she was way off her expected course. There was no Southern Cross looking down on her from above the storm clouds.

Evelyn was into stars. She thought that the Southern Cross – *Crux Australis* – was the most amazing constellation. At home she often went outside at night, lay on a banana lounge and stared at the heavens. Using the light of a torch dimmed by cellophane so that her eyes didn't have to adjust from brightness to darkness, she'd align a star-gazing wheel in accordance with date, time and direction and match what was in the sky to the celestial map. Sometimes she fell asleep in her garden and stayed there until daylight. One morning she had woken to find a neighbour looking at her through the fence. She had waved her star-wheel at him and said, 'Jupiter was rising last night.'

She had no idea what Jupiter had been doing last night. Planets weren't even marked on her wheel, but she thought that she should make conversation.

'You should be careful outside at night,' he had said, 'There's some weirdos around.'

You're telling me, she thought.

'Yeah, thanks,' she said, meaning the opposite.

Her neighbour fancied himself as a rough-diamond-philosopher.

'If I come out here one morning and you're gone and there's a circle burnt in the grass I'll know that the little green men have taken you away. You get on the piss last night or what?'

Evelyn laughed, 'No, not me, how on earth could I tell Centaurus from Ophiuchus if I was cursed by the demon drink?'

She wasn't sure what her neighbour found more disturbing, abstinence or big words, but whatever it was, it did the job and he ambled off.

It was not that Evelyn always combined star-gazing with teetotalism. There had been that time, at an accountants' conference at a resort on the Gold Coast, when two neatly dressed Japanese tourists had made her feel as though she was an astrological guru. Evelyn had also been dressed

neatly, to the extent that the duo from the Land of the Rising Sun had thought she was a member of the hotel staff. They had bailed her up as she, slightly liquored, weaved her way to the toilet.

'Excuse me,' one of them had said, 'Can you give direction to the Southern Cross?'

'Oh you'll have to catch a space-ship,' Evelyn had responded, 'You'll never walk there in those shoes.'

When the Japanese didn't laugh, Evelyn remembered her motto: Never let a bad cross-cultural moment get in the way of a good party. She launched into an enthusiastic search for the Southern Cross.

'Ya gotta find the pointers first,' Evelyn had said.

Searching for the pointers made her giddy. But she *did* find The Saucepan, low on the horizon.

'Look, there's The Saucepan,' she shrieked at her new friends, who looked as though they would rather be cuddling koalas at Lone Pine.

The male of the couple corrected her.

'Oh-why-on.'

'Oh yes! Orion! Silly me. We call it The Saucepan. You know, I don't know where the Southern Cross is. Well, it's up there somewhere. It's so big you can't miss it. I reckon it's behind a cloud. Gotta nuke those clouds if you want to see stars. You guys going to Alice Springs? Better still Uluru. Get out there where it's dark and there's nothing in the sky at night but stars!'

The Japanese had bowed – and fled.

Evelyn didn't tell the fleeing duo that there was an even better place than Uluru for gazing at the heavens. Beyond the black stump and half-way to the Never Never, her parents grazed sheep and cattle on a tract of land more arid than arable. Out there she and her mother had studied the stars. At night, after the dishes had been done, they would stroll out past the woodheap and sit on busted cane chairs. They'd take a torch with them, for there the snakes bit first and asked questions later. One of the station cats would usually drift by and lurk in the gloom. Evelyn and her mother would stay out for hours, sometimes looking for nothing in particular,

just soaking up the atmosphere. On a clear night, with no moon, the Milky Way carved its way like a glacier across the black sky, hanging there, roaring a song of silence above them, pressing down on them as though they were part of it. Often they saw so many shooting stars that they ran out of wishes. Those times had ended when dementia had sucked her mother's brain, and then her mother, into a black hole. But Evelyn still remembered how good those nights had made her feel.

Now she lived on the outskirts of a city and urban lights interfered with her viewing from the banana lounge. There was also the moon to contend with. She knew that when her neighbours trundled out of their driveways, towing their fishing boats, there was no need to look at the tide and moon charts. Anyone who knew how to fish only went out when there was a full moon or a new moon, when the tides were high and the biting midges swarmed. When the boats stayed home, it was Evelyn's turn to go out. Even then, sometimes the midges hadn't read the tide charts and struck like laser-wielding aliens, but at least when the moon was a sliver it didn't dilute the vista.

It wasn't as though Evelyn was an enemy of the moon. Since she was small she'd been fascinated by it. She had tried to see the man in the moon, the one that everyone said was there. She never told anyone that what she saw was a kitchen table with her mother and father sitting across from each other, having a cup of tea, just like they did three or four times a day. She had wondered how they could be in two places at once.

It is said that moonshine can make you go mad. That didn't surprise Evelyn, for if her parents' tea-drinking ritual existed in a parallel universe, the glowing orb also had two personas, one shiny and friendly, the other frightening. On nights when it rose blood-red from the earth and crept from behind the coolibah trees that lined the creek, she hid her head under a pillow. Other times she was scared by what it revealed, when it lit everything like daylight. Once she had looked out of her bedroom window and seen a huge kangaroo feeding on the grass that edged the homestead. She had been terrified by the sinister shape, silhouetted against the monochrome of the moonlight, but had decided that, as she was well into her twenties, she should not scream and run to her parents' bed.

She had been four years old when man had first landed on the moon. *National Geographic* had produced a commemorative record. Made of plastic, it was new technology, a step-up from the Bakelite 78s that, when broken, could be mended with Araldite – dozens of times – until there was more crack than cackle. She recalled that her brother had carefully cut the record out of the magazine and had placed it on top of a cupboard. That night they had been allowed to listen to it – or so she had been told. She could recall the act of the flimsy disc being placed in a safe place earlier in the day, but she could not remember hearing it played. It would have been on the record player powered by torch batteries, the one where they had to sit still so that the stylus didn't jump. She wondered at the black holes in her own memory. Maybe she had drifted into the land of nod as they had sat together and her father had said, 'Let sleeping dogs lie.'

But now she was in Cuba, wide-awake in Cuba when she wanted to be sound asleep. If she hadn't been surrounded by a cold front, she might have left the warmth of her blankets to check whether the water went down the plug hole clockwise or otherwise. Instead she resorted to CNN, 'detonated' by remote control and read her Spanish phrasebook. She recited numbers – useful for shopping – and tried to learn the days of the week. *Monday – Lunes*. Ha, the moon had an alias!

'Hasta Lunes,' she said to the female anchor of the CNN news-desk who looked as though her make-up had been applied with a spatula.

Spatula Face ignored the prospect of being seen on Monday. Trying to find the Spanish for 'you look like a whore,' wore Evelyn down.

Finally, just before a civilized hour for breakfast, she slept soundly, lights and television on, tour notes and phrasebook sprawled across the bed. Unexpectedly ending up under unfamiliar stars for the next three weeks was not the end of the world. She had done worse. Like fall in love.



Against The Odds

Mary Allmich

On my arrival at Darwin Airport in the aftermath of Cyclone Tracy, I was so excited that I almost danced down the steps from the plane and across the tarmac to the terminal. I was now free and independent, having survived an acrimonious marriage breakdown in Melbourne, and I was prepared to make the most of the unique friendly atmosphere in this outback town. Accommodation was no problem as my friend Fred, who I had met on a previous trip to Darwin, had offered me a comfortable cabin on his property, about a half hour's drive from the city centre.

In December my seventeen year old daughter Linda, an attractive, cheeky blonde, who had remained at the family home down south, arrived for a short holiday. She was fascinated by my stories of the Darwin lifestyle, and wanted to share some experiences.

By some judicious shift swapping I arranged to get four days off just before Christmas to take her on a sightseeing tour, hopefully to Katherine, regardless of the fact that I had been warned by several local people about the issues of travelling during the wet season. But because of time limitations we did not want to wait around for the rain to stop. Rain had never kept us at home in Melbourne, and we had promised to be back in Darwin for Christmas dinner.

All excited we set off on our trip in a borrowed Datsun 120Y car, armed with an icebox of drinks, a radio cassette player, citronella oil insect repellent and calamine lotion to treat Linda's itchy sand fly bites. The drive was slower than we anticipated, and far more arduous. We stopped for a short break at the small township of Adelaide River, and then continued our adventure. Just outside the town was a bridge over the river, which was a few inches underwater, but we managed to get across albeit slowly. So far we were coping with the dangerous weather conditions.

The road was a narrow, muddy edged, potholed strip of bitumen wide enough for one vehicle winding its way through the hills to Hayes Creek. Just our luck! Over a hill a road train roared towards us with headlights glowing, enveloped in a cloud of muddy mist and rain. I quickly pulled

over to the unsealed shoulder of the road, hoping it was stones and not mud underneath, as the apparition roared past. Visibility was absolutely nil for a couple of minutes until the spray settled.

I reached over my sleeping daughter and turned off the cassette player while waiting for the murk to clear. Listening to Slim Dusty droning on about the Rain Tumbling Down in July, and the Pub With No Beer created an unwelcome distraction on this hazardous trip. I needed to concentrate on dodging potholes and negotiating the water on the road. With the rain easing off, we continued on to Hayes Creek, where we stopped for a short break and one of their famous steaks. We had not expected to travel for more than four hours to get to Katherine, but weather conditions decreed otherwise. It was now four hours since we left home, and we were barely halfway there.

This little pleasure jaunt of ours was becoming a major challenge. While we refuelled the car, the proprietor of the pub warned us to watch out for the King River crossing, which was prone to flooding over the road. We departed, promising to ring from Katherine to let the people at Hayes Creek know we had arrived safely. I was now feeling much less confident about my ability to cope with these unexpected hazards than when we left Darwin. Linda changed the cassettes over to some rousing rock and roll and we set off once again, apprehensive but ready to tackle any challenges we met, still dodging potholes and water on the road. Unfortunately, as the fogged-up windows of the car limited our view, we could not enjoy the scenery.

When we arrived at the King River there were a couple of other vehicles stopped by the roadside, as the river was flowing inches deep over the road surface. There was a short discussion as to whether to continue or return to Hayes Creek, and we made a quick decision to forge ahead as the water was slowly getting deeper. It was really scary feeling the current pulling at the car, but we all crossed safely.

Hooray! Next stop Katherine!

Talk about rude awakening! On arrival at Katherine we were greeted with a BRIDGE CLOSED sign. The bridge over the Katherine River was impassable. We could see the township of Katherine just across the river, a debris-laden, raging torrent. The water carried large uprooted trees,

sheets of corrugated iron and a wrecked small shed, along with many unidentifiable objects.

The only way to reach the hotel in Katherine was to cross on the railway bridge, which was high above flood level. Trains ran infrequently during the wet season because washouts along the line caused constant delays so we did not need to worry unduly on that score. This bridge was a narrow gauge rail track on sleepers that were close together but still had small gaps between them. The technique was to position the car's wheels on each side of the rails, and bounce slowly over the sleepers. The thought of driving across this primitive looking structure absolutely terrified me.

If you met another vehicle coming in the opposite direction, one of you had to back off the bridge to allow the other one to cross, then you could try again. In general terms, small trucks backed off if confronted by larger trucks, cars backed off for all trucks, and little cars had to back off for virtually everything.

I was absolutely terrified and shaking. If I had to back that fogged up car, I was sure I would end up in the crocodile-infested river. Linda, upset and very scared, was screaming about the terrifying, crazy bridge crossing. Why did I blithely ignore the advice that was offered in Darwin? Our travelling companions in the other vehicles did not seem to be unduly fazed. The locals in Darwin had warned us about the problems we might encounter, but I had put those stories aside as just more of their beer and barbie yarns trying to frighten a newcomer to the Territory.

All these dramatics seemed to amuse the occupants of the other vehicles who took pity on us and offered to go first and stop any traffic on the other side of the bridge to allow us to cross over. We readily agreed to this and the first car began to creep across the bridge. Just before reaching the halfway mark, a large semi-trailer appeared on the Katherine side, and with a warning blast of its air horn indicated that the approaching vehicle must back up. The car driver cheerfully acknowledged the signal and returned to where we were waiting. The semi-trailer rumbled over the bridge, continuing towards Darwin with a blast of his horn, followed by a huge cloud of spray. Once again our lead vehicle drove on to the bridge, successfully arriving at the other side. The rest of us followed, said our farewells and continued on our various ways, ours being to the hotel that I had been eyeing from across the bridge.

Linda and I were very wet, tired and stressed. The hotel proprietor Bob, and his wife Jill, were waiting for us as we parked, greeting us cheerfully and helping us carry our gear inside out of the rain. Bob and Jill soon had us sorted out, and offered to ring Hayes Creek to let them know we were OK. We were taken straight to a bedroom, shown where the bathroom was located just down the hallway, and told that we would have to use the long drop lavatory out the back until the septic system was functioning properly. Apparently this was a common problem during wet weather. Jill told us to get cleaned up and she would bring some fresh corned beef sandwiches and a thermos of coffee to our room. We would have to use powdered milk as the milk lorries were unable to negotiate the flooding south of Katherine.

Once again Linda burred up, this time over the temporary lavatory. With an expression of disgust, she used this facility, coming out of it holding her nose and dry retching. She complained that it was primitive and disgusting, and the stench was nauseating. I must admit that the smell was revolting. This was a new experience for both of us because the flush system was all we had ever used down south.

Showered and wearing dry clothes at last, we gratefully wolfed down the sandwiches accompanied by large mugs of coffee. Then, absolutely spent, we lay down on our beds and slept, ceiling fans flat out, mosquito nets in place. There was a pleasant atmosphere in the pub and we were able to relax at last, drifting off to sleep to the soothing sound of rain drumming on the tin roof of the building.

The next morning, Linda overcame the lavatory problem by wrapping a T-shirt around her face. After freshening up we ate a hearty breakfast. Bob informed us the road was closed south of Katherine so we cancelled our plans for any further sight seeing. Bob told us that because of the continuing rain we should talk to the truckies who intended to travel back to Darwin for Christmas and see how they could help us. He understood how much I dreaded the return trip – my confidence in my ability to cope had taken a decided downturn.

A little later two men, one with a big black bushy beard and the other in need of a shave, decidedly rough looking but very friendly, approached us introducing themselves as Mark and Andy, fencing contractors who were going home to Darwin for Christmas. Because Bob had told them about

our dilemma they generously offered to load our car on the back of their five ton diesel truck so we could make it home for Christmas too. We were very relieved to receive their friendly offer, agreeing to an early start next day. The men organised loading the car immediately, then we all spent a pleasant evening in the pub relaxing. Linda and I were so thankful that we had help from these two experienced locals, that we bought their beers for the evening.

Bed time, last trip to the long drop for the day. Linda wrapped her T-shirt around her head grabbed an umbrella and torch and raced off, but seconds later she ran screaming and incoherent into the pub pointing at the lavatory. Several men came running, grabbing a torch on the way. Then howling with laughter they removed two large green tree frogs who had been sitting on the seat. We quickly attended to our needs before anything else happened, feeling embarrassed about the fuss that Linda had made over harmless frogs, though it was a disconcerting experience for a city girl.

Next morning, we loaded our bags and other gear, and settled into our allotted seats while Mark and Andy carefully placed a large box in the cabin of the truck. Linda and I sat in our car perched high on the back of the truck, while Mark and Andy were to ride in the truck cabin. We said our goodbyes and headed off to Darwin, passing over the dreaded railway bridge as if it were all in a day's work. We crossed the King River which had risen a little since we passed through two days ago, then on to Hayes Creek. Linda had become very quiet. As we arrived in Hayes Creek she was off the truck in a flash and vomiting by the side of the road from car sickness.

Mark and Andy, feeling sorry for her, decided to let her travel in the cabin of the truck, but Andy would have to move to the car to make room for her. The box was moved to the car. When I asked him what was in it, I was informed to my absolute horror that it was Mark's pet python, and he was keeping an eye on it while Mark was driving. I had no idea that any sane person would keep a snake as a pet. Andy told me that Mark likes to keep pythons in the roof of his house in Darwin to control the rats and mice that shelter there during the wet season. After some time he convinced me that the python was no threat to my wellbeing, so we continued on the next leg of the trip home.

The remainder of the trip was uneventful. I barely noticed the scenery because I couldn't stop watching the python's box. It was a nerve-wracking experience, leaving me tense and ready to jump out at the slightest sign of movement in the box. I did notice that as we came closer to Darwin, the trees that had been affected by Cyclone Tracy were nearly stripped of foliage, but the spear grass was a lush, cheerful green. Mark, who had been expecting to chat up Linda, was disappointed because as soon as the truck had become mobile, Linda had promptly gone to sleep, so Mark sang at the top of his voice hoping to wake her. No luck! He resigned himself to a quiet trip.

Home at last, and after a few explanations to Fred about our journey home, we shared a couple of beers with Mark and Andy, without whose kindness and assistance we would probably still be in Katherine. We decided to tell our story to our friends at Christmas dinner the next day. Next on the agenda was a clean, flushing lavatory, a long shower, a quick snack and a good sleep.

On Christmas day we awoke refreshed and looking forward to the long-awaited Christmas dinner. Fred had a spit operating under his open-sided shed, which was set up with trestle tables and folding chairs, and the pork was already emitting a mouth-watering aroma. The relief of being safely home had given me a ravenous appetite.

Early in the afternoon the guests had arrived bringing all sorts of contributions towards the meal. There was a variety of canned vegetables, sweet potatoes, dry biscuits, nuts, cheese, a large jar of apple sauce and even a Christmas cake. In addition, several of the guests had brought along their particular home-brewed beer in their iceboxes. Now and then a bottle of home brew would explode, much to everyone's amusement, adding to the festive atmosphere.

Fred, who had by this time been indulging in various home brews from very early in the day, decided that he would make a cheese dip to add to the nibbles we were munching on while waiting for the pork to cook. We had several packets of dry biscuits which were contributed by our friends, so a dip would be an added tasty treat. Within a short space of time, Fred emerged from his kitchen carrying a large bowl of cheese dip.

He decided to sample his offering as he neared the table when, swearing like mad he flung the contents of his bowl outside on the grass. He calmed down enough to explain that there must have been a cockroach in the bottom of his food blender, because the dip had pieces of small, brown, hairy legs clearly visible in the mixture. Undaunted, Fred returned to his kitchen to try again, after refreshing himself with another bottle of home brew. This time, disaster struck as soon as he had loaded all the ingredients for the dip into the blender.

His yelling and cursing brought us running to the kitchen door expecting to see a major catastrophe. There was Fred, red-faced with rage, trying to clean a horrible looking mess from his face. Apparently, when he had placed his ingredients in the blender, he had forgotten to remove the spatula and replace the lid of the machine. Consequently, when he turned the machine on, the contents were flung out far and wide in the kitchen, with Fred copping a large amount of the mess over his head and shoulders. When we had stopped laughing, we helped Fred to clean up and restore some semblance of order to the kitchen.

By this time the pork was ready to be eaten. After we had gorged ourselves on the fabulous meal, Linda and I, safely ensconced in our friendly group, recounted the hair-raising story of our adventure. This resulted in us being unmercifully teased, and advised to keep our ears open next time we were given advice. Our red faces attested to the extent of our embarrassment as our litany of stupidity unfolded. While we told our story, I kept thinking about how foolhardy I had been, and how dangerous it was to attempt a trip that I was advised against, by people who understood the wet season's constantly changing conditions. I had learned my lesson the hard way by being overconfident. Before I try any more jaunts into the unknown I will LISTEN TO THE LOCALS.



Tigers and Goats

Rohan Wightman

Paula looked down the hill and noticed a blue and red tortoise clambering up the green slope. It was Julian climbing up the hill with their packs. Dysentery had sapped her strength and flesh, the walk up the steep hill with the humidity solid as soup was unbearable. Paula had been sick for most of the holiday. Julian remained his infuriatingly healthy self, so when he offered to carry her pack up the hill her heart melted with relief.

Having seen Julian, she staggered weakly towards a wooden café, surrounded by a collection of scrawny chickens languidly pecking the dusty ground. The smell of dhal soaked the tepid air. A low ceiling fan offered some relief but added to the veil of fine dust coating everything. A thin dusty man approached her, a singsong voice tumbled from between his tobacco stained teeth.

'Are you right madam?'

'A can of Coke and one of Sprite please.'

He turned to the rattling fridge, wrenched the door open, selected two cans and plopped them on the counter. Paula paid and left, feeling the male customer's eyes staring at her.

A young woman in a bright purple sari was sitting demurely on the stone fence next to the café. A small silver stone glittered from her nose like a moonbeam. She smiled shyly at Paula, the black kajal under her eyes adding a sense of wisdom to her youth. A delicate hope came to Paula – a woman she could talk to.

She had last spoken to a woman two weeks ago, a deserted mother in Pokara whose husband beat her because she only produced one daughter in six years. He eventually left, she explained in stumbling English. She had spoken to the occasional man, but whenever Julian appeared they ignored her, continuing the conversation with him despite the fact that his language skills were considerably less than hers.

This was the most galling of her Nepalese experiences; at times she disliked Julian because he was a man and she was tired of talking to men.

Paula sat next to the Nepalese women and smiled, 'Speak English?' she asked. The woman flashed a white smile and nodded. 'Australia,' said Paula, the woman's eyes glimmered with understanding and she shook her head. It had taken Paula a while to get used to a shaking head meaning yes and a nodding head meaning no.

Reaching into her bag she pulled out the dulled brass game of tigers and goats they'd bought in Kathmandu. It was one of the few things she considered they'd paid a reasonable price for.

The Nepalese women's eyes flashed an endless sadness, a conspiring smile peeked out from behind her dark lips and she shook her head. Suddenly a young man with dark wiry hair, tight-fitting blue jeans and a red silk shirt swaggered into sight and sat down. The woman hurriedly got up and walked away.

'I play you,' said the young man, pulling a packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and offering one to Paula. She shook her head and rolled her own.

'I play you now,' he repeated. 'Okay, Okay,' replied Paula.

She spied Julian wavering towards her and waved the can of Sprite at him. He smiled and dropped the packs onto the dusty ground. His thin unshaven face was red and dripping with grimy sweat. He rolled the cold can over his face then pulled the top, downing half the can in long gulps.

'Thanks hon. How's the game goin'?'

'Just starting.'

'I play you,' said the young man, pointing at Julian.

'No, she's better than me,' he replied.

'I'm getting food, do you want anything?' asked Julian

'No thanks, I'm sick of dhal.'

She watched him go, his sarong flowing behind him like a badly folded flag. He ducked low to get into the cafe and was gone.

'Your husband?'

'Yes,' replied Paula, lacking the inclination or energy to explain the intricacies of their relationship. She tipped out the pieces from inside the game and placed them in a pile next to her.

Tigers and goats was the Nepalese version of chess and was played in most cafés by men.

Paula picked up a tiger from the pile on the fence and placed it on the corner of the board, and the Nepalese man placed a goat one move away from the tiger.

'My name is Paula, I'm from Australia.'

The Nepalese man smiled, 'My name Jai, from Nepal.'

Paula placed another tiger in the centre of the board, Jai placed a goat next to the tiger and so it went until all the pieces were down.

There were four tigers and eighteen goats. The idea of the game was for either four goats to be jumped, or for the goats to surround the tigers so that none could move. The positioning of the pieces was vital. A badly placed tiger put the player at a huge disadvantage.

The proprietor of the café handed Julian an aluminium plate of white rice and dhal. Julian, like Paula, was sick of dhal but it being the staple food of Nepal they ate it all day, every day. He sat down on the wooden bench seat, placed the plate of dhal on the rickety trestle table and contemplated it.

The distinctive sound of sitars and conga drums crackled out of the ghetto blaster balancing precariously on a shelf behind the counter. Julian was enjoying the sound when it was snapped off to be replaced with a slow Beatles number. Julian grimaced. All the cafés played Nepalese music until a westerner sat down, then they played old sixties tunes. Julian hated the music of the sixties and everything it stood for.

As if driven by the music, Julian started shovelling the food into his mouth, pausing occasionally to gulp a mouthful of Sprite.

'Hi, me Aruna. Where you from?'

Julian looked up to see a robust Nepalese man standing before him – a white safari suit clung to his body like sticky wallpaper and a gold tooth sparkled from the centre of his mouth. Julian swallowed his food and smiled up at Aruna, who immediately sat down.

'I'm from Australia, my name is Julian.'

'Ah Australia, good cricketers Australia, best in the world,' said Aruna, flashing his gold tooth at Julian.

'I hate cricket, most boring game in the world.'

'Shane Warne, great man, best bowler, best batsman,' Aruna continued.

'Who the hell is Shane Warne? I hate cricket, it's the stupidest game ever invented.'

A puzzled look contorted Aruna's face into a semi-sowl.

'You can't be Australian, you don't like cricket. All Aussies like cricket.'

'No, no I'm Aust-rian, not Aust-ralian,' smiled Julian.

'Ah so sorry, my mistake.'

'That's okay. Anyway I have a bus to get, so better go.'

Julian stood up, bowing his head so the slowly swirling ceiling fan wouldn't decapitate him. The humidity hit him like a wall, sucking the moisture and strength from his body. His stride descended into a shuffle and he made his way towards Paula.

* * *

Small groups of men, silent as ghosts, had gathered around Paula until a tight circle of men surrounded her. She looked up. All she could see were frowning male faces. The humidity and the tight crowd sautéed the boiling air with the odour of stale sweet cigarettes.

Paula quickly drew Jai into a simple trap. He moved one of his goats towards a stranded tiger and failed to see another tiger lurking nearby. Sensing a quick victory, he moved in for the kill, only to find he'd left a goat unprotected. Paula took it. Varying tones of Nepali rippled through

the crowd. She felt eyes savaging her with unspoken thoughts. Jai's eyes darkened into two dark beads of humiliation.

Paula knew she'd get no more easy breaks. You could always score one point while the male ego was playing narcissistic games. She'd learnt that long ago, when she'd been the only *wog chick* in white suburban Doncaster.

Paula contemplated her moves, carefully weaving the tigers through the swarm of goats moving to encircle her. Each time Jai moved, Nepali phrases shot through the simmering air as a raucous debate exploded amongst the crowd, dark glaring eyes and thrusting fingers proffering angry advice to Jai. Paula stood up and stretched, needing to fracture the tension that was squeezing the last of the strength from her exhausted body. On the hill above, she saw the tall slumped figure of Julian gazing towards her, and she waved.

Glad to have located Julian, she sat down and felt the hot tension of the crowd wash over her like boiling oil. Finally Jai moved and Paula contemplated the herd of goats which were pressing in on her tigers.

Julian could smell his sweat. It glued his T-shirt to his body like a gritty second skin. He wished he could take it off but that wasn't polite, so he lifted it away from his body, which offered slight relief. Julian gazed at the scene below. Paula and the crowd of jabbering men, the dusty road with low wooden dwellings running alongside it, fields with women hacking away at the hard dusty soil with babies strapped to their backs and children tugging at their saris.

Julian was scared before they went away. He'd never been away with a lover before and the prospect terrified him. Intimacy was foreign to him. He had a large circle of good friends which meant that, like most popular people, he had few intimate friends.

He had a deep fear that the whole thing would be a disaster but the opposite had been true; they had their fights but nothing irresolvable.

* * *

Jai's goats were squeezing a noose around Paula's tiger, pushing it towards a corner of the board. Tight jeans encircled Paula, crotches at head level. A thin fog of dust hung suspended in the hot air. Paula wiped her

forehead and looked into Jai's smiling face. His dark eyes glittered with the arrogance of assured victory. He offered her a cigarette; she shook her head. Two moves, she estimated, before her tiger was trapped and the game over. She moved her cornered tiger into one of the few spots left, knowing it looked like a move devoid of anything but empty ritual. A ripple of ecstatic Nepali bounced through the tense silence. Hands slapped Jai's back and ruffled his hair; he took a long drag on his cigarette, exhaled slowly, glared at Paula and moved his goat.

Paula moved the tiger away from the marauding goats, leaving it pressed against the corner of the board. Jai quickly moved one of his goats closer to the trapped tiger. A smile glowed on his dark face. His hand was poised over the board, ready to sweep the pieces away in a final gesture of victory. Paula held up her hand and jumped a hidden tiger over a goat.

Jai's face twisted into a mask of furious hatred and his hands tightened into fists. Guttural growls and high-pitched Nepali admonishments rained down around Paula with the fury of a tropical rainstorm. Jai screamed back at the belligerent crowd, white flecks of foam quivered on his thin lips. Fingers stabbed the air, angrily pointing at the board then at Jai and Paula.

The crowd of angry men dissolved into a screaming, arguing rabble. Paula could feel the tension compressing into a hot ball ready to explode. The heat, the screaming voices and her dysentery-sapped body made her head swim. She almost wished Julian would appear but the anger of the crowd and her sense of power was subtly revitalizing her. Half a dozen older men had gathered around Jai and appeared to be angrily offering him strategic advice. Paula noticed a sheepish look in his eyes as they spoke to him. The half dozen advisers stared at her with cold anger. It felt like they were stripping and preparing to violate her.

Julian had always told her he could see her getting angry. That a dark shadow like storm clouds washed over her, turning her coffee coloured eyes into black pools and adding a few shades to her dark Maltese skin. For the first time she felt what he meant. She was sweating anger, it coated her skin like armour.

* * *

Julian stared with interest at the game, and loud angry snippets of Nepali floated up to him. He couldn't see Paula. The circle of men striding around in a tight circle, their hands thrusting downwards like swords, obscured her. Julian stood up and saw that a small space was cleared around Paula, as if she'd cast a spell of protection. The crowd of men jostled and shouted but none encroached the circle. She was rapidly smoking, her hand cutting through the air like a piston while her foot tapped on the stone fence. She was angry but must be winning judging by the commotion, and she wouldn't appreciate him coming down and stopping the game by his presence. Victories over any mechanisms of social control were rare, and he knew Paula would be relishing this one.

He noticed a woman in a purple sari hiding behind a straggly tree watching the game. She turned and looked at him, the stone in her nose flashed, a cheeky Cheshire cat smile blossomed briefly under her kajal stained eyes, then she returned her gaze to the game.

Julian took a light sip of the tepid iodine-tinged water. He missed being able to turn on a tap and get fresh water. A brightly coloured bus crammed with people tore through the village, raising a plume of dust. It reminded Julian he was going to have to spend the next few hours squashed into a bus made for five foot Nepalese people, not six and a half foot Australians. He started to walk towards the cafe, deciding to get some cool drinks for the journey and to enjoy the freedom of movement while he had it.

Paula made two rapid moves, pushing the goats back with her tigers; a murmur of Nepali accompanied each move, followed by a barrage of advice to Jai who defensively moved his goats away from the tigers. Paula had him on the run and despite his blustering machismo he knew he was in a bad position. He'd lost two goats and it was hard to come back with such diminished status. A quiet tension filled the air as Paula contemplated her next move. Jai glared at her but it was a fire with no substance; she could see defeat and shame lurking in the margins of his eyes.

She moved, splitting the herd of goats in two with a line of tigers; Jai attempted to regroup his herd by moving a goat towards her lead tiger. Paula smiled at Jai, then at the group of elders clustered around his side. She moved a tiger towards an isolated goat. A deluge of angry Nepali erupted like thunder, the air was charged with animosity.

Jai's eyes narrowed to dark slits and his lips split into a snarl. He jerked himself to his feet, his thin body tense, his wiry hair plastered over his scalp with sweat, his shirt glued to his body, outlining his nipples. Discordant furious Nepali lacerated the air around Paula, and she didn't know if it was directed towards her or Jai.

Jai snarled at her in Nepali then marched off, followed by most of the men, who continued yelling at him. Paula stood up, with sweat running off her in sticky torrents. A young boy with a disarming smile sat down to continue the game. The few remaining men plied him with urgent advice that he ignored, assuredly moving one of his goats between her tigers to form a wedge. It was the best move she'd seen all day. She summoned a tired smile and looked for Julian. He was wandering towards her, clutching a cold can in each hand. He turned and pointed, and a bus bright with paintings of Hindu deities was rattling towards them.

Paula pointed towards the bus and shook her head, bent down, scooped up the game and walked towards their packs. The boy was already there, smiling, his hands resting on their dusty rucksacks. Julian got there as she did, handing her a can of Coke.

'How'd ya go, beat em all?'

Paula grimaced and shook her head, 'Long story, let this kid put our bags on the roof, I'll pay him.'

'Sure, I'm too tired and hot to be dragging those bloody bags onto the roof.'

Paula wandered over to the boy, handed him some rupees and drifted towards the bus, rolling the cold can over her face.

Julian was crammed next to Paula. He was trying to arrange his tangle of legs so they weren't jammed up against his chin, an impossible task. The bus lurched into gear and rattled off. Paula gazed out of the grimy window at the departing scene.

The men who'd been involved in the game were sitting in a café smoking hookahs and playing cards, the women were dragging rocks from the river to the fields to make fences. The woman Paula wanted to play tigers and goats with was strolling down to the river. She looked up as the bus passed, her eyes caught Paula's, and a knowing smile crept across her face

as subtle and beautiful as a moonbeam. She waved, Paula waved back. Paula stole a last glance out the back window; the young boy who'd put their bags on the roof was walking next to the woman, switching at a water buffalo languidly strolling in front of them.

Julian had given up trying to arrange himself into a comfortable position; his knees were squashed between the front seat and his chin. His long arms drooped down beside him; one was being crushed by a woman balancing a coop of chickens next to him, the other by Paula. Paula laughed softly, reached over and kissed him lightly on the lips.



Journey to the Mountain: The Story of Lullaillaco Boy

Claire Marron

Hello. My name, just as so much of my history, has been lost. But for this I will be Lullaillaco Boy, I am seven and here is my story. A terrible event has happened in my village and the whole of the Incan land. I have been chosen, along with two young girls, to be offered to the mountain gods. I am scared, but everyone else in my village believes that we should be honoured to have been chosen. I know that it will bring great honour to my family and for them I will try to go through with this. Besides, even if I said no, I would be made do it.

I am eating my last meal with my family; after breakfast the parade to Cuzco leaves. I know that my family will be with me during the trip but I already feel alone. The journey is as I had thought it would be – long and hard, and it makes me tired. Every step of the way I feel my feet getting heavier and heavier until they feel as if they would fall off.

Finally we arrive in Cuzco. The city is alive with excitement and we are almost carried to the main palace. My first reaction to the palace is that it is huge. It is beautifully adorned with gold and jewels sparkling in the sunlight, with shifting colours. We are taken to an open room, and it smells amazing, like the fields of flowers in my village. I can see all the tables set out with food and places for all of us to sit. The doors at the end of the chamber open and a man wearing gold robes steps into the room. I immediately bow like all the grown-ups. The emperor shocks us by bowing to us before he sits at the table and looks for us to sit.

The food is delicious and I wonder why we are being feed this. Normally we could only get fish and maize but here in front of us we have birds, corn, bread, meat, fish and maize. Only then does it sink in that this will be one of our last meals. I eat all I can; it is the best food I have ever eaten and I wish I could have more. As night comes, we are taken to our rooms. The day arrives and with it another leg of our journey begins. Today we are to be walking to the mountain, a journey I am scared to be part of.

My stomach twists and turns as we reach the mountain and I am given time to think that this will be my last night alive. We eat well again that night and we are given maize alcohol to calm us. I wake with a start; people are playing drums and singing and dancing. I am taken out of my tent and brought over to another one, where I am dressed in beautiful clothes before my hair is braided and cut.

We are led up the mountain. There are people everywhere and even if there weren't there is no way I could survive if I make a break. The tomb that I would be in is open and I am pushed inside. The girls are given more maize alcohol and they are hit on the head. People come in with gifts and someone binds me so tightly I can hardly breathe, I know that this is the end. The tomb is closed and everything goes dark. I fight to take a breath and choke on last night's dinner when I do. I feel great pain from where the bindings are attached and I wonder what I have done to deserve such pain. Then it disappears, and I know that I am dead.

After all that, here I am sitting in a display as one of the last connections to my history.



The Poinciana Woman of East Point:

The truth behind Darwin's most popular urban myth

Roland Dyrting

Synopsis

This essay is a highly personalised exploration of the foundations behind what has been called Darwin's "... number one urban myth", namely, the story of the Poinciana Woman of East Point. The work explores contemporary and historical aspects of this tale and, although based on footnoted research, is nonetheless primarily written to entertain. No ghosts were exorcised during the production of this piece.

1. Irradiating their gonads

Darwin's East Point, a short axe-headed peninsula cutting into the Arafura Sea, is listed in Lonely Planet's *Northern Territory* travel guide, and justifiably so. In the morning you can visit the pokey, but agreeably idiosyncratic, East Point Military Museum – the photographs and weaponry there show what stubble-chinned young men used get up to before they discovered chest-waxing, replenishing moisturisers and the word "awesome". The point was extensively fortified during World War II, and remnants of once-virile military hardware still stand semi-flaccid throughout the peninsula – searchlight emplacements, lookout towers, ammunition magazines, field-gun turrets.

Cool afternoon sea breezes often blow in, while colonies of wallabies placidly graze the low grasslands and adjacent monsoon vine forest. Got some soy-marinated steaks in the esky? Then have a barbeque along the sandstone cliffs and photograph the silhouettes of blade-fronded pandanus palms against the brief poignancy of another one of Darwin's bright, bruised sunsets. Poinciana trees will twitch and ripple in the twilight's gentle winds as you and yours noisily pack the folding chairs into the troop-carrier's boot.

But after dusk comes night. And when I was a teenager, East Point after dark attracted a horde of young hominids who, sad to say, disported themselves as if they'd all contracted a particularly virulent form of Abyssinian epilepsy. They subjected cars to elaborate but pointless accelerations and decelerations along unsealed roads, ingested unhelpful amounts of ethanol, explosively regurgitated stomach contents, smoked cannabis extracts, evacuated bowels and bladders indiscriminately, used Zippo lighters to set flatulence aflame, irradiated their gonads with hare-brained heavy-metal songs, and spontaneously assumed a chaotic variety of oral, digital and genital juxtapositions.

Paranoid schizophrenics, long-grassers, petrol-sniffers, metho-heads, and the Gerasene demoniac – onlookers to all this slap-happy conduct – also lived, loved and howled out in the surrounding army ruins. Yea verily, I say unto thee, at night behavioural patterns out on the Reserve were sometimes dangerous, often depraved, and almost always deplorable.

I tried to get out there as often as I could.

“\$1BIL MARINA PLAN FOR EAST POINT,” read the headline in the NT News for April Fool’s Day, announcing the Arafura Harbour proposal – a thousand-plus homes, a marina complex, tourist resorts, shops, restaurants, all safely encased by an artificial beach and a massive sea wall¹. This is planned to extend from East Point all the way to Nightcliff, incorporating the Ludmilla Creek and catchment area, and the surrounding mangrove and rainforest habitats.

Not in my back yard, said all the world and his wife, somewhat predictably.

Personally, however, this out-of-the-blue mention of East Point after so many years made me remember a story that I’d almost forgotten.

Here it is: There was once a beautiful brown-skinned Asian woman who long ago was raped by a group of Japanese fishermen out on East Point. She became deranged after this event and when she discovered that she was pregnant she hanged herself from a branch of a Poinciana tree near where she’d been assaulted. She has since become a wraith who stalks and kills men at night. She entices them by initially appearing as a beautiful, white-robed, long-haired young woman but then transforms into a hideous wild-haired eagle-clawed hag just before she eviscerates her victims and feeds on their still-steaming guts. She has a distinctive shrill

scream and can be summoned on moonless nights by spinning three times and calling out her name.

I first heard this story as a teenager, and like all oral histories there were variations. Here's one: "According to local legend, Poinciana Woman is a real person who lived in the East Point area many years ago. She was sexually assaulted and brutally murdered by a man who was never punished for his crime. The Poinciana Woman's ghost is said to haunt the area. Every now and then to avenge her murder she comes back and randomly takes the life of a young male."²

Here's another: "It's a great big myth that's been handed down since before Cyclone Tracy. The better version is that an Indigenous woman was raped by soldiers during settlement, and then hanged and left on ... [a] Poinciana Tree. Reputedly she now haunts East Point and protects women."³

This story has been around since cocky was an egg and has recently been nominated by the Australian Broadcasting Commission as the "...the number one urban myth about Darwin."⁴ Plays have been written about it (the most recent being the 2006 Darwin Festival's *Urban Thrilllogy*), internet blogs have incorporated it in their hubbub, and when I was a high school literacy tutor a few years back, youngsters of all shades could still repeat the basic narrative, plot-point by plot-point, straight off the top of their heads, not even accessing Google once.

To be frank, when I first heard the account it didn't particularly scare me – by that time I'd seen far worse things standing drug-stumped and slack-jawed in any number of Adelaide's inner-city alleyways. What did strike me however, was the story's precisely outlined, and utterly believable, violence. Pack rape, depression and insanity, unwanted pregnancy, suicide, infanticide, male-targeted homicide, ritual disembowelment, all rounded off with a dose of plump cannibalism – it could have been a historical-drama directed by Mel Gibson.

For me, the tale's clear-cut details argued for some sort of veracity for it being at least partially based upon some specific past event. Indeed, there were many others who didn't just credit the story's historical validity but were confident about its ongoing reality as well.

“Man, I wish I was joking, but she is alive,” says one blogger.⁵ “You should get ... some ghost show and prove it to people that it [East Point] is haunted.”

“I don’t believe it’s a myth,” blogs another.⁶ “I’ve been to East Point after dark years ago. And everybody’s car usually stops around the same place, losing all power ... That’s why they built the gates down the road, so they can lock them before dark, because too many people were getting harassed by the Poinciana Woman.”

The devil finds work for idle hands, and spurred on by the NT News article, I decided to find out what I could about a wraith that could immobilise automobiles.

The earliest mentions I could find were from just after the Second World War, although the location of the drama changed from the East Point peninsula to the Daly Street railway bridge.

“Everybody said Daly Street Bridge was haunted,” Maisie Austin writes. “... Apparently, a man hanged himself there and people always saw his ‘shadow’ there ... As well as the hanging, a lady was killed there in a car accident and people said she could be ‘seen’ sitting on the bridge at night ... Another tree under which spirits gathered ... was the Frangipani tree. Apparently, when a mother (and her baby) died at childbirth, their spirits met under this tree. The mother was called the ‘Poinciana Lady.’”⁷

Inez Cubillo concurs, writing, “He [Delfin Antonio Cubillo] captivated everyone with his stories ... old-time stories about Darwin town, bush and Aboriginal stories. Many children sat at his knees ... listening to his Filipino ‘ghost stories’ of the ‘Kapre’, the ‘Aswang’, [and] the ‘Enchanted Spirit Woman’ ... seen at the Daly Street Bridge after midnight.”⁸

“She [the Poinciana Woman] is a bogey woman, curfew story,” sensibly concludes one Internet writer.⁹ “When the curfews were on Non-Whites of the north after World War Two, mothers used her deadly siren song as a way to make sure their kids were home before sunset. In about 2005, the Darwin City Council tried to chop some of the trees down and there was an outcry from the locals because of this legend.”

Later references had a strong tendency to portray the wraith as being not Asian but Aboriginal. In 1997, for instance, the NT News carried a

story about a Larrakia man claiming the East Point area as a site of "... Aboriginal significance...".¹⁰ He criticised the foundation of a fine-food restaurant nearby as being disrespectfully close to the "...Poinciana Lady's..." dwelling place, a wraith supposedly important in Larrakia folklore. George Brown, Darwin's Lord Mayor at the time, responded in a subsequent article by admitting that Indigenous sacred sites linked to this wraith "...may exist..." within East Point's immediate environs.¹¹

And a few years later, a local theatre group performed a very successful play in which a girl is pursued by three lecherous teenage boys. They chase her into the bushlands where, hiding underneath a Poinciana tree, she prays for some sort of deliverance. The spirit of the tree, a good-looking Aboriginal woman, comes to her rescue. An enormous tree branch falls on one boy's head, causing him to immediately chuck a perish. The second boy she lures over the lip of a tall cliff, after which he understandably loses much of his initial sexual enthusiasm. She spares the life of the third boy, however, only turning him into dribbling fruitloop instead.¹²

Indeed, by the twenty-first century, the wraith had been firmly embedded within an Indigenous context. "There are many exquisite orange-red blossomed Poinciana trees," states *Aboriginal Darwin: a guide to exploring important sites of the past and present* while commenting on East Point, "...around which there are a number of stories about the infamous and sometimes mischievous Poinciana Lady."¹³

I distrusted these interpretations for three reasons.

First, the Kenbi Land Claim monograph, published in 1979 by the Northern Land Council, mentions several extremely significant Larrakia sites in the immediate Darwin area — *Gundal, Madlamaning* (Emery Point) and *Dariba Nungalinya* (Old Man Rock), in particular — yet makes no reference to any important Dreamings, stories, or even grave sites, present in or around East Point.¹⁴ Other important written sources (such as *Under the Mango Tree: Oral histories with Indigenous people of the Top End*¹⁵, *Bunji: a story of the Gwalwa Daraniki movement*¹⁶ and *Saltwater People: Larrakia Stories from around Darwin*¹⁷, for example) contain detailed accounts of Larrakia oral history but similarly make no mention of the Poinciana Woman.

Second, there is the Poinciana itself (*Delonix regia*), the tree most consistently partnered with the wraith. This is not indigenous to Australia

– it is instead a Madagascan immigrant. And the ones standing out at East Point, judging by their size and structure, were planted sometime in the early 1900s, not in the pre-colonial past.¹⁸

Third, the story's widespread attestation around other parts of northern Australia besides Darwin vigorously argues against it being a localised Larrakia tradition.

One internet informant writes, for instance: "What made me sure that this is not a myth was the time I was living in Perth, when my friend spoke of a woman who walks an island in Cocos where he is from. He called her the 'Poinciana Woman' – a witch. Now this is no coincidence. He hadn't even heard of the story from Darwin. He was as shocked as I was when I told him of the story that I knew about the Poinciana Woman."¹⁹

Another blogger chucks a U-ey and heads off to Queensland: "This is a common story in Cairns ... I have also heard it around Thursday Island ... she takes on the form of girls or women the boy or man knows to lure them. One version is also that she was pregnant, the child having died within her."²⁰

Like the Devil in the Book of Job, the Poinciana Woman seemed to come from "...roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it."²¹

2. The Narrows

The Indonesian drug-dealer is a companionable flurry of anecdotes, jokes, and cynical one-liners, but he's steadily making me more and more nervous. We're sitting around a large low-slung Balinese coffee table in his living room. Each side of this table has two pull-out drawers. The two facing him contain small satchels of hydro mull-heads, ecstasy tabs, amphetamine pills — and a shitload of legal tender.

We're in a Housing Commission flat in the Narrows, up on the third floor, but I'm not here to see him. I'm here because his brother, who also lives here apparently, had pinned a notice on a supermarket community board, advertising a second-hand laptop.

SUCK BULK PISS, urges some graffiti down in the car-park, but the only people following this advice are a large group of Aboriginal countrymen sitting out under trees in the surrounding parkland. They pass around

plastic bottles filled with cheap moselle and are dryly chanting their Dreamings to the urgent staccato beat of clapsticks.

Everyone else around here seems to want to get stoned or zoned instead; every fifteen minutes or so there's a knock on the unlocked security-mesh door. The white folks are buying the tabs; the coloured mob are stumping up for the broccoli. One Filipino punter even pays for his deal with four bound mud crabs and a cooking sauce poured into a large juice bottle.

I'm getting anxious for two reasons. This operation is so unprofessional – there's no one standing lookout, no locks and bolts, and the drugs and moolah are all up front, ripe for the taking. And it's not the police I'm really worried about, it's the mechanics of predation: Drugs attract money, and together drugs and money attract carnivores.

The drug dealer places the mud crabs and sauce into his fridge and sits back down. "Wish everybody would pay with –" he begins.

An Asian woman walks slowly into the room from the flat's central corridor. She's wearing only a soccer jersey and is obviously still groggy from sleep. She has the body of a tennis-player, the face of Queen Nefertiti, and her shiny black hair reaches down to the back of her knees. She zombies over to the fridge, opens it and gulps down water straight from the bottle. After she shuts the fridge, the drug dealer smiles and says something to her in Indonesian.

She jiggles an erect middle finger at him and then stumps out of the living room.

After seeing what her nipples just did with that jersey, I can't think straight – man, I can't even think curved.

"She's a friggin' Pontianak," he says with a chuckle. "Blair Witch Project, or what! She's a spunk, but my brother has to put his balls in a rack every –"

"What did you just call her?" I say.

His brother never does show up. After about two hours, I leave my mobile number and depart. (The bloke rings me up that night and says he's sold the laptop to Cash Converters.)

As I wait in a concrete bus stop opposite the Housing Commission flats, a raggedy group of teenagers in a parkland decide to amuse themselves.

They tie upside-down, opened Garbags to lit boat-flares. These form black parachute-like contraptions that slowly rise from the lawns and drift off towards the industrial suburb of Winnellie

Next week an almighty brawl will erupt here, involving over fifty people. Apart from the usual black eyes and busted-up lips, a man will be hacked in the neck with an axe, another will be impaled on a fence, and a woman will be stabbed with a replica samurai sword stolen from the Palmerston Shopping Centre.²²

I wait for my bus, watching the teenagers' ingenious kites. This place resembles what East Point Reserve used to be at after midnight, and yet it's only eleven-thirty in the morning.

3. Infested with wraiths

If the dogs are howling, she's far away; if they're whining, she's nearby.

She stalks lonely roads and roosts in tall trees. The cloying smell of *kemboja* (frangipani) often precedes her. An exquisite white-robed woman walking slowly, head downcast – "...her tapering nails of extraordinary length (a mark of beauty)... long jet-black tresses she allows to fall down to her ankles..."²³ "After the victim falls into her trap, she will turn ugly and old with sharp teeth ... another belief is that she was abused by a male individual ..."²⁴ The corpses of her victims, if found at all, will be unspeakably desecrated, a defilement of their mothers' pain-of-birth.

She lives all over South-East Asia. Her most common name is Pontianak — "A vampire ghost of a woman who died in childbirth; a banshee," explains one respected Indonesian dictionary.²⁵ She has other names as well. In the Malaysian peninsula she's also called Langsuir, Matianak, Boentianak,, in the Philippines, Pantianak or Tiyanak, in Indonesia, Kuntilanak, in Timor, Pontiana.²⁶

There's a middle-sized town in northern Borneo named after her, a place initially so infested with wraiths that an Arabic pirate once fired cannon balls from his boat at a throng of them as they trudged mindlessly on a beach.²⁷ There's been many movies made about her – nine that I could find.²⁸ I've recently seen one of them. It was so bad it resembled what a porno movie would look like if all of the sex-bits had been carefully expunged.

One of the first academic mentions of her is in Skeat's classic anthropological tome *Malay Magic* published in 1900 and sightings of her persist to this very day – mostly shitty footage shot on mobile phones.

The Poinciana Woman is the Pontianak who lives in Darwin – an illegal immigrant undoubtedly.

But who brought her here? Here's a description of Darwin that doesn't mention the Drover or Lady Sarah Ashley: "During the late 1930s, administrative concern over the presence of Asian crews in Darwin increased. In 1936 there were 130 Japanese and 103 Malays employed in Darwin. There were a number of ethnic groups loosely termed 'Malays' or 'Koepangers', including people from Singapore, Java, Maluku (Aru Islands), Timor and nearby Sabu, and Roti and Sulawesi."²⁹ And the third largest group of Asian seamen? Filipinos, my friend. Apart from the soon-to-be exiled or imprisoned Japanese, all these sailors came from within the Pontianak's traditional hunting range. Dead set.

I'd been searching for a specific crime, a definite rape case-history, but I'd instead discovered that Darwin is part of South-East Asia. That we're all right slap-bang in the hey-diddle-diddle of what Matthew Flinders (when he encountered Makassans off the Arnhem Land coast) once called "... the Malay Road."³⁰

Selamat tinggal, Pontianak prey.



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Firework

Kieran Finnane

Synopsis

Firework is a personal essay, reflecting on the significance of losing one's house and all one's possessions in a fire. Such an event is obviously of broad relevance, but the setting of the experience reflected on here is specific to a part of the Northern Territory, its lifestyle and community.

I could imagine afterwards that every time I woke and saw the stars shift in the sky, a window in our home sprayed its glass onto the verandah, a beam bent and folded down to the floor. That every time I heard a stirring and cracking in the bush, a book, a painting, a garment flared briefly, a jar popped, its contents cooked forever. That these gasps and sighs reached me from a distance, that I knew without knowing.

At first light I made tea and cut bread, taking breakfast to my husband and son still in their sleeping bags. We'd drunk half the water and eaten the canned stew, so the packs would be lighter today. We rolled up the sleeping bags and mats and started walking. Our son had made himself a companion from a feather stuck into a split stick. He tripped along the track, talking to his feather friend, and to us. He was full of talk, some of it just sound, his own kind of music.

We were walking into the sun, which lit up the grasses, creating a shimmering sweep in front of us, pierced by the strong forms of tree trunks and rocks. The track wound down into hollows and up over knolls, with a low range rising on our left. We could see other tracks here and there, leading into the ranges, and planned a few detours for next time when we'd come back with our daughter.

The rest stop, equipped with a water tank, picnic tables and toilets, was about two hours away. When we got there we came into mobile range and a friend's number showed as a missed call, over and over. I rang.

"You've got to come home," he said simply, "your house has burnt. It's completely gutted."

News like that has a surface of meaning, which you comprehend, but the full meaning unfolds slowly over time. My husband had built the house twenty-five years ago and had lived there with his first family before his divorce. I looked at him. I could see he was already thinking about what he should do to deal with the situation, ever the practical man.

We didn't move straight away. A band of bush walkers arrived. We knew the guide and told him our news. He could hardly grasp what we were talking about. In the bush, with just the minimum of food, clothing and shelter on your back, something like that doesn't seem to have much relevance.

We started walking again. Our son's happy babble had stopped. We were walking abreast but we weren't huddled together as the track had widened into a dirt road. Each of us seemed to occupy our own space. We would speak now and then – it means this, it means that, a list of seemingly unrelated things except that they had been brought together under the roof of a house. And, when would we tell our daughter? She was away on holiday. Would we bring her straight home? What home? Our friend met us on the road. He didn't say much, just listened and answered our questions, very calmly. He wasn't afraid for us or if he was, he didn't show it. Looking back later, I would appreciate that. I felt a little afraid as we got closer to home, afraid that the sight would be shocking.

A small group of friends were there, as well as firemen and police. The house looked like itself – that is, it had its own shape, except there were gaping black holes where windows and doors had been. It had completely contained the fire. The trees and grass around it were hardly even singed.

I kept my distance but walked around to the courtyard. Here it was all a terrible mess, and I had an impulse to get a broom and start to clean up. It didn't seem right to have the house in that state when there were people there who should be looked after. Our friends were either crying or dumbstruck. They watched us. I watched our son – his eyes were glistening and his bottom lip trembled.

Another friend arrived, with boxes of food and clothes, including jackets of all sizes. He was crying. "I'm so sorry, so sorry," he kept saying. I was concerned to see so many people upset because of us. "It's all right, it's

not as bad as you think, it's only *stuff*, after all," I told them. I felt like changing the subject, but it was hard to know what else to talk about.

"Let's go back to the track," I said to my husband, "we might as well, nothing to do here." We laughed and for a crazy moment it felt possible. We were uninjured, we felt strong and well after our walk. A lightness surged in me: we were alive with just the shirts on our backs, the sun was shining, roads all around beckoning. Then, just as quickly, I felt tired and wanted to sit down. There were half-burnt swags scattered in the driveway. I sat on one and looked numbly at the house.

Another couple arrived. I knew them, the husband used to work with us, but we hadn't seen them in a few years. I wondered why they were there. How had they heard? Had they come just out of curiosity? I felt annoyed as I went up to say hello and then I saw how upset the wife was and then I remembered. Their son had been killed a few years before in a car crash. They'd never said that that was why they had left their home but I had supposed it was. The wife used to talk about her garden and her furniture, about the wonderful fruit and vegetables in the district, about fishing and swimming in the river. Why wouldn't she want to go home?

Now tears from behind her sunglasses slid down her face as she looked at the home we would never be able to go back to. There, tangled somehow in the mess of rafters and cracked walls, was her grief for her son and the happy home they had once had. Or was it rather that knowing loss, she had a deep empathy when others experienced it? I knew my loss was nothing compared to hers. Somewhere behind me our son was scratching the dirt with a stick and crying a little – he was alive and he'd be okay.

In the days that followed many people offered kindnesses, small and large. This had a wonderful buoying effect, quite elating at times. It is not often that one has the opportunity to receive so much kindness.

Many people also cried, even though we remained mostly dry-eyed. Perhaps because the rest of our lives was in fairly good shape, from the start we understood that losing only our house was at the lower end on the scale of losses that people can experience. For some people the fire must have called up their own losses in a vivid way, perhaps because they were not over them or hadn't allowed themselves to grieve as much as they should. I heard stories of families whose lives had completely changed

after losing their house in a fire; I was told the first year would be the worst. I wondered if I was missing something, if one day I'd wake up and realise something really dreadful had happened, something that would be a blight on my life. That never happened.

I did cry over the fire. Once I wept, for quite a long time. I'd come on my own to sift through the ashes to see if there was anything I wanted to retrieve. As I approached the house I felt a tender sadness for it, that it could have been dealt such a blow. It looked so assaulted. I went in through the back door, or rather the hole where it had been, and saw on the floor a perfect row of blackened books. These were the children's old storybooks. I knelt down and started to pull the charred covers open. Although the pages were burnt at the edges, they were still perfectly legible; the rich colour of the illustrations seemed brighter than ever amongst all the black and grey. I cried and cried over these books.

Another time I cried on the shoulder of a friend about the bombs we had left outside our children's bedrooms. Three motorbikes and a jerrycan of fuel. The rooms were totally destroyed. In our son's only the metal frame of his bed was still recognisable; in our daughter's, the metal legs of her desk. Everything else seemed to have vaporised: the lightness of what children own and care about. I cried too when our daughter came home and there was no home to take her to and not so much as a hairclip or a bauble to give her from her old life.

I read a story about a couple's childlessness, in which their love for one another and the desolation they feel as the years go by is evoked by the spaces and furniture and neighbours of the apartment they live in. The author in other stories sometimes allows furniture, the mute witness of so much intimacy, to speak. What does my burnt house say about me and my family, I wonder?

She likes to read, or at least, she likes to think about reading, say the scorched pages from valuable, wonderful books amongst the mountain of ash in my study, spilling out from the door.

She can read French and German, they also say (wrong on the second count – they should just say that I am the one who takes care of the books).

She allows papers to accumulate, say the old letters, clippings, magazines, tickets, bills and worthless old records of nothing much. (None of them say though, "Dear daughter ... love, Dad", the one thing I am looking for, because he is dead and I'll never be able to read that again.)

She has a husband, say the two huge motorbikes lying in a twisted heap.

They have a son, says the little bike alongside.

Yes, she has a husband, says his wedding ring hiding in the rubble, waiting for the children to find it. (My husband takes to wearing it – he never has before – and within days it is as shiny as it was when it was new. No other jewellery survived.)

She or he or both make films and videos, say the dozens of cans containing sticky spools of celluloid and the piles of videotape turned to rust-coloured velvety ash.

They have something to do with the local newspaper and it's more than just reading it, say five thousand scorched archived copies.

*They have a daughter, say the scorched copies of *Girlfriend* blowing all about the courtyard, telling lies about our daughter because she has long ago moved on. ("Why *Girlfriend*?" she cries in angry frustration when she fails to find anything much else. She weeps more than any of us over her losses.)*

Someone plays the piano, says its steel frame and twisted strings. Or someone has tried to, at least.

And the guitar, says a set of six strings that nobody notices.

They cooked a meal here last night, say the broken dishes still clinging to the dish rack that has fallen on the floor.

They'd inherited some old silver, an English teapot, a Dutch coffee pot, say the old silver in its melted plastic tray and the shards of porcelain – shining white with pink roses, white with garlands of blue, prettier than ever in the ash.

Someone - a French friend perhaps? – gave them a set of Laguiole knives with the signature bee on the handles, say four of the eight that survive intact (and which we'll continue to use despite their faint odour of fire).

They otherwise had little of worth, say the shards of cheap crockery, the sort found in any number of households around the town.

The walls, that once carried some fine paintings, are silent.

Are they Catholics? ask a few glass beads of a rosary and a reproduction of an early Renaissance Madonna and Child that lies serenely in the ash, almost unscathed. (It had been cut out of a magazine and slipped into the pages of a book about Rome.)

Are they Europeans? ask old black and white photographs of three generations of a European family in the late 1950s.

German-speaking, say the captions, written in a childish hand.

These photographs belong to the man of the family, say the two little boys, peas in a pod, who smile out of many of them.

They each look like their handsome mother, say the faces of all three.

But nothing at all like her husband, adds his face.

He may not be their father, his face continues.

Where is their father? ask the surviving pages of the album but they offer no clue.

Is this a sad story? they ask.

No, they answer upon reflection, for here they all are at the tennis club, in mountain forests, on the Dalmatian coast, at table together, here is their happy mother with their stepfather, elegant, dressed for a masquerade ball, dancing, laughing. A young boy's careful, rather proud document of his family.

We survived because we weren't under plastic, say the photos mounted on pages interleaved with thick tissue paper.

Poor thing, say the sticky lumps of my plastic-pocket albums.

* * *

One evening about a month after the fire we go for a walk near the house we are renting. We're with a couple of friends, close friends who took us in on the first night after the fire. We leave the track at the base of a high,

broad hill and climb up. It takes some time. The sun has already set when we come over the top and see the valley that holds the town where we live spread below us, and beyond the town, the ranges dancing far out to the west. The afterglow in the huge sky is a dusty yellow, which fades slowly into grey, which deepens into darkness. We lose from view the house holding our children, who are looking after our friends' little girl. We stay on in the dark, with the town nothing more than the thought of it and its pinpricks of coloured light. We talk, mostly about things that happened to us in our separate pasts, interesting things, funny things. Eventually hunger drives us down, picking our way over rocks and through scrub in the dense night until we come to the faint glimmer of the track. When we get to the house the children have fed themselves and the little girl has told our daughter she loves her.

From this night life begins to return to normal. A daughter is born to a friend and we all get the pleasure of holding a small baby again. Another friend writes a play. And another celebrates her fiftieth birthday. It's hot by now and we sit out in the garden at night and eat a wonderful meal and sing and recite and pay tribute. And the houses of three other families in our town also burn down. As our house was burning, we were lighting a small campfire at a pretty place fancifully called Fairy Springs. We had watched the sun go down, filling the vast valley with a fiery light. We could see parts of the town on the horizon. My legs were aching from the walk and we were all very tired. We ate as soon as it was dark and were already dozing by the embers, our son between us, when my phone rang. I didn't want to talk to anyone and turned it off. I realised later that it was our friend trying to let us know about the fire.

I didn't sleep well that night but it wasn't because of any sense of something going wrong. It was just that the ground was hard and I could feel my bones. And sometimes my husband was snoring, and once our son, dreaming, flung his hand out and hit me. That was why, between short deep sleeps, I saw the valley turn slowly towards dawn and heard the night creatures go about their business all around me.



Larapinta Trail: Notes from a journal

Leni Shilton

Synopsis:

This essay was written following a bush walk through the West MacDonnell Ranges in Central Australia in the winter of 2008. It was written to entertain and to bring the reader on a journey and share some of the experiences of walking through this stunning country.

Winter 2008

After filling the house with cooking and shopping for a week, we pile swags on the roof racks, pack everything we can think of in the trailer and set off on our trek along the Larapinta Trail.

The worries about details fade the moment we drive out of town, the country rising about us with its familiar beauty. The trek is a reunion of sorts: cousins, sisters and old friends; some coming together again after a gap of twenty years. The numbers have swollen since initial talks as news travelled through cyberspace that Pete and Alex wanted to walk the Trail, and there are sixteen of us now.

Pete has worried and trained hard, running up and down Mt Wellington as the snow fell on Hobart. As we set off, our fitness levels vary, but Andrew and his First Aid Kit that includes anti-inflammatories and painkillers, reassures us. Some of us know these mountains well, having lived here for years, or having visited many times. Once bitten, it seems the desert with all its inconsistencies and beauty is a hard place to stay away from.

The group sets off from the Old Telegraph Station on the long winding walk that rings the north of Alice and gives the impression of not leaving town. Photos show us laughing, one of those strange snaps where Pete has set the timer on the camera and we are all smiling on and on as he runs back to the group and we all wait for the light to stop flashing or the beep to go off. I think the next picture would be more interesting, capturing the relief on everyone's faces as they move away from the pose, keen to get on.

My young son has done this walk a number of times on school camps so he feels comfortable to lead the group of adults along the snaking ridge top.

Sue and I are the support crew for the day, so we wave off the walkers and drive back into town. We hook up the trailer and take the western road past Flynn's Grave, through a locked gate, then drive slowly over rocks to Wallaby Gap, our first meeting point. Our plan is to walk for five days, taking in the first five stages of the Trail, about one hundred and eighty kilometres of walking through the Western MacDonnell Ranges. The two 4WD Toyotas, our old rusty workhorse and a hire car, are filled to bursting with gourmet meals and other goodies. We unpack ready for the walkers, with the kettle boiling and bowls of water for sore feet. Some days this plan works well; on others, we barely get the 4WD free of the trailer before the line of walkers appears through the trees.

Our walk will take in Wallaby Gap, Simpson's Gap, Fish Hole, Standley Chasm and the last day to Birthday Waterhole on the Hugh River.

Wallaby Gap

In the early evening, before dark, I wander into Wallaby Gap, hoping to see water. Instead I am greeted by a dry rocky creek bed and silence. After years of drought, no birds are calling to each other across the rocks, there is no sound at all. Just my feet scraping on the stones and the voices of others from our group who've climbed to the top of the gorge and are calling out to be waved at. No sound feels like no life, and there is a sense of being unwelcome here.

Closer to camp I am surprised by a line of walkers all dressed in fluorescent orange jackets that appear bobbing amongst the trees. Their jackets, it seems, are a uniform that they have to wear on the tour. I doubt it would stop them from getting lost, but it may help the tour leader find them. They trudge past our camp to the pit toilet up the hill, talking loudly, toilet paper in hand. We call them the 'fluoro touros' and are relieved not to see them again on the trek.

Simpson's Gap

Walking in front of me is my daughter. She's talking to her uncle Dave. Dave is telling her about a dog his family had that was shot by a farmer,

and Lahni is asking Dave question after question about the dog and how it died and what they did with its body. We are making our way up the path out of Wallaby Gap. The path will take us along the edge of the range. Much of the time we walk in shadow with the country dropping steeply away to our left and rising up straight and tall to our right. I am reminded of Tolkien and the knowledge he had of the country he was writing about in *Lord of the Rings*. Country he must have walked as he wrote about it. I think especially of the country he describes in intense detail when the hobbits leave 'The Last Homely House' at Rivendell and journey towards Moria. Maybe I'm wrong; maybe he made up the whole landscape. Lahni and Dave are talking about something else now and I'm impressed by my nine year old's ability to talk incessantly and keep up the walking pace.

We eat lunch high on a saddle over looking the valley that runs back towards Alice Springs. We can see some of the town from here and the black dots of cars moving slowly, far in the distance. Dave gets reception on his phone and talks to his daughter in Victoria. We are far from everything and still too close all at the same time.

To our right the track will take us down towards Simpson's Gap. It is lightly wooded country, dotted with more and more birdlife, the closer we get to a waterhole. The track is steep and my bike-riding knees screech out with pain as I slowly take one step at a time. Lahni barely notices the descent and rushes past me to catch up with Alex this time, who is busy telling her a story about his family in Ireland and his twin girls in Hobart.

Our campsite has a chip heater shower, gas cooking and pit toilets. We are treated to good food and warm drinks – so much for roughing it. The campfire is smoky and Lahni tells us to say 'I hate white rabbits' to get rid of the smoke. It works, which amazes us all, but we have to say it all night because the smoke just moves on to annoy the next person.

Stars in the ground at Fish Hole

The Four Wheel Drive track into Fish Hole is a series of washouts and erosion gullies, but I have to admit that driving it is more fun than I've had in years. The small green trailer rocks precariously from side to side as I walk our old 4WD over rocks and through gullies and the few kilometres to the camp seem to take forever.

I am expecting a smell when we get there, given the name 'Fish Hole' but there is only a faint odour from the eco toilet. We use this sparingly as it is flushed with precious water from the rainwater tanks.

Our little camp faces south and red hills rolled away from us to the east and west. Earlier that morning, back at Simpson's Gap, we'd left the walkers on the other side of the mountain range. They arrive tired and footsore, having walked twenty-six kilometres, much of it through flat, dry, empty country. They don't have much to report about the walk except for being followed by a thin, hopeful dingo for some of the time.

The only other family already camping at Fish Hole turns out to be the sister, brother-in-law and nephew of Barbara, who is one of our group. Earlier in the afternoon, when we'd arrived, Barbara had noticed three camping mats on a platform lined up neatly under the camping shelter. When she saw the shoes she'd said, 'My sister is camping here.' This is both entirely astounding and one of those things that seems to happen in the bush. Strange coincidences abound in this country. We invite Barbara's sister and her family for tea and breakfast and a warm spot at the campfire, to make up for our noise and the sense that we have taken over their space.

Barbara's sister tells us about the 'Stars in the Ground' and after dinner, when people were quietly talking around the campfire, my small daughter and I walk up the track in bright moonlight away from the warmth and light of the camp. The air is still and cold. The quiet is a thick presence around us. The ground sparkles at us like fairy lights turning on and off as we walk along. In the rocky hills we find stacks of mica imbedded in the ground. On the track, the fine sheets have been scattered into millions of tiny pieces by car tyres.

My daughter is drawn to the flaky silver like a moth. She runs in moonlight bright enough to read by, and digs out sheets of mica with her hands. When the cold begins to seep in, we walk back to camp breathing out steam, our hands full of brightness as fragile as butterfly wings.

In the morning the ice has crystallised like a jewel in the bottom of the kettle and we make patterns in the downy layer of white frost on the tops of our swags.

Standley Chasm

We pack up from Fish Hole, trying to make it look like we haven't been there at all. This is hard. The country is so damaged, parched and struggling. The trees are broken and at the edge of our camp, and in the dry creek bed, there is evidence of cattle. The ash from our campfire just adds to the desolate look and we cover it up. We start out on the walk hoping to get back into softer, greener country. Years of drought have pushed wayward cattle into the waterholes deep in the mountains, and it is only when our path winds up over rocks that have to be scaled that we leave evidence of them behind.

The bird life is surprisingly quiet and we debate over the identity of a black and white bird that appears in the quiet of rocky gorges, hopping from tree to tree, fading into the shadows, then appearing again on a bough as if to show off. We finally decide on the Pied Honeyeater, after circling around the Flycatcher and Willy Wagtail. The locals among us know it can't be a Willy Wagtail, and wait patiently for a clearer look before coming to a final decision. It seemed important to name this small bird, as there were so few of them here.

We pass three rangers as we head into the gorge. Pete talks to them about the country, the drought and the condition of the walking track, but only one of the three answers, and only then in single words as the other two look away. They seem eager to be gone and we wonder at an argument between them, or a love triangle possibly, which is silly and frivolous of us. The real truth is more likely that they are sick of talking to walkers.

We take winding paths along dry creek beds and through rocky valleys, the soft pink gorges rising up around us and dropping away again as we move into yet another valley. We are walking in winter but the sky is clear blue and the sun warm. The walk is pronounced the most beautiful thus far, the length a very reasonable fourteen kilometres. So deep in the mountains, the hills and creek beds are treed and green and rush with delighted birds. We feel the lightness of the country and sense its hidden water supply.

Our party split at a fork in the path, with one going round a ridge and the other following a creek bed that weaves its way up to a saddle. We meet

in the cool of a rock face some hours later, each group proclaiming their route the finest and having the photos to prove it.

The climb down into Standley Chasm is a precarious drop through a series of holes in the rocks in a narrow orange gorge. We edge down over the cool rocks one by one; aware we are climbing down where a river takes its path after rain.

In the chasm we are confronted with other people, 'day trippers' who, unlike us, smell of shampoo and perfume and cigarette smoke. We hurry past them, not wanting our earlier sense of peace and contact with the country to fade.

Birthday Waterhole - Hugh River

The walk to Birthday Waterhole goes via Brinkley's Bluff, a steep climb followed by an even steeper descent. The views from the top take in rolling mountains east and west and breathless country in shades of orange, white and red with only the occasional tinge of green. Strips of green can be seen running the lengths of valleys and creek beds in snaky lines of life. The cattle country to the north declares itself by being a sea of bare red earth, empty of grass and trees.

My sixteen-year-old son and his mate leap up the mountain, running ahead of the others. Their energy seems limitless and they are only slowed at the end of the day by the blisters on their feet. My son writes in the visitors' book at the top of the Bluff, letting people know they can hire their camping gear from us next time. There are the usual notes in the book: 'Great Views!', 'Don't light campfires,' and 'Please crap away from the campsite!' Even with the views, it would be a very windy, miserable place to camp without a fire but everyone was in completely agreement with the last comment.

We eat chocolate and drive the weary walkers along the very slow 4WD track back to our camp. My husband and I do this drive. I keep a distance from Chris and watch all four wheels on his vehicle move independently of each other, as he walks it slowly in low range over the boulders on the track. The steep drops into the creek beds are especially hairy. I lose sight of the track completely under the huge bonnet of the 4WD. I hold the picture the track in my mind and trust that I know where my wheels are. We get up and down each drop safely with all the right bits on the cars still intact.

We keep bumping into people we know and when a troop carrier pulls off the track for us to get by, we find it is two good friends from town, one the father of a young lad in the car with us.

'Hi Dad!' he calls out from the back seat of our Toyota.

'Oh! Hello Hugh!' answers his father, 'I was wondering where you'd got to. When will I see you at home again?' We all laugh at the wry humour and farewell our friends to continue the slow drive to our camp.

And later that night, at Hugh River, some friends walk out of the darkness and join us around the campfire. They are camping further up the track and heard we would be here.

The camp is a gentle space of unwinding and resting. The walkers settle into the quiet of the country, taking off walking boots, washing sore feet and then finally relaxing.

My sister and I boil the billy and take the hot water away from camp. Hiding behind the trunk of a wide river red gum trunk, we strip off and wash our tired bodies in the small bowl of water. We laugh because it is like so many moments from our childhood, but for the years and our changed bodies.

Lahni calls out for me to watch her as she cartwheels along the creek, her hair flying through the air in an ark. When she tires of cartwheels, she sits to write in her early writing: 'I am Lahni. I am camping with my family.' She has just started to write sentences and begins all her writing with this wonderfully simple statement that encompasses the world: 'I am Lahni.'

We watch her joy, her love of the country expressed so clearly, and it makes us smile.

We come to the end of five days with relief and reluctance. We have no more walking, but no one wants to pack up. On our final day, we sit in the dry Hugh River, talking and eating and drinking tea. The eucalypts stretch across us, making patchy shade. Tiny Honeyeaters flit about in the branches, busy with their day, and Red-Tailed Black Cockatoos screech overhead as they follow the path of the creek back towards the hills. The world is simpler here than in a house, and we stay a little longer and put off the moment of leaving.



... drowning ...

Mary Anne Butler

Synopsis

A woman finds herself in a precariously soggy position during her first Darwin Wet season. A blackly comic experience, ... drowning ... is told in the Second Person voice, aiming to draw the reader in to vicariously experience the protagonist's emotional turmoil.

Darwin in the Wet. Rain buckets down relentlessly, day upon night upon day. Your house floods. Water seeps in through the doors, under the cracked slab. Your pool overflows, your guttering cracks and leaks. Everything grows mould: clothes, photo albums, your grandmother's antique table, the century-old puppets from Chang Mai which you carried around in your backpack for three full months. The Wet shows no respect. You begin to suspect that fate and nature have a secret union, seeking vengeance for that ant you stepped on, that fly you swatted, that beetle you failed to rescue as it got sucked down the vortex of your swimming pool filter, scrabbling desperately for a lifeline.

You feel you will go mad.

Finger in the dyke, you try to stem the flow. You ring plumbers and roofers and drainers; troubleshoot your way across the great canal while panic and depression sink in their sharpened claws. You do the sixth load of washing for the day, drape it around your bedroom, attempt to stem the rising damp and mould. You wonder what brought you to Darwin; wonder what makes you stay. Seven hundred millimetres of rain in the month of February alone, the plumber tells you as he writes out his exorbitant invoice. He's never been so busy, himself. And yes, you do have a huge drainage problem here, he can see that. Well thanks for pointing it out, you say. You go to the Yellow Pages and find his advertisement. You rip it out of the book and burn it, slowly. You chant while you're doing this, in the hope that all the other Yellow Pages in Darwin will somehow go out in unison and sympathy, and blacken his ad from the book so that his work dries up and he goes broke.

You suspect you have a nasty streak.

Friends come around with sandbags and goodwill, tarpaulins and advice, scotch and Coke. One with a mattock to dig a trench, another with food, for morale. Good friends. Thoughtful friends.

Anger and depression wrestle with helplessness and common sense. You dig the trench, eat the food. But at night, alone in the flooding house, the day's fears compound and magnify, settling into your churning gut and tripling in intensity. These fears play and replay in your head, generating Dread and all the blackness she entails. Finally sleep takes you, but relief doesn't. Nightmares invade your head: worms seep through the floors, tree roots wrap themselves around your ankles; you lie helpless in your bed as it floats through the walls and out to the high, moody seas where sharks circle, grinning.

Grey, listless morning finally staggers into the world to find your living room inches deep in water. The State Emergency Services arrive with more sandbags and trench-diggers. You break down finally; weep on the shoulder of a large, jolly, pig-tailed woman in orange overalls who manages to extricate herself from your shuddering grip to go and rescue a woman who is trapped in a car with a tree across it. Perversely, you feel better that someone else is suffering ñ perhaps even more than you. You're not proud of this, but the feeling is overwhelmingly satisfying.

Your suspicion about the nasty streak is confirmed.

A friend suggests that you go out; have some fun. You extract a going-out and having fun shirt from your cupboard to find it furry, coated with green mould. And another. And another. Your leather shoes rot silently; your camera lens grows a film of moss. You pick up your guitar to find the strings have rusted to each other. Photos stick together in their albums.

You stay in, walled against the floods. You grab your rusty-stringed guitar to write a song. As you write it, you're sure the song is brilliant: moody, insightful and lyrical. But you forget to write it down, so it fades into nothingness; lost in the cosmos with all those other forgotten songs floating somewhere, and all you have left of it is two chords and half a refrain, neither of which will rocket you to rock-star status.

The dog curls on the couch, looking soulful.

You remember your responsibilities, and a dog needs a walk. Even in the Wet. She rallies at the word and ventures forth ñ shuffling sideways into the rain with her earflaps plastered shut and her eyes squinted tight against the driving elements. She looks like a blind, deaf crab. Itís almost enough to make you laugh, but not quite. You search for your sense of humour but suspect itís somewhere down the storm drain along with natureís other refuse.

In the outside world the very ground is lethal to tread; slippery, spongy, festering. Frogs generate their deafening chorus and, despite your inherent fondness of them, you would do anything ñ even commit froggie murder ñ to shut them up right now. Mosquitoes and slime invade even that private space between your forehead and your mind. The sky broods, slate-grey and grumbling.

And then, you see it. You swear that ñ through the grey, moody cloud and drizzling rain ñ a single, thin ray of sun is leaking towards the earth. You can tell that itís trying hard to break through the cloud and rain; it really is. If you stand still and quiet for long enough, you can even hear it whispering to you: Ím coming, Ím coming. Hang on. Íll be there soon.

The rain wanes briefly, the dog offers you a palm frond to wrestle from her, you can see the ghost of a rainbow hanging in the clouds.

Something deep inside you stirs; something very much like Joy.



DYMOCKS ABORIGINAL TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WRITERS' AWARD

Time Marches On

Ellen Maria Pocock (Nabajin)

It was Ellen's third winter in Alice Springs. After becoming a Police Officer she had volunteered to go to Alice, thinking that being away from home and friends would allow her to become a stronger woman and a better copper. She was rugged from neck to toe, with two pairs of socks, thermal leggings and pantyhose under the work trousers, singlet, work-shirt, jumper and then the nylon bomber jacket. Yet even with all that gear she could feel her tropical blood running cold to her extremities. It was her turn to be part of the watch-house crew on the patrol group which, in the winter, she didn't mind one bit, because it meant that she could hide next to the heater around the bursts of work that would find its way to the watch-house door.

The watch-house was old, so old that it no longer met the requirements of the Ricky Dick, or more appropriately the RCIADIC (Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths In Custody). The floors were all polished concrete, which when hosed out would become as slippery as a banana peel and leave members and prisoners subject to slipping on the floors. The walls outside of the cells were rendered concrete in parts; if you had scuffles with an aggressive detainee both you and they could end up grazed and injured. The male side of the cells had upstairs cells which were no longer used except for storage because of the RCIADIC, and both the male and female exercise yards that all the cells opened onto had no roof except for an arc-mesh to the open sky, allowing the cold, rain and heat to come down on all who were housed beneath.

For members to do cell checks in the height of summer, when it was raining, or worse in the winter rain, they would have to move carefully along close to the cell doors so as not to get wet from falling rain, not slip on the banana peel floors, hopefully not get spat on by a cranky prisoner – and then make it back, dry off and do the entry into the computer and hopefully not electrocute themselves while doing so. The old watch-house was soon to be demolished to make way for the new one, which would

apparently be state-of-the-art, with all the bells and alarms Police would ever need.

Ellen looked up at the clock – almost 5.30am and time to do the walk. Placing the book down on the desk beside her and rising slowly from the seat, she moved towards the big heavy white door. As the door heaved open, the cold night air hit her face as sharp as a slap and just as painful. Quickly stepping into the cold in the reception room, she shut the door behind her to keep the warmth inside the member's office.

Turning and heading through the next door the swish of her arms in the jacket seemed loud against the night air. Looking up through the arc-mesh roof she could see the moon. It seemed so large and luminous, captivating Ellen and causing her to stop still. Staring at the moon which hung so low in the sky that she could almost touch it, even the stars gave way under its majestic and magical appearance. "Swish" – the fabric of her jacket breaking the silence as she realised she had been standing so still that she had been holding her breath. Wanting to hold that moment as long as humanly possible, that reaching for air her lungs had forced a breath to be taken.

How long had she stood still, mesmerised by the moon? Have to move, time would get away from her and she would be needing to call Joyce and let her know how many prisoners meals to make and release all the PCs¹ before she did that. Only a couple of men would be needing breakfast, and the two ladies who were in for PC would have to be released from custody.

She strode to the 'tank' at the end of the yard, the swish of her jacket more purposeful now. "Hullo. Good morning ladies. Time to get up." Nothing, but the steady snore from the blankets ensued. "Allo, you mob. Dijjan iddan bin time to go blanga you mob home eh?" "Come on I know dijjan early one, but you mob bin ere plenty time now, you noomore wanna stop ere!" Success. Talking in pigeon had got a response and the blankets started to pull back from over their heads. Ellen tried to stick to her self-imposed number one rule: "Always treat others the way you would want to be treated, or your family to be treated". As an adult, she questioned her Christian faith given in her view the Patriarchal and Paternalistic faith driven doctrines that had created the Stolen Generation; and often pondered the strengths and shortcomings of all faiths, with this

her number one rule seeming to be only truth that was evident among all faiths. Looking in on the women who were now sitting up rubbing their weary eyes, she thought to herself that it was only a twist of fate, a turn of the pages, that she should be on this side of the bars, leading a very different life to the women before her.

Placing the big old key into the lock on the door, she turned it and heard the barrels clicking over. In a place like this, even the cell doors had a history; the locks were apparently from The Old Bailey in England itself. Not that anyone who was being locked in would appreciate that, but for her it was still symbolic, in a strange and ironic way, of the meeting of White and Black culture in Australia.

The women rose slowly from their beds and shuffled the slow step toward the open cell door. Ellen noticed that one of the women had on long pants and a jumper, but the other only had on a T-shirt and short skirt. How on earth could she handle this cold dressed like that? Maybe she had some more clothes or something in her property, but even as she hoped, Ellen knew in her heart that they were only the clothes on her back.

The three of them made their way to the reception room, and while the air in there had been a brisk wake-up for Ellen, it sure felt warmer than the exercise yard. Tom was already at the computer with the women's property bags on the counter; he must have already finished the cell checks on the male side and was just now printing out the property receipt forms. Ellen asked: "Okay which of you ladies is Norma?" and the lady in the pants stepped up to the counter. Ellen held the property bag up and gently shook out its contents – a purse, a scarf, tin of tobacco, \$15.25 in notes and coins – she and checked off all the items except for a cardigan, missed, as it was stuffed into the next pigeon hole. Norma pointed it out, and then signed for her property.

Next was Rosie, the woman in the shirt and short skirt, Ellen picked up her property bag and gently shook it out. It didn't seem like there was much in it, it was so light. The contents came free, revealing fifty five cents, a half-smoked cigarette, a packet of Tally-ho papers, a scarf and two matches. Ellen shook again, thinking she had surely not emptied all the contents. When nothing else came from the bag, she reached for the property receipt just to make sure. Unfortunately, that was all the

property that the woman had possessed when apprehended the night before.

Ellen tried to play her poker face and keep her emotions in check, and Rosie signed for property. Tom and Ellen went round to the heavy door that was the entrance and exit to the watch-house and, as was the norm, followed the women to just beyond the door. Tom went back inside to organise the morning meals for the remaining prisoners, while Ellen stayed, to ensure the women left the station grounds without issue. Ellen looked back to the moon that still hung in the night sky, watching the proceeding human drama playing out before it. It still looked the same, but something had changed. The pity that suddenly consumed Ellen was overwhelming. She wanted to cry, a feeling of sickness rose to her throat. There were so many injustices and inequalities still, in this day and age. She wanted to run and give the woman her jacket to relieve her suffering from the cold, if only for that day. Surely she couldn't give her work jacket away! But the woman had no shoes on her feet, and only the shirt and short skirt to shield her from the cold. How could she just let her walk out of here like that, when she herself was so rugged up to keep winter at bay? Then she remembered the spare old clothes they held sometimes, to allow prisoners or victims to change into, to freshen up.

"Hey Rosie, wait up!" Ellen yelled down the driveway after her. Rosie turned back and Ellen motioned for her to come back. "You forgot something." Ellen knew that she couldn't be seen to be soft, or giving one woman something and not the other, so she quickly raced back inside and found a flannel shirt in the clothes bin. It wasn't much, but it was the warmest thing she could find, and she ran back outside to Rosie before Tom could speak. Talking a little too loudly as she handed the flannel shirt to Rosie, she said, "This one was stuffed in the pigeon hole next to your property, it must be your one, eh Rosie?" hoping that Norma, who was waiting at the end of the driveway, wouldn't get jealous if she heard. Rosie, realising the policewoman's intentions said, "Thank you Mrs, thatun it bin mine. You mob nomore can keepum my jumper". As she took the flannel from Ellen she grabbed at her hand with both her hands and squeezed. She quickly donned the flannel shirt and caught up with Norma, and the two women disappeared down the road.

Ellen felt only a little better, because she knew that Rosie and Norma would likely be back in the next night, and someone else would probably take the shirt from Rosie, leaving her in exactly the same predicament that she came to the watch-house in. "I must not be so negative," she found herself saying out loud, and then felt her cheeks flush. Ellen knew she had to go back in and face Tom, an old workhorse who had been a cop longer than she had spent at high school. What would he think of the gesture? Would he tease her, or would he admonish her for her actions? As she rounded the entrance back into the watch-house, Tom was waiting at the counter. He merely looked up at her and smiled, and said, "Ellie, Joyce will be here in five. I'd love a coffee while we wait," Without a word being spoken she knew he understood, and there was no need to feel weak or ashamed of her actions.

1. PC's – Persons detained by Police for Protective Custody due to their level of intoxication and inability to adequately keep themselves from harm



The Buffalo Shooter: Reuben Cooper 1898–1942

Joy Cardona

Reuben Cooper was born on 6 February 1898 at Wandi, near Pine Creek. He was the eldest son of Robert Joel (Joe) Cooper, who was born at Fairview, near Riverton in South Australia. His first wife was Alice Rose Mara-Oldain Cooper, who came from Port Essington, an Aboriginal woman from the Iwaidja tribe of Coburg Peninsula in the Northern Territory. Reuben later married Sally Ah Mat, a Thursday Island-Samoan woman. Reuben and Sally had five children: Reuben John Cooper (dec.), Ruby Dowling, Lorna Abala-Brahim, Ronnie Cooper (dec.), Josie Perez (dec.) and Dawn Cardona.

Alice, Reuben's mother, was born to a Tiwi Island lady and an Iwaidja man and died in 1931 (Pye 1977:28).

The descendants of Alice Cooper from the Iwaidja-speaking side of her family are now members of the Muran clan on West Arnhem Land, and the families visits the area quite regularly.

Reggie, Sally and Hazel all live on Croker Island.

Reuben had two sisters, Ethel and Josephine. Ethel married Reggie McLennan. Their siblings are Ada Bailey, Francis May, Reggie McLennan, and Bill McLennan. All these children are now deceased and Josephine died at an early age (14) and is buried at Paru on the Tiwi Islands.

As a young man Reuben worked at his father's sawmill at Paru and during this time he learned from his dad about how to shoot and catch buffalo. Reuben's dad Robert Joel Cooper was considered by Xavier Herbert as "... the greatest shooter of them all". He also had a reputation as the 'White Rajah' of Melville Island. He became a symbol of the romantic idea of the explorer in the wild frontier. His tales were prized by journalists when he travelled to the southern states (Mulvaney 2004:14).

Reuben's father Robert Joel Cooper had engaged the employment of the local Tiwi Islanders, Larrakia and the Iwaidja Clan of Cobourgh Peninsula,

West Arnhem Land. He started trading with the Tiwi Islanders who eventually accepted him as part of the Island, naming him 'King Joel of Melville Island'. He was also known to the Tiwi Islanders as 'Jokubber' (Jokupper) (and Jokupa – Mulvaney 2004:191).

Joe Cooper had travelled to the Territory with his brother Harry from South Australia "around 1879". Both brothers spent time on Melville Island in 1894, working for E. O. Robinson but they had difficulty establishing a shooting camp as the Tiwi did not want them there. The brothers left the island and took Tiwi people with them on their retreat back to Cobourg Peninsula. With the help of the Tiwi they learnt some of their language. Their next attempt to set up a shooting camp in 1905 (Morris 2001:83) Anchorage was more successful (Mulvaney 2004:164). In 1907 Harry became ill and died on Melville Island (Morris 2001:89). Joe had a few boats which he used to carry government officials and other important people to the Tiwi Islands. Due to his knowledge of Tiwi people he was appointed sub-protector of Aborigines in 1912 (Mulvaney 2004:164).

Joe "... understood the value of education and financed the education of his son ..." (Mulvaney 2004:165). Reuben was sent to boarding school in Adelaide from 1908 to 1915. During this time he developed the exceptional sporting talents that would make him Darwin's leading sportsman upon his return (Stephens 2007:3). Some records and reports say that he attended Prince Alfred's College, although researchers have failed to find any records of his attendance. Brother Pye M.S.C. wrote that Reuben went to St Peter's College, Adelaide (Pye 1977:28). Mulvaney quotes Reuben as attending a public school St Stephen's in Wakefield Street, Adelaide (Mulvaney 2004:165 and Stephens 2007:3).

"The Territory now benefitted because, upon Reuben's return from school in 1915, he introduced Australian Rules football to Darwin" (Mulvaney 2004:165).

Reuben was a keen sportsman and a member of the original Darwin Buffalo football club (Presentation by Matthew Stephen MAGNT Darwin 2006). His athletic ability was not limited to football. A man by the name of Snowy Baker picked Reuben in his team to represent Australia in the Olympic Games, as a runner, but because of his "Bondi Brown" or colour he was not allowed to go (Pye 1977:28). As Douglas Lockwood said, "(t)

he colour of his skin was bad enough, but worse was the fact that he had a better education than most Europeans in Darwin" (Lockwood 1977:123). Reuben was a gifted sportsman; he competed as a swimmer, in soccer, in cycling and in boxing as a middle weight. When he was older he was considered to be a talented football coach with the ability to inspire his players (Northern Star 05/04/1938).

Despite Reuben's ability, he lived in a prejudiced world, and the colour of his skin prevented him from achieving many things. As Brother Pye wrote "... he was not accepted socially in pre-war Darwin because he was part coloured. How low and narrow can we get?" (Pye 1977:28).

"At a time when relationships between whites and blacks were unlawful, and few would admit to them, Joe Cooper acknowledged his family and supported Reuben throughout his life" (Stephens 2007:3).

My name is Joy Cardona and this is my story about the history of the Coopers. In 2000, as Reuben's granddaughter, I was selected to carry the Olympic Torch. I was the last Territory person to carry the Olympic Torch, on its final journey into Sydney. I dedicated my carrying of the Olympic torch to Reuben in recognition of when he was denied the opportunity to run in the Olympics because of his colour.

Over the past decade, many of Reuben's descendants have played Aussie Rules. Reuben Cooper Jnr was the first Indigenous footballer to leave the NT to play AFL in Melbourne for South Melbourne, now the Sydney Swans. There was a weekend in Darwin recently when there was a Reuben Cooper descendant in every team for every club in the NTFL. Three of his great-grandsons are currently playing for th NTFL. Matthew Cooper (Nightcliff), Jethro Calma Holt (Waratahs) and Roy Kantilla (Tiwi Bombers) and his great-great-grandsons, Nicholas and Denzel Cooper. Joy (that's me) was also involved in Australian Rules, becoming the first female to have umpired 100 Aussie Rules League games.

"In the mid 1930s (Reuben) ... became more involved in advocating for greater political rights for the coloured community. Like others such as Ahmat, McGuinness and Cubillo, success on the football field ... (produc)ed confidence to fight racism and prejudice in other spheres. Cooper encouraged Xavier Herbert, acting superintendent at the Kahlin compound ... , to call a meeting that resulted in the formation of the

Euraustralian League, later known as the Northern Territory Half-caste Association, which drove protests to the ordinances' for many years." (Stephens 2007:10).

Reuben Cooper's first wife was a Larrakia Filipina known as Betha (Cubillo-Carter 2000) but they later divorced.

Reuben married Sally Ah Mat in 1925. She was a Thursday Island-Samoan woman. "Soon after their marriage the couple moved to Cobourg Peninsula, where they lived until 1942 when Reuben died." (NT News 16/11/1988).

Together they set up a sawmill at Mountnorris Bay called Coopersville. Nana Sal said "(t)hose were great years, despite the terrible isolation. The only way in and out of the place was by boat". They employed about 12 Aboriginal people, cutting cypress pine, just like Reuben's father, for building and furniture (NT News 16/11/1988).

Other Children of Reuben Cooper

Reuben was not faithful to Sally. In addition to Sally he had children to other women. Sally's sister, Patricia Ah Mat Bonson, had a daughter Gwen Bonson James. He then had a child, Gabby Henry, with a Tiwi Island lady called Murrawee and another child, Tom Calma, with Juana Calma.

When Reuben was not playing football he was working out bush hunting buffalo and cutting timber. In the early 1900s he took over his father's business on Melville Island. He milled cypress pine and supplied carpenters in Darwin with wood for housing and furniture. He also had a buffalo shooting camp in West Arnhem Land, to collect meat and hides. After his dad, he was one of the first Indigenous men to own and operate his own business. In a 1915 letter to Spencer Baldwin, Joe speaks of his son returning home from school in Adelaide. "He has grown very much as he is only 17 years old and weighs over 11 st and is 5 feet 11 (inches) high, he did most of the Buffalo Shooting this year[.] we got 650 since July 10th [.] have now finished for the season, have been shooting for Vesty Bros[.] ..." (Mulvaney 2004:168).

A camp was established for tribal relatives who came over from Melville Island to see Reuben and to mix with the local Iwaidja people. That's where they buried him when he died, soon after the outbreak of the Pacific War in February 1942.

Reuben continued working throughout Arnhem Land, building "... comfortable homes for himself and his staff – homes that were often better than most of the socially conscious Darwin people possessed. Electricity was generated. Fish, oysters and crabs were gathered nearby. The bush was rich with buffalo steaks and Banteng beef. A camp was established for tribal relatives who came over from Melville Island to see him and to mix with the local Iwaidja people. There, on the shores of Mountnorris Bay, with a group of coloured friends, he re-established a sawmilling industry, carrying cypress to Darwin in schooners built on site" (Lockwood 1977:123).

Reuben worked through the area from the Mary River and across the Marrakai plain skinning the buffalo for its hides (Morris 2001:96).

Sally worked hard and lived a very tough life during the years at the sawmill. She raised her children in the harshest conditions. I recall my grandmother talking about how she used to cook for the camp. She made an oven out of the ant hills, and there is still some visible evidence today. In his reports, Gordon Sweeney, a missionary from the Methodist Mission Station on Goulburn Island, comments on the tidiness and cleanliness of the houses. Indeed, Sally continued to be a very clean and tidy lady. "The order and cleanliness of Reuben Cooper's house is worthy of note also the hospitality, although they were out of stores he shared what little he had (Sweeney 1939).

Nana Sal talked about Grandpa all the time. She told us how Grandpa learned and picked up his bush skills from the Aboriginal men he employed and how she learned all about bush medicines from the Aboriginal ladies. She told us that Reuben had passed his skills on to his family and young Aborigines. "... (W)hen things got quiet at the mill, sometimes for months at a time, it didn't matter, we'd head out into the bush and go buffalo shooting". They would live in a stock camp. Over time they would "... slowly build up a swag of good hides to take back for shipment to Darwin and overseas sale" (NT News 16/11/1988).

Nana Sal was a "... life member of the Buffaloes NTFL club where she rarely has missed a game. Countless players who have sported the double-blue club colours (sic) fondly remember her as the spectator who never needed a microphone to get her messages of encouragement across to the players during a match" (NT News 16/11/1988).

"At the outbreak of the war Reuben was well set-up with a lighting plant and water pump as well as a workshop and sawmill. With the aid of his helpers he also built two boats. Reuben had two boats or luggers. This was the most reliable and quickest way to ship his buffalo hides and sawn timber in and out of Arnhem Land to Darwin. Two of his boats were called *The Prairie Flower* (Pye 1977:28) and *The Beatrice*. The last lugger he had was called *The Dawn* after his youngest daughter.

The Prairie Flower by accident sailed into Darwin Harbour just after the first air raid by the Japanese on 19 February 1942. Brother Pye was told that Reuben "... and his crew did their part to help those in distress" (Pye 1977:28).

On 22 August 1939, Gordon Sweeney, a missionary from the Methodist Mission Station on Goulburn Island, visited the Cobourg Peninsula sawmill. Reuben supplied Sweeney with regular statistical information. In this report he saw plant comprising Ruston Hornsby crude oil engines about two years old, two saw-benches which worked through overhead shafting, one new 2 ½ ton Don truck, and one old utility car (Kettle 1939).

Sweeney's visit includes details of the people living in the Cobourg Peninsula area.

Gordon Sweeney's report

The following information was recorded for Murganella Creek and Cape Don, at the top of Cobourg Peninsula

- 13 men, 8 women, 4 children; a total of 25 people
- Iwaidja speaking people 17 men, 19 women, 17 children a total of 53 people between Port Essington and Murganella Creek
- Croker Island people 2 men, 1 women and 4 children total 7 people
- Muralidban people 11 men, 7 women and 11 children total 29 people
- Maung 10 people
- Brera 20 people
- Milingimbi 112 people

From Ellen Kettle, Personal Papers Collection, NTL

Reuben was not at his camp when Sweeney arrived at Mountnorris Bay for this report. He was away choosing a new sawmill site 11 miles further into

Cobourg Peninsula (Kettle 1939). This was the last sawmill that Reuben would operate, and its ruins can still be seen today.

Staff members who worked the mill were my Great Uncles Ankin Ah Mat, and Ali Ah Mat, and Richard Dick Johnson and Guriu Viliflour, who was from the Torres Strait.

Grandpa Reuben and Nana Sal adopted Richard "Dick" Johnson, who stayed with the family until his death in 1982. Dick worked with Reuben and was very faithful to him. He stayed close to Reuben's wife Sally and daughter Dawn. He told us many stories. One particular story, which is told by both Dick and my Aunty Lorna, is when Lorna became very ill after eating some poison berries. They were camped at a place in Arnhem Land called Paw Paw. Lorna needed medical treatment, so Reuben loaded Lorna onto the buggy and got his black stallion and headed for Katherine. When he neared the East Alligator River (known today has Cahill's Crossing), he was unable to cross with the horse and buggy as the river was up. Reuben strapped his daughter onto his back and swam across the river to the other side, where he was picked up and taken to Katherine. Lorna also talks about her event, and remembers waking up in Katherine hospital where she heard the birds and thought that she had made it to heaven.

Uncle Dick Johnson told us that Reuben was a tough man, who made the Aboriginal people who worked for him work hard, and his methods of discipline were harsh. The sawmill brought many different clans together from all over the Territory, and many people were sent to him because they where in trouble in their own communities. At Reuben's camp the different clans had spear fights, and tribesmen were killed. Today they call this place 'Gulduck Country', which means scary place.

The black stallion that Reuben rode can still be heard at night galloping through Murganalla. Families who live there say they always know when a descendant of Reuben's is coming to country, because they can hear the horse.

On the mainland around the area of the old sawmills, Reuben Jnr and his brother Ronald 'Rocket' Cooper Jnr, live at Wiligi Outstation. They are the sons of Ronnie Cooper, who is buried at Wiligi along with his son Joseph. Ronnie's families also have outstations west of Wiligi, where Josie's children have an outstation and Lorna's outstation is called Igual.

Today we are still using generators for electricity the same as they did in 1939, and we still hunt and gather for fish, oysters, crabs, long bums, pinny winkles, banteng, buffalo and pigs.

In 1942 in Arnhem Land, Reuben died from peritonitis. He was rushed to Oenpelli, but while he was waiting for the medical plane, he passed away, it was too late. He was given one of the biggest (Aboriginal) funerals in Oenpelli that went for weeks, as Reuben was classed as a man who had ceremonial rights (Lockwood 1977:123).

Twelve months after Reuben's death, Iwaidja and Tiwi people honoured him in the only way they knew, with a Pukamani death corroboree that was a fervent as any danced for tribal leaders of the Tiwi Islands (Lockwood 1977:123).

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Many thanks to my friend and work colleague Sandy Stuart.



Hannah's Bread

Karen Manton

Klaus is watching Hannah in the kitchen. Her fingers are clasped tightly, knuckles shining yellow white. She is breathing in deeply, as if drawing up old cries through the vinyl floor into a vortex that rises to the palms of her hands. There is a highly pitched sound ringing in her ears not unlike white noise. Her concentration is intense. Every now and then she takes out from between her palms a little lump of dough, scrapes it off, works it into a ball and then pushes all her body weight into it again, as if to make it into nothing with the force of her intensity. Klaus has seen this strange little ritual of hate and love take place during Hannah's breadmaking before, and knows it is not to be interrupted. He sees Lady Macbeth at the damned spot, rubbing furiously but not succeeding in wiping out the stain.

Hannah sees only her shuddering hands and the edges of the unloved dough. It carries in it something of her mother, and her mother's mother, and her mother's mother's mother. Something like a curse, a cloak of memory that cannot be shed, a way of being that cannot be altered. It is a flesh of the past that refuses to die, insisting on being reconstituted, remade, consumed. Left alone in the dark it will feed on itself and survive. It has done so for centuries. And here a part of it sits now, in Hannah's palm, a little bit of would-be bread that will not be squashed into nothingness. On the bench under a once-cream muslin sits the mother dough, resting in silence, listening to Hannah's panting rage.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' she barks at her husband.

'I'm not looking at you like anything,' he says quietly, and opens the fridge to retrieve a beer. On the top shelf she can see the jar of bubbly batter that holds a history within itself – of its own making and that of her family. It is some kind of weird, festering substance – not just of bread but of the soul – potent like the DNA that knits flesh ties with all their secrets. It is a kind of creature that demands to be fed, nurtured, coddled – above all kept and passed on down the line. The starter.

'When did it start?' she had asked her grandmother, peering into bubbles of the pungent stuff. The reply was mysterious, vague, full of intrigue.

All Hannah knew was that her grandmother's starter for bread was old, very old, and the precious family heirloom that she herself would one day carry. It was up to the daughters, her grandmother said, to make sure the bread lived. There were lessons to be learned, responsibilities to be taken on. There was a particular way to care for the strange eyeless and limbless creature, to feed it well, to grow it into dough, to knead it and raise it and bring it into being.

Klaus lets the fridge door close. He takes a sip from his drink, looking at her. She is fidgeting with the dough again, while looking through the warped flywire screen of the back door. At the edge of the verandah sits a blue porcelain jar, looking elegant. Beyond it a garden spade lies awkwardly on the red earth, awaiting its next instruction.

'I'll dig it for you if you want,' says Klaus.

He would have heard the curses as she belted a relentless and unshifting earth. 'The ground is not my problem,' she replies.

'Maybe you should forgive her,' he says and slips away before she can reply.

The dough slips from Hannah's hands to the floor. She picks it up, trying to brush the dirt from it, finally throwing it onto the bench. It sits there silent but not humbled. And she feels in it the eyes of her grandmother, staring out at her, appalled.

* * *

The room was dark. Candles were burning on the table and along the mantelpiece. On the floor lay a large crucifix statue. It was the Good Friday Christ that came out once a year to horrify children and chastise adults. A wooden carving, painted in what would appear to be a tacky way in the light of day – yellowy hue for legs arms and face, chocolate brown hair, dark eyes staring out of their sockets, bright red lips, even brighter red drops of blood around the scalp, at the palms, at the feet. As a child, Hannah had thought the statue was a real man. Although she came to realise it was wood, not flesh, there was something about it that she did not like. In the dim of the front room with its drawn curtains and sickly incense and melting wax candles the whole thing took on a creepy presence. Before her eyes it morphed into a real, contorted, stiffened body

with pierced hands and feet lying stretched out on its wooden cross. She tried to focus instead on the carpet with its pattern of dark, evergreen leaves and pale pink roses. Her grandmother was standing behind her, chanting and shifting a rosary between her fingers. She pressed a forefinger into the soft muscle at Hannah's neck, just by the collarbone. Hannah sank to her knees, feeling the carpet scrape her skin as she bent to kiss the hands of Christ. She could taste a metallic coolness in her mouth and in a giddy whirl saw the man bleeding down his yellow, rigid legs. Blood was streaming from him onto the floor, to line the pale pink roses and seep crimson into them. All the while her grandmother was chanting and moaning, wailing and weeping.

'Look away, look away,' a voice in Hannah's head commanded. Out of the dizzy spell she caught sight of another rigid body standing in the doorway. It was her mother, Imelda, wild at the sight of her daughter kissing a dead man's feet. Her green eyes were ablaze with fury, the red hair seemed to stick out from her contorting face as if managed by its own electric field.

'What the *fuck* are you doing, Esther?' she asked. Imelda had called her mother by her first name for years.

'You! You go to hell,' the old woman stammered, rosary dangling from her pointing finger.

'I feel sick,' Hannah murmured, 'I have to lie down,' and she made her way across the hallway into the bedroom she shared with her mother. From there she listened to Imelda rant and rave at Esther in the kitchen. The shouts became louder. She heard her mother's voice entering the darkened room where the ritual had taken place. She heard Esther follow with incantations. Through the crack of the open door, Hannah watched.

Imelda was blowing out the candles one by one.

'Send me to hell, then,' she was saying, 'send me.'

'And bring home another devil child,' muttered Esther.

'What? What did you say?'

'Who's that girl's father, huh? Who?'

At which point Imelda picked up the crucifix and hurled it into the hallway. The wall shuddered. A shower of plaster tumbled onto the floor.

'Take your god-forsaken crucifix and *shove it,*' cried Imelda.

The bedroom door burst open.

'Come on Hannah,' panted Imelda, 'Let's get out of here. It's time.'

Behind Imelda, Esther was kneeling on the floor, weeping over her crucifix. The rosary trailed behind her.

Hannah looked back at her mother, bewildered. Imelda stormed out. Esther staggered to her feet and lifted the crucifix into her arms, walking down the hall towards the kitchen with all the solemnity of a pieta on the move. Imelda was rummaging through the fridge.

'And stuff this as well,' the starter jar smashed against the wall.

Though walls separated her from the scene, Hannah could see the mixture oozing down the wall. Her grandmother's wail confirmed the deed. It was the final betrayal. Imelda would never make the bread. Never.

Not that this was news. Esther had given up on Imelda's connection to the bread a long time ago. The cord had been cut while she wasn't looking. Imelda's refusal was a frozen stare, a gaping absence.

'It is up to you Hannah. I have no hope in your mother, anymore.' Esther would say, kneading her dough with pursed lips, and watching Hannah struggle to learn to make the bread less well than she would like. 'Still, at least there is someone.'

'You'll never be able to make it right for her, Hannah,' Imelda had said into the dark as they lay side by side. 'I don't know why you bother. It's not worth it.'

Now, in the house of the desecrated crucifix and dishonoured bread, Hannah contemplated the fading blue of the chenille bedspread beneath her. When she eventually moved herself and shuffled to the front door she found it open. The gate was hanging crooked from one hinge. She wandered out onto the street.

Imelda was dancing her way down the road, singing to herself. She turned once to scream, 'What are you waiting for, Hannah?'

Imelda paused briefly, as if she'd wait for her daughter if the girl ran. But Hannah did not run, and Imelda turned to continue her dance in the

opposite direction. The girl stood there for some time under the cold glare of the streetlights. It is a strange thing, she thought to herself, to look out into the night and see your mother diminishing. She suddenly felt old, older than the woman who was falling away from her. Imelda spun around the corner, and was gone. Hannah waited a few moments, in case her mother suddenly reappeared, laughing away, saying 'Just joking!' But the road remained empty. Soft rain fell on Hannah's face as she scoured the night sky for stars. There were none.

At five in the morning, Hannah woke. She half expected to roll over and see her mother's fully clothed body lying on the bed as usual, boots pointing to the ceiling, nose snoring softly, hair flung in all directions. But the bed was empty. She got up to go to the kitchen for a glass of water. Unfamiliar shadows were hovering on the walls. In the backyard the flames of a bonfire licked the cold morning air. Her grandmother was poking the centre of the fire with a large stick. As her eyes focused, Hannah recognised a pile of clothes, shoes and books.

'You,' the old woman pointed at her. 'You can go too.'

An hour later, when Hannah stepped out of her room with a bag of her few possessions, her feet knocked over a jar that had been placed on the floor in the doorway. In it was a portion of starter, saved from the wall perhaps... or taken from another secret jar. For a moment she heard the laughter of a small child and a grandmother together, and saw little hands guided by big ones, flicking flour, gathering the dough, kneading it, pounding it. 'When you are grown up,' the old woman had said, 'you will have your dough from this bread.' And she pinched the little girl's cheek so hard it hurt.

That was a long time ago, thought Hannah – before her mother started leaving and returning without notice; before the arguments; before the smothering cloud of unhappiness crept through the house as insidious as the rising damp that kept them all chilled.

She picked up the jar of starter and put it in her bag, thinking, 'I'll throw it away, get rid of it,' and walked out into the fresh, biting air of dawn.

* * *

A blowfly hums into the kitchen, circling Hannah's face and hair. She pauses, waiting for it to land anywhere close and die with one swipe of her fist. It lands well out of reach, on the kitchen window. She turns to contemplate its little legs crawling across the glass. Outside, the red dirt landscape with its spindly plants stretches under a blue sky to a small ridge of rock, about five hundred metres beyond the house. Klaus calls it 'the back fence'. Beyond it is the desert, a sea of dry, rusty coloured earth speckled with sparse vegetation and the shadows of clouds, extending all the way to the horizon.

'Not much of a garden,' her mother had murmured, just three days ago. It was the one visit she'd paid on her daughter in fifteen years.

* * *

Imelda arrived out of the blue of course, hitching a lift with a truck driver who didn't mind the detour. Called out by the commotion of the dogs, Hannah stood on the steps trying to focus on the apparition before her – a woman in an unlikely white dress with enormous red and orange roses printed on it, balancing upright in her right hand a sky blue porcelain urn. As the dust around her settled the figure waved madly at Hannah, calling, 'Surprise!'

And what a surprise it had been. Imelda stumbled through the door and lurched towards the kitchen bench where she set down the urn as if it were her handbag.

'What's this?' Hannah asked, almost daring to wonder if it were a gift.

'Your grandmother's ashes,' said Imelda, who was leaning against the back door, looking out to the ridge as if it were a view she wished she could admire. 'I don't have room for them.'

Hannah stared at her. 'You never told me she was dead.'

Imelda came over to the bench and began drumming it with her fingers.

'For god's sake Hannah, I've only just found you. I travelled all this way. You hated her. We both did. She tried to destroy us.'

Hannah said nothing. She was staring into the bread that was sitting beside the urn.

'She threw you out at fourteen, Hannah. Remember? And *don't* say I left you. You decided to stay. It was your choice.'

At last Imelda's gaze was drawn to the bread. When she spoke again it was with a cautious gentleness – as if the untouched loaf might have ears.

'I thought we could plant her under a tree in your garden. I thought you'd like that.'

They both looked out to the expanse of red dirt where little tufts of spinifex wavered in the wind. There was not a tree in sight.

'I'll ask Klaus to buy me a cactus,' Hannah replied.

* * *

The blowfly is humming around Hannah again as she hovers by the bench, picking at little crumbs of dough on her fingers. Underneath the buzz of the blowfly another humming emerges from deep within the rocks outside. It comes across the dirt, through the window, into the kitchen. At first Hannah assumes the sound is the insect flying around erratically. But the fly is now still, perhaps listening also. And with the humming comes a strange breeze, right through the door into the kitchen, turning the ceiling fan gently.

Klaus returns to the fridge. As he opens the door, Hannah hears the humming enter the cold air and hover around the jar of starter. She pushes past Klaus and grabs the jar.

'I'm going to kill it. I'm going to throw it over the ridge,' she announces, and storms outside, past the blue porcelain urn and abandoned spade.

* * *

She throws the jar skyward, up, up into the searing blue above. It is rising higher, higher, higher, disappearing into one of the compact little white clouds floating above. It is gone for what seems a long moment. Long enough to draw a breath, to almost believe she's got rid of it, to stand and wonder at how a cloud has swallowed her little jar. And then out of the sky it comes hurtling back down towards her, the air whistling in its wake. There is only just time to reach out and catch it.

She lies on the warm rock, holding in her hands the secrets of her grandmother's bread and the bread that her mother could have made but wouldn't, and the bread that she did make, though reluctantly. And as she falls into sleep she hears whispers from long ago, from the time her grandmother alluded to but never explained. These were the sounds of days long gone, humming with the diverse notes of argument and love, of mysteries and intrigue, of moments forgotten except for the essence of something passed on from one woman to the next in little jars of starter and fistfuls of mother dough.

When Hannah opens her eyes, large grey clouds are moving in, devouring the little ones in their path. A cool air descends. The first of the rain pelts down in great drops to the hot earth so that little puffs of steam and dust rise with the fall of each one.

* * *

Some time later Klaus looks up from his books and rock specimens. Outside the window he sees Hannah dancing in the rain on the rocky ridge at the back of the house. He takes off his glasses with measured calm and goes out to the verandah to watch. Beside him the porcelain urn stands to attention. The spade receives rain like an open palm. Hannah sees him and comes down from the ridge.

'What are you doing?' he asks as she runs towards him, drenched, feet stained red with the wet earth.

'Dancing,' she replies, still catching her breath.

He sees her fist clutching something. 'I thought you were going to throw it over the ridge.'

'I've changed my mind,' she says and pushes past him into the house, leaving him to ponder the thunderous sky.



This is What Love Sounds Like

Natalie Sprite

Flying into Hobart, the plane draws an arc above the silver river, the dark mountain. As the wheels touch down, I remember being eighteen and how good it was to leave.

I grew up in Tasmania. I was the fat girl with frizzy hair. The smart one with braces and no mother. Metal cut the inside of my mouth and I was always cold.

I remember lunchtimes in the library or the art room. The smell of chalk and etching acid and dark ink. A blue and white uniform. The taste of the small green rubber bands that joined the top set of teeth to the bottom and the way my tongue could not stop flicking at them.

Once in a maths test, a rubber band pinged silently from my mouth. I saw it sail, suddenly freed, through the silent air and slap wetly against the blackboard where it left a small dark patch of my spit on the dust-grey surface.

The shock of it and the moment of stillness before the noise. The heat in my cheeks. Staring down at my desk as laughter broke across my back. Then the kindness of the teacher who said only, 'That's enough, settle down.' And finding refuge in the algebra before me. I felt the space where the rubber band had been, flicking at the emptiness with my tongue.

I step off the plane into an icy wind. I hunch around my spine and make myself small as a woman walking late in an unsafe place.

I don't tell anybody that maybe there is a hole in my baby's heart.

* * *

Hobart airport is small, but bigger than it used to be.

The squat white building sits ahead of me, a reflection of planes moving in the glass, then sunlight hit the windows and turns them amber. A man in a blue suit steps back to let me pass and suddenly I am here, in the uncertain country of childhood. I step through the automatic doors and into a rush of artificial heat.

It's Jack and Lily I see first, their whispering hair full of sudden light. A fling of skinny kid arms around my legs and waist, the press of their heads against my belly and my thighs. Then my brother is hugging me too, the prickle of his beard at my cheek. "Alice's teaching." He kisses me smackingly. "She'll see you at home."

"How is she?"

"Good," he says. "She's good," and we step sideways to let a hockey team in blue and red past, luggage banging at their legs and plastic name tags on their chests.

* * *

I was the second last girl in my class to get my period. Sara was the last. She was my best friend. She wore white socks up to her knees and black shoes that were always polished. Her uniform came to her knees and was crisply ironed.

My uniform was not ironed. I wore ankle socks and desert boots and one day Sara wasn't allowed to be my friend.

"Because you come from a broken home," she explained. "It's not me. It's my mother. She thinks you might be a bad influence."

"But I haven't done anything."

"I know."

"I help you with your maths homework."

"That's what I said. She said it doesn't matter. You're from a broken home. Anything might happen."

I didn't know what to say. We were sitting on the green painted wooden benches at the front of D block. In front of us, a stretch of concrete, and then a fence. On the other side of the fence, rough blonde grass, rocks and the river.

I looked at the river. It was an overcast day and the water was grey and white with wind. The wind blew my hair into my face.

A broken home. A home that is broken.

But when I got my period we were still friends. She used to share her banana cake with me.

* * *

Kathryn rings every day with stories she collects for me like shells. "My Nana's best friend Essie had a hole in her heart and she lived till she was eighty-nine. And even then, it wasn't her heart that got her, but the number 94 bus to Randwick. She never saw it coming. The bus driver came to the funeral. They give them counselling, but I don't know it helps that much. He bought lilies and cried through the service."

* * *

Not everyone is so kind.

Sitting in Alice's kitchen, my ungentle aunt swoops like a dark winged bird over my belly. "You're very small for six months," she says and her currawong eyes gleam. "Are you sure everything's normal?"

I lift my cup. "Everything's fine."

"You just seem very small." She smiles with lips gluey with orange lipstick. "Maybe you should get checked. Have you been checked?"

I sip my tea. Steam rolls up my face. "Everything's fine."

My dark aunt takes a slice of carrot cake from the plate on the table between us. She turns to Alice, "Don't you think she's small?" Then before Alice can answer, she swivels like a Dalek back to me. "Your cousin Lisa carried a baby for eight months and it was only then they found out it had been dead for nearly twelve weeks. Rotted inside her, it had. They had to cut her open to get it out. All black and shrivelled, it was."

She bites at the slice of cake in her hand. "Poor little mite," she says.

* * *

Go placidly among the noise and haste.

Small blue tiles covered the toilet floor and behind the door hung a copy of Desiderata.

The walls were painted yellow and there was a high window with a security screen behind the toilet. The window was open. I leaned forward to pull of a length of toilet paper and the cold air flowed down around my bottom.

You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars.

A streak of blood on the white toilet paper. Red in the middle, pale pink on the outside. I wasn't afraid. I knew exactly what it meant.

I had a body that could make a baby.

I was a woman.

* * *

I lie on the double bed with the electric blanket on. There is forty percent more blood pumping through my body and most of it, I am sure, has ended up at my clitoris. I am aroused all the time. I bring myself to orgasm twice a day. The heat of the electric blanket comes up through my back and the soles of my feet, my hand between my legs. I am so wet these days. Pregnancy has made me juicy as a mango.

Afterwards, I lie and look at the pressed metal ceiling, the intricate old beauty of it, the new paintwork, crisp along the wobbling lines of old architraves.

I close my eyes and I imagine my baby's heart and that it is strong. Strong and whole. I wrap her little floating body in a white cocoon and put love like light all around her. Every day I do this. I see her heart like an anatomical diagram. I see it beating strong and clear as a bassline through her body and mine. I feel the lion strength of her.

* * *

Alice's kitchen is a long thin room full of light. I stand at the sink, put my hands in the foaming washing-up water. The heat of it is lovely.

At the other end of the kitchen, Alice slides diced onions from a chopping board into the cast iron frying pan. "How is it going with Ian?"

"It's okay."

"Really?"

"No." I laugh, but Alice doesn't. I pull a plate out of the sink, watch the soap fall in a single sloop of white and then I tell her. "He uses the word burden a lot."

"Oh dear."

The kitchen smells of onions frying. Outside is the dark green of old pine trees and the bright of the neighbour's new tin roof, shining like alfoil in the sun.

"He won't touch my stomach."

Alice steps across the kitchen and still holding the wooden spoon in her right hand, wraps me like she does her children. I cry until my nose runs and then I move backwards looking for a tissue, which I find on top of the fridge.

"It'll be okay," she says.

"I know."

"Most of my friends are single mums." She puts the spoon down on the beach, "Sometimes it's easier."

"I know." Swallowing tears like an apple in my throat, moving backwards out of the kitchen.

* * *

When I was fourteen, Mum came back for a visit.

We stood on the corner of Franklin Square eating icecream. Mum with her pink tongue lapping at a vanilla cone. "It's just pig fat, you know," she said. "That's what they make it out of. Pig fat and a bit of colouring and flavouring. And lots of sugar of course. But mostly pig fat."

I watch her lift the cone above her face, bite the very end off and suck icecream through the hole. Her cheeks cave inward. The icecream at the top end shrinks and wrinkles. Her throat bobs with swallowing. Her eyes are closed.

My mother's body is covered with tiny scars. It's because she scratches. If she gets a mozzie bite, she will scratch until it bleeds and then, when it scabs over, she will scratch it again. Except for parts of her back, which she

can't reach, her whole body is covered with small, round, silver scars. They overlap one another.

* * *

In the bath I am warm.

"Hello." Jack and Lily appear at the side of the bath.

"Hello."

"What are you doing?"

"Having a bath."

"Oh." The air is steaming and the mirror behind them fogged grey. "Is it fun?"

"Yeah, it's nice."

They stand side by side, both in baggy shorts. Jack is bare-chested so I can see the birdcage ribcage of his tiny chest. "Can the baby hear us talk?"

"I don't know. Maybe." We look together at my stomach, laying there in the water. It floats with my breasts above the surface. The water is opaque with soap.

"Can we come in too?"

"If you want."

They pull their clothes off. Jack is first, climbing over the side of the bath. "Ooh," he says, standing with the water around his shins, "It's hot."

Lily leans over the edge, tests the water with one hand. "No it's not."

"It's a little bit hot," he says and sits down.

I move to make room for him. He sits with his ankles crossed and his knees up around his chin. Then Lily climbs in, one pale leg over the bath and then the other. She stands between us like a lamp post. "Do you think we'll all fit?"

I shift over until my left hip is hard against the smooth ceramic wall.

"I want to lie down," she says and then she does, unfolding herself into the water, laying her long body down beside me. Her head on my shoulder, her long hair swishing in the water.

"I want to lie down too."

"Here." Lily shifts her legs and points at a triangular space between her hips and my belly. "You can lie here, Jack."

I look at the space she has pointed to and it seems so little, but Jack lays himself into it, sideways, and then the three of us are still. Our bodies pressed together like packaged sausages. The tap drips, pinging the bathwater. Steam rises and the air is thick and hazy. I put my hand on Jack's damp hair and he closes his eyes, rests his face against the swelling of my belly.

My muscles soften in the lovely heat of the water. Condensation beads on the metal of the cold tap. The edges of things blur. I can feel the pulse at my neck and temples and the texture of children pressed against me, the bone of elbows and knees, the curve of their bellies. Lily's eyes slowly closing and the blush that heat puts in her cheeks. The silk of her hair in the water by my shoulder. Jack's breath and the press of his head against my belly, listening for the baby.

* * *

Kathryn says, "I met a woman at the park the other day and she said her baby had a hole in her heart and it fixed itself. No operation. Nothing. Her body just did it. By the time the girl was two years old, the hole had gone."

I sit in the small room where the phone is. Sunlight falls in a diamond from the window across the wooden boards. I put one hand on my belly.

"Listen to this," she says and puts the phone up to her breast so I can hear the sound of her baby suckling. It is such small and tender noise. Tiny. Rhythmic. Wet. It makes me hold my breath. This, I think, is what love sounds like.

I walk every day. I go down to the silver river, astounded by the beauty of it, and I think, How did I not notice this before? And the mountain too, which sat like a weight against my back my entire childhood, is suddenly

glorious. For the first time, I start to love this little city, a town made from stone and wood and set between a mountain and a river. It warms me, somehow, this sudden enchantment, looking at the clinking yachts each evening, holding my belly against the cold air. Walking under a lavender sky.

* * *

"Things aren't flowing."

"What do you mean?"

"We're not meant to have this baby."

"What?" The creep of cold up the skin of my arms in a trail that I can see, goose-bumped, chicken-skinned, fear in very small dots.

"The signs aren't good."

"What signs? Like what?"

"Oh I don't know." He exhales hard into the phone, a sound like wind on a cold day. Then he says, "Okay. Like the stuff with the heart."

I am left breathless and wordless, winded by this. A fast jab at the throat.

"Oh Ian. That is so unfair."

"No it's not. I'm just telling you what I think."

"Unhelpful then. Okay? It's really unhelpful." And then I am crying, holding my belly and hunched in a cane chair that will leave the pattern of its weave across the back of my thighs.

From the box on the table in front of me, I pull a eucalypt scented tissue and I say, "I don't need this right now. This is not what I need."

Silence.

I stop crying. I blow my nose. "I need you to be steady."

I can hear the noise of television in his house, not the words, just the burble murmur, the strange laughter.

"Ian?"

"Yeah," he says, and I hear the shuffle of his movement, the click of the wire screen door opening, the rattle of it closing.

I think of that country sky and one velvet night when he took me by my hand and pulled me into the dark garden to show me the stars. The unbelievable cold of the air, the warmth of his belly against my back. His arms like a good blanket around me.

I let the air out of me, rub my belly clockwise, slowly, bend towards the heater. "You on the verandah?"

"Yeah."

On the street behind me, a clatter of shoes on old stone. The sound disappears down the road and then there is just the silence on the other end of the phone and into this silence I say, "I love you, Ian."

The silence deepens like dark water under a small boat. I can hear the scratch of a match stuck, the sharp inhale, the long exhale of smoke blown into cold air and in the background, muffled by distance, the sound of dogs barking.

"Ian?"

"I might go now," he says and then he hangs up. The receiver in my hand, against my ear, is hot and full of the sound of empty air.

* * *

Jack and I sit side by side on the soft sand at the top of the beach. In the water, Lily stands, bent at the waist, holding a friend's toddler, lifting him up as each wave comes in, putting his little feet in the water as the break passes. Their bodies are golden in the light.

After a long quiet, Jack says, "It's such a big world, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I s'pose it is." The air is cooling, but the sand under my toes is warm and silky.

"It's such a big world," he says again, "and it's such a small us."

I turn to look at him then. "What do you mean?"

“I don’t think I’m big enough for the world,” he says. “I think you need to be big for the world.”

I put my hand on his back, and he leans into me, moving inside the nook of my arm, up against my breast.

“It’s okay to be small though,” I say. “There are still small places in the big world.”

“Yeah,” he says and we look at the water again and at Lily and the baby who is laughing. I can feel the nubbly bones of his spine against my arm and the heat of his skin through his shirt. The lean of him into my body. The hummingbird heartbeat in his chest, the slimness of him and the smallness of his bones.



The Mad Woman

Glenn Morrison

Perhaps it was because of the pumpkin after all.

There was no way I could have known that first Sunday. Her sing-song greeting arrived over the top of the driveway gate, bird-like through the sticky morning heat and twisting two syllables into too many: 'Helloooooo'.

Celeste was at drawing class. I had slept in. I pulled on my robe, weaved from our bedroom to the foyer between the piles of concrete rubble and bricks. Where there would soon be an entry of new glass sliders was makeshift plywood. Outside, the gate dividing front yard from back was already complete, built from the timber that had made up the fence it replaced.

After the air-con in the bedroom the heat outside struck hard, like a mallet. I checked my watch – only 10. By two, I could forget any work on the shed footings. Swinging a pick over rock-hard desert dirt in 40-plus wasn't my idea of a relaxing Sunday. Only a month in the Alice and I was a cat's whisker from packing a bag. Trouble was, Celeste was settling in all hunky dory. I wiped my forehead open palmed, pulled on the gate, found myself face to face with the mad woman.

We had never spoken. And to be honest, I was stuck for words as I took in – for the first time up close – her alarming form. What looked like it must have once been a bright-yellow blouse fell like a damp sack over her collapsed arm muscles, ending in a scrape on the dark skin of her pot belly. In grim defiance of gravity, she clutched a pumpkin to her hips.

Utting her chin once at the vegetable, arms straining, she poked it forward, risking the whole humongous thing dropping through the space between us. She left me no option but to take it.

It was a gift, she said, because my wife was so beautiful and friendly.

Celeste and I had seen the mad woman before. She would amble past our place around dawn, mumbling to herself, ignoring every bugger. Her dyed-orange hair stuck out at impossible angles, finally collapsing to her

shoulders like a demolished building done in by explosives experts. Celeste reckoned she was chatting to herself in her native tongue. To me she seemed to be wearing a sign warning: Keep Clear.

I didn't want the pumpkin. Some sort of snow job. But what could I do? I eased it on to the outdoor table. There it sat – a blue-grey problem with ridiculous curlicue top. I felt like giving it straight back to the mad woman. But Celeste would have called it a nice gesture. I felt like a bastard and thanked her instead.

The mad woman warned me to make sure I showed the pumpkin to my beautiful wife, then waved goodbye. I showed Celeste later that day. She made a delicious soup, froze the leftovers, and that was that.

Back then, the mad woman lived three doors down in a government house. The street was a row of handyman's delights; old guvies waiting an eternity for someone or other to doll them up.

Ours had been waiting too, until we got it at auction after some bloke defaulted on a low-income loan. Everyone reckons we got it for a song. But we sure put in the work to bring it up to scratch. Then this real estate agent tells us it'd be worth double what we paid for it. Celeste turned down the stereo and got a big smile on: 'For our guvie?'

For the week after Pumpkin Day – as I'd started calling it – we noticed the mad woman digging furiously in her garden, turning the front yard into what was fast becoming one big edible forest. Celeste remarked what a good thing it was, sustainable living and all that.

I was thinking about that when the mad woman came again the next Sunday, bearing another pumpkin. I didn't want to leave her there standing at the gate, traffic streaming past and her wondering what to do. So I invited her in. Perhaps if I'd just said thanks. Or accepted the pumpkin and dropped her round a date loaf. Things might have been different.

She was dressed in a whirl of brightly washed yellow, took a seat at the end of the table and was immediately at ease, big smile, laugh louder than her dress. Celeste offered her coffee. She declined. Chose to chat. I knew something was wrong, but couldn't put a finger on it.

I might have offered the mad woman breakfast, if it hadn't been for the cigarettes. Besides, I'd hardly had a chance to break her line of chatter:

How big was her pumpkin? for example. Then there was our lovely house. Her lovely garden. There was her niece's recent trouble with the law – not so lovely. And the government's rip-off of Aboriginal people. Had we forgotten the incompetency of child welfare agents? After a couple of minutes the discourse halted and she uttered the words that were to become as familiar to us as brushing our teeth: 'You got a smoke?'

My wife and I looked at each other. I didn't smoke. But Celeste did. Being a friendly sort of person she responded the only way she knew how.

'Sure,' Celeste said with a big smile, eyes gleaming, eager to help. She offered one from her pack. 'Light?'

The mad woman emptied the pack. She clutched possibly twelve cigarettes in one hand and fumbled to place a thirteenth in her mouth with the other.

'Thanks,' she said.

Celeste and I stared quietly at the dozen cigarettes held tightly in the mad woman's left hand. Then, all of a sudden, she had somewhere to go.

'My daughter,' she said. Apologies. Leave us to our breakfast, she said. So polite. And with that she was gone.

We stared blankly at the back of the gate. At each other. Well, at least that was over, I thought.

But within days, the madwoman was making a regular, soon to become daily, appearance at the front gate with those same fateful words: 'You got a smoke?'

At first I was polite. 'No, I don't smoke,' I'd say. But she was persistent.

'Oh no,' she'd say. 'Not you. Your lovely wife.'

'She's not home.'

'Did she leave any?' she'd ask.

Next Saturday I was again sleeping in. I could hear Celeste talking in the entry. Then the kitchen. I heard a voice I couldn't place, chopped English, piercing shouts then more voices. By the time I'd realised I wasn't

dreaming and forced myself out of bed, the mad woman had already left and Celeste was standing alone by the kitchen bench.

'It was an emergency,' Celeste said before I could ask. 'Her daughter was hurt, needed a doctor.'

'Is she OK?'

Celeste turned to the bench and picked up the phone book. 'Not really,' she said without looking up.

'Celeste, there's a payphone at the shops right next door.' My lips quiver when I disapprove and I hadn't wanted the mad woman in our kitchen.

'I know,' said Celeste. Her lips were taut, creased over teeth refusing to part. She sighed, nodded to the entertaining area outside and beyond to the gate. 'It's her daughter Graham. The husband bashes her. She's our neighbour, for God's sake.' Celeste shoved the phone book with too much force back in to its cradle.

'There's nowhere else for them to go,' she went on. 'Before I knew it they were all here. Daughter with a whopping bruise, cuts all over her face. And the blood.' Celeste shook her head. 'What was I to do?'

'What about the husband?' I asked.

'Not here,' Celeste said. 'Thank goodness.'

I looked outside. Several men and two older women milled about at the front gate, everyone on edge as if waiting for something to happen.

'Who are they?' I blurted.

'Relatives.'

My brain quickly sketched our dismal future: All the mad woman's relatives lined up and knocking steadily at our front gate, all asking for a smoke, many bearing pumpkins.

It wasn't our problem I reasoned. I desperately wanted not to be involved. But there was no way out. I pulled back on the curtain until I could see the gate. Still there. Two had stayed. Cross-legged they sat until late.

I crawled out of bed round 10.30. Back to the front window. Cursed my alarm set for five. They were gone. All of them. Thank God. I must have fallen asleep on the way back to bed because I don't remember getting there. I do remember a loud tap some time later.

'Helloooooooo.'

The glow of my watch read 11.30pm. An hour's sleep. Great. I drew on my gown, stepped outside, opened the gate.

'You got a smoke?' the ritual began.

'No, I don't. Go away.'

'Not you, your beautiful wife.'

'No, she doesn't smoke.'

The mad woman grinned and let go a cackle: 'Yes she does.'

'She's given up,' I lied.

'Oh.' The grin faded.

I snapped. 'Don't go coming round here any more asking for cigarettes. It's rude, and it's bloody late. Your damned relatives have only just left. Now piss off and go home.'

She covered slightly, looked down, retreated a few steps. 'Tell her thanks ... your wife ... for the phone.' She turned and was gone. Again.

I felt bad. Again. As if I had wrongly scolded a naughty child. But she was fifty-odd. What about the pumpkin? Hadn't she given it with good intent, the kindly gesture of a neighbour? Now she was a neighbour in trouble. Wanted to thank us. And I'd rained on the whole bloody parade.

I couldn't sleep that night thinking about the mad woman. I needed to be sure why she had even started coming round. Was it because Celeste was the friendly sort? I swallowed a laugh and recalled the first time the mad woman had met our dog Bones. Had he been first to cross the line?

Bones loved the mad woman's front yard, the jungle of matted vines and mulch, tomato stakes poking out here and there, no apparent order. Mornings the mad woman would be out there on her knees, digging

things up. "Hellooeee," she'd wail as we tried to slip by unnoticed. Often as not Bones would run in her front gate anyway, all liver-coloured fur and kelpie bluster and the game would be up. Then he'd come running out on the street a big, gritty T-bone between his teeth.

No matter what started it, even Celeste had come to resent the mad woman's night-time incursions. But Celeste had her own way of dealing with stuff.

'She's just a woman living her life,' Celeste said opening one eye. I'd thought she was asleep. I turned my head on the pillow. Too hot to sleep, even with air con. 'And she's just trying to live it as best she can,' Celeste continued. 'I mean, what's she done really?'

Tired as I was, I couldn't give in. 'Done? What about this feeling? The midnight cigarette breaks?' I leaned up onto my left elbow and threw off the sheet. 'What about the visits from her bloody family, the phone thing? Next she'll be moving in. She's disarmed us with her madness. That's what she's done.'

Celeste's brown hair ballooned across the pillow, spilled round my arm. It couldn't hide her eyes as she gave me a look. 'Seriously Graham, not everything is about you. The woman borrowed a few cigarettes. So what? She might have done me a favour.'

I thought about that. Just a few cigarettes? Fair exchange for a pumpkin? I couldn't shake the feeling there was something more.

'The thing is Celeste, I'm not an Aborigine. I'm a whitefella.'

'So?'

'Well, we have different ways, different expectations. Important stuff. Like, privacy and that. I don't go hanging out at her place trying to bum pumpkins for example'

'Did you want to?' Celeste's lips turned up at one corner, eyes creased in a grin.

'Very funny.'

'Go to sleep Graham. It'll sort itself out.'

I puzzled my feelings for days, hoping to see the mad woman to apologise. Or something. I couldn't work out quite what was needed. For her or for me. But she didn't walk past the house.

I started standing outside around dawn with a large pannikin of tea, watching the front gate in case she turned up. At night I'd check the front gate. Sure, I could have gone past the mad woman's house, knocked on her front door. But something tugged me back. And in reality, hadn't my scolding achieved what I'd wanted? Something wouldn't settle in my belly about the whole crappy deal. Celeste said to forget about it and eventually I did.

Until last week. On the way to the corner shop I heard a whimper from the mad woman's front yard. I thought it was Bones. I leaned over the gate expecting to find him snout-deep in soil-covered beef leftovers. Instead I found the mad woman squatting heavily in her pumpkin patch. She gestured.

'Hospital,' she said. Pointed to her abdomen. 'Sick.'

She must be drunk, I thought, then remembered Celeste's words: Just a woman living her life. I looked again. So helpless.

'What's wrong, missus?'

'Bastard stab me.'

I stared dirt silent, shocked and unsure of myself. Didn't want to get involved. Yet her face. I opened the wire gate and went to her side.

'Who?' I asked.

'Husband.'

'Your husband?'

'Daughter's. Wouldn't give him money ... for grog.'

I placed my hand gently to her shoulder.

'Where did he stab you?'

The mad woman lifted her blouse under her sagging left breast. There, on the broad expanse of rolling brown skin were two neat slits between her

ribs. They looked strangely innocent. Almost careless. So small and neat. How could they possibly do any harm? But they were stab wounds. And there was blood all over her stomach.

Bile rose hot in my throat. My brain ratcheted through a dozen possible plans. Hopefully the blade had missed her heart. But what did I know of first aid? I scanned the street for help, then reached for my mobile and punched triple O, asked for an ambulance.

'There's a bit on at the mo, mate,' the attendant said. 'Could be a while. Is she still bleeding?'

A bit on? What sort of response was that? The woman had been stabbed. My mind raced. What's with this town? Were there stab victims sitting all over the place waiting for a bloody ambulance? Maybe Celeste was right – maybe no-one really gave a rat's.

I rang Celeste. She brought the car and first aid kit. We placed a bandage over the wound and Celeste held it there as I half lifted, half dragged the mad woman to the ute.

Celeste held her close through the bends in the highway until we landed on the apron outside the emergency section of the hospital. I stamped my feet, furious at the slowness of the automatic glass entry doors then ran in to raise the alarm. The nurses took over from there. We watched helpless as the mad woman disappeared in to Emergency's inner sanctum amid a flurry of gowns, drips and stethoscopes.

A nurse said the family would be contacted. Might as well go home. Nothing else we could do.

We climbed back in the ute and drove. I couldn't put out of my mind the mad woman's face – so helpless. And so accepting. Stabbed by her own daughter's husband. And for grog.

I promised myself I would make up for my rudeness, work out what made me so prickly in the first place. All she wanted was a few smokes.

* * *

I read in the papers this week the Government was selling off its old stock of homes – guvies – same as ours. Too expensive to maintain. Then this real estate agent shows up and puts a For Sale sign on the mad woman's

house. Quietly, without fuss, she had gone and weeds now reigned where pumpkin vines had ruled.

There was not telling where the mad woman might have been moved. A flat or hostel. Hopefully a garden flat and not one of the town camps. Either way, she doesn't come round anymore. Celeste climbed in to bed and I followed, still thinking about the whole mess.

'Poor mad woman. If only I could go back, fix things. Change what I said, what I did. Christ, isn't there something I can do?'

Celeste narrowed her eyes, stared hard into mine.

'She has a name you know. You could stop calling her the mad woman. That'd be a start.'

'What is it?'

She smiled: 'It's Celeste.'

Once again I was stuck for words. Silence hung between us like that for a full minute. Finally I knew what to do.

'Let's find out where she lives. I'd like to visit Celeste. Maybe take her a pack of smokes.'



Encounter at Kalayakapi, c. 1880

Michael Giacometti

Ants transformed the red dirt into black superhighways that shimmered with their relentless movement like a heat haze on tar. Flies massed on the unexpected feast – to maggotise, to multiply. The native cats, sated on the guts, juicy eyes, gristly ears and meagre flesh, slept through the interminable summer heat, leaving the carcass to improve in the outdoor oven, ready for another serve in the evening cool. The animal was large, almost devoid of hair. Most of the nails on its front paws had been pulled off; the tips were bloodied stumps. The body was pitched forward into a rough sort of burrow, an unfinished excavation in the dry creek bed.

* * *

–There’s water three hundred yards up the creek, Mr Gray. A native well. Plenty of native tracks leading to it. We’ll need to dig it out for all the horses to water.

–Well done, Mr Brown. Lead on. We’ll make camp there.

Down by the soakage, the two men dismounted. After two days without water, the horses were nearly knocked up. While Mr Brown wearily unloaded the distraught pack horses, Mr Gray surveyed the landscape.

The hunting fires of the natives burned a few miles to the south. The thick, black smoke from the burning spinifex hurtled skyward like souls eager to reach heaven. Hundreds of kite-hawks circled low over the flames, ready to grab a lizard, a bilby or a singed kangaroo before the native spears and nulla nullas intervened.

–What infernal hell is this?, Mr Gray muttered to himself. –Fire. The native is always burning. Even on this hot summer day when the stirrup irons brand the horse’s belly and the bit scalds its tongue. He will burn this country black and disappear in the ash.

Mr Gray removed his wide-brimmed felt hat with his left hand, bowed his head forward slightly to mop his brow on the already sodden shirtsleeves of his crooked arm. Hundreds of flies, stirred from his back by the movement, rose into a halo around his unprotected head. He swatted

lethargically, knowing they would soon resettle on his sweat-soaked back. He replaced the hat and refocused his attention closer. With a clearing harrumph, he turned where he stood and bellowed to his companion.

–There’s good feed here for the horses, Mr Brown. No need for the hobbles tonight.

* * *

The old bearded men sat in agitated council between two fires in a spinifex clearing. Their dogs lay sphinx-like on the outer perimeter, sniffing at the darkness. Several young warriors hunting *malu*, red kangaroo, had come across something disturbing earlier in the day and had run in alarm back to their camp. The voices of the old men circled in turn around the fire lit mob.

–They have six legs but no toes, two heads, stand as high as a spear, split into spirit men and thunder feet.

–They have tracks we have never seen before, do not know how to make.

–They take all of our *kapi*, our water, don’t leave any for us, for *malu*, for *kalaya*, emu.

–Their arms are as white as quartz, as white as *pilpira*, the ghost gum that the possums live in. They must be *kurun-kurunpa*, ghosts.

–They haven’t asked for permission to be on our country.

–They should talk to us.

–What are we being punished for that these *kurun-kurunpa*, these *walypala* have come here?

–Maybe that cheeky mob from the stone country sent them. Their Kadaitcha are very powerful.

* * *

The spinifex fires and circling kite-hawks, *paningka*, indicated the location of the hunting natives, just as surely as the gunshot blasts echoing down the range gave away the location of the Europeans, the *walypala*. Galahs screeched loudly into flight from *apara*, the red gums. They transformed the sky into alternating pink and grey flashes as the birds called and

whirled in serpentine flight, as if trying to elude a darting falcon. Another blast echoed along the sandstone cliffs like a thundering chorus of drums, rolling repeatedly back and forth for almost a minute. Downy feathers slowly descended through the gnarled branches. Along with smoked horsemeat, pink cockatoo and parakeet stew was becoming a mainstay of the explorers' meagre diet.

* * *

Tjilpi, a learned old greybeard, gave instruction to the young initiates. The boys were now men and having learnt some of the ways of the women, now began to learn the responsibilities of a man, a hunter.

–*Kuka kalaya* came through here. Walking. Male. One year old. Stopped here and turned east. Another *kalaya* coming from south of east. Also male. Four years old. Seven little *akalpa* following. One of them a bit slower. He'll be tucker for *paningka* soon. Single *kalaya* wanted to steal the trailing *akalpa*. Father *kalaya*, he chased him away. Yesterday, just after sunrise.

The hunting mob leave the *tjina* of the father, leave him to raise his little ones, follow the *tjina* of the young male *kalaya* across the claypan to *kurku*, the mulga.

–*Malu* been sleeping there, *tjilpi* points out. –He sleeps there most days. *Kalaya* woke him up. *Malu* hopped and walked slowly away from the sun. *Kalaya* went opposite way for a bit, scratched about for some tucker then went on.

A faint glint in the sand about ten steps away catches the eye of *tjilpi*. Crescent-shaped tracks leading east lay beside a small, smooth cylinder, the colour of corkwood flowers.

–*Walypala*, *tjilpi* said to himself. –Yesterday, before midday.

The old man turns back to the initiates to continue the lesson. –We sweep our tracks so *kalaya* can't follow us, won't know we have been following him. We disappear ourselves so the Kadaitcha man won't be able to make his sickness magic on us either. But the *walypala*, he must have strong powers. He's not scared of Kadaitcha. He leaves his *tjina*, footprints, and bumprints in the sand; his shit on the surface, like a dog marking his territory, letting the bitches know he's here to rule, ready to rut. He

scatters his kill liberally and wastes the best meat, the fatty meat from the *malu* tail.

* * *

After several days of fruitless searching and false leads, Mr Gray and Mr Brown found another native well in a red gum creek. Tired and thirsty from the long, rationed and hot days, they set up camp only metres from the well beneath the tree's ample shade. They had soon drawn several large buckets of water from the well for their horses to drink.

During their five-day stay beside the well, no kangaroos or natives were able to visit it, the most reliable source of water for many days walk in any direction. The *walypala* and their horses ran it dry. The zebra finches were forced to drink the pungent, drying mud. The natives had already moved on.

* * *

After an awful day of butchery, the meat from the final remaining packhorse cured in the makeshift smokehouse. Flies pulsed over the fleshy tit-bits on the ground outside. Mr Brown kicked dust over the writhing mass and cursed at the stench. He entered the flimsy tent and added an armful of green leaves and branches to the fire beneath the curing racks.

–I'm glad this is the last one, Mr Brown muttered to himself.

For the next three days he would be the barbarous attendant to his flesh-eating desires, tending the fire and smoke, turning the salted strips of muscle, rotating them among the different levels to encourage even drying. In the smokehouse, Mr Brown was projected into one of Dante's hellish realms, tortured by the smoke stinging his weeping eyes, by the flies creeping over his face and into his ears and mouth, by the ants in their millions trying to carry away his best work yet, and by the smell of death on his hands and seeping from every sweaty pore.

* * *

Resting in the cloistering late afternoon heat beneath a river red gum, Mr Gray reflected on the untidy appearance of eucalypts. Their habit, their form, their mottled colour and their tendency to silently shed limbs on still days were repulsively foreign, so unlike a tall poplar, a majestic pine, a towering elm, or grand and shady oak.

Mr Gray closed his eyes and thought longingly of home. The gentle breeze stiffened and the dull grey-green lanceolate leaves waved up and down like a lady's handkerchief signalling from a horse-drawn carriage in Bath, or even, God forbid, the colonial equivalent, Melbourne. The agitated branches shook the lerp scale, *ngalpinka*, from the leaves. It fell in a shower of sugary snow, coating Mr Gray's face, beard and body. Like a slow-motion thorny devil on a sugar ant trail, his unmoving mouth pushed out a pointed tongue, captured a sweet morsel and drew it in. The sweet waxy drop reminded him of the comforts of childhood, encased in warm blankets, sucking on a honey-dipped dummy. Within moments, Mr Gray was deeply somnolent, drugged by the oppressive heat, the day's exertion and longing.

The ancient gum once shared its shade and secrets with the Munga Munga women. In return, the tiny women left their children on the burls and boughs where they were rocked to sleep by the slow murmuring of the tree. The women went west to gather *kuraltja*, yalka, and *kumpurarpa*, desert raisin, maybe get a *tinka*, sand goanna, along the way, but they did not return. When the mischievous children awoke, alone and hungry, they suckled from the nectar-rich flowers and sugar-coated leaves of *apara*, their aunty.

They crept up to Mr Gray sleeping where their mothers once stood. They tugged lightly on his beard; Mr Gray involuntarily swatted a fly away. They removed his hat and placed it on a high branch; Mr Gray did not flinch. They sat on his leg, removed his right boot and reeled at the stench contained within; Mr Gray's toes wiggled, tempting the crows to strike.

* * *

The silent, invisible *tjina* were everywhere around the disorganised camp. Mr Gray lay stretched out on his back like a corpse, snoring lightly. Ants crawled all over his body seeking food, but he was oblivious to their small pincers.

Mr Brown was not so fortunate. He was becoming more insomniac, unable to find a place to sleep free of the black roads of ants. Wherever he lay they spewed from their volcanic slits to crawl into his clothing and nip and tear at his flesh. He scratched and howled, jumped up and down, tried to rip the thin mortal layer from his bones. The Kadaitcha, sitting in the darkness outside the circle of light from the small camp fire, got up and

noiselessly floated away on trackless, emu-feathered feet. Mr Gray did not stir.

* * *

–Those fellas, they’ve gone mad, poorfellas. They walked everywhere. *Tjina* going every way. North up the creek. Nothing that way. North-west along the cliffs then south of west through thick *kurku* scrub.

Tjilpi shook his head with sad concern.

–Poor *walypala*. They must have blind eyes. Don’t they know the *tjurkupa*? Everything is written for them to read: in the trees, the rocks, the sky, even in the ants. They can’t see our *tjina*, *mitura wanani*.

* * *

A lone native carrying his spears entered the creek bed. To foreign eyes this creek was like any other for hundreds of miles around, this section interchangeable with countless others along its length.

He knows this one. It is *Kalayakapi*, emu *tjurkupa*, his mother’s father’s country. Nearby along the easterly pad, a mob of stately *kurkapi*, desert oaks, stood guard beneath the crest of a cayenne pepper coloured sand ridge. The light breeze whispered and whined through the long needle-like leaves; those that had fallen and dried, along with the many pointed cylindrical cones, matted the ground beneath each tree.

He was still some distance from the next waterhole, a soakage called *Kalayakapipiti*. He was thirsty so he sought out the large *apara* on the opposite bank, upstream a little way from the rotting *kuka*, meat, the *walypala*. A green flash of budgerigars shrieked and darted speedily through the lower branches of the grand gum.

Whispering to the tree, his mother, he picked up several hollow tubes of bark and formed them into a long, narrow straw. He inserted one end into a small orifice in the tree’s belly and supped from the rainwater held secretly within. With great care he removed the tubes and placed them at his feet, ready for the next person to use, then softly singing the country into being, walked on.



DYMOCKS RED EARTH POETRY AWARD

Sketch of This Day

Dani Powell

Wind sketches. Lines and patterns scrawled across the country
Wind currents mapped like tracks into this place
Converge at this one day

Conversation carries in the wind passing, cars passing, people passing
To the shop, away from the shop, to the shop
Kids looping turnstiles

This afternoon the funeral. *Who's gonna carry the coffin?*

Outside it's hot. Not hot like the hot we know but hot enough to send us
inside
Inside there's cake. Cake made yesterday with pineapple mashed into it
There were two cakes but one went missing

We looked everywhere for it: in the fridge, the cupboards, the bedroom
Might have been a dog snuck in. Might have been one of the kids
That man hanging round. Who was that man hanging round the kitchen?

Clarry wants to go to the funeral so we drive him up
One of us to drive. Two of us to get him out of the Toyota
A warm wind. Some old men on plastic chairs
Christian hymns. Plastic flowers. He joins them.

Back home we sit inside and start the singing
Some ladies come in
Not enough limbs. Not enough legs for the coffin
That old man lying flat in a box and not enough fellas to carry him

Last night there was drinking. Fighting up the road
Today the youngfellas are hung over. The old ladies are pissed off
Who's gonna carry the coffin?

The young whitefella goes like it's an inevitability. He's not even family

People walking the streets. Dogs again
Tracking the lane between the house and the shops
More milk. We've run out of milk again
Cuppatea after cuppatea. To the shop. Away from the shop.

Ham sandwich in a plastic bag for the old man
Cuppatea, enamel cup
I used to take 'smoko' to my father up the track to the windmill
A thermos of tea. Mum's cakes
Dry grass in the warm wind

I take the sandwich and the tea and walk the dirt track to the churchyard
Camp dogs follow me like they can't help themselves

Clarry sits there and listens to the singing
This way family can come and sit down for a bit
When we pulled up yesterday two young fellas threw themselves at the car
And grabbed their grandfather's bag
Went through it like dogs at a rubbish bin
Camp dogs. Hungry dogs. Mad dogs with mad eyes
'Let them have it. That's my grandson.'
Grandparents give to their family. Everybody gives to everyone

The coffin is carried across the dusty yard by a scraping of broken old fellas
It's like watching the feeble limbs of an insect
Being crushed by its own weight
A praying mantis carrying the corpse of itself

The stillness of it. The ceremony of it. The swaying of the pallbearers
Backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, in the warm wind
Like a house on stilts being blown about
A lop-sided jacked-up wooden box
Driftwood drifting back to heaven

That old man has wet eyes when I get to him
And all the while I am watching I am wanting
To scream at those youngfellas to carry the fucking coffin

An old man sitting in the sun
The funeral's done but the singing might go on all night
He wants to go home. 'Palya?'

I take him to the Toyota and get someone to help me get him in
I fold up the chair for the hundredth time and jam it in the back
It's bloody heavy and I can never get the back door closed
I drive him home and find him a place in the sun
I go back to the house with the too many people
And too many feelings trapped inside

The old ladies are lying by the fire as if weighted by the afternoon sun
Time is dealt with differently here
A day is not divided into thirds by breakfast, lunch and dinner
A day seems to unfold itself, one limb at a time,
and stumble forward towards its interruptions

Stillness swells until it erupts into something
A revving car engine, someone screaming up the street, a dog fight
And you are taken with it, like a willy willy on a windless day

Caught up, carried to the end of it, until the wind drops
and the day settles back into itself like a sleeping dog.

I push the wheelchair across the yard and park the old man in the sun
Some of the ladies lift their necks to see who's here
Campfire smoke coils quietly



Sustenance

Kelly-Lee Hickey

Her hunger
sells paintings
of bush bananas

My emptiness is
of a different kind.



Reflux

Kelly-Lee Hickey

our childhood
smells
ripe

like papaya
freshly
peeled

scabs
become
nutrition

as our
conversation
is cutting

lawns
around
burnt out cars

mould
grows
on asbestos walls

and my eyes
mimic
the monsoon



Cows, Stuart Highway

Kaye Aldenhoven

Wild red scrubbers
trample mud
drink mud
from the last billabong
along Burrell Creek.

Roadkill, near Tennant
balloons hugely, belly taut
hooves towards the sky.
In the old days my kids threw stones
at such rare, primed carcasses, hoping
to trigger an explosion of guts.

Red dirt verges are strewn
with funereal black
scraps, strips, bits
hard shreds of dried pelt
frayed skins and wires of tyres.

Day and night we pass
and are passed by cattle trucks
three dogs each, reinforced steel, double-tiered.
The wind of their passing tugs at our car.

A driver parks his truck
in shade at Elliott
dashes across the tar to grab
a carton of iced coffee
dashes back to resume
the relentless bitumen.

Near Katherine, soft brahmans
café au lait, crème caramel and milk-coated
are jammed in
so they can't stumble
so they can't break a leg
so they can't become
unsaleable.

Once, cattle travelled beef roads to abattoirs
at Mudginberri, Point Stuart, Alice Springs
Tennant Creek, Batchelor, Berrimah and
Vestey's meatworks at Bullocky Point.

Now cattle trucks lurch and sway
at one hundred kays an hour.
Cattle tremble, moan
doomed for Port Darwin -
the long, hot, thirsty road, then
the long terrifying voyage
to halal death in Third World countries.

If they knew, those sad-eyed
cattle, they'd long for my
stainless butcher's knife
quick through their throats
the splash of heart-pumped blood
and the stillness of the export freezer.



Observations from a road trip to Alice and back, May 2009

Thirty years

Fred Vant Sand

An old cowboy walks,
Grey green hat moulded to his head.
Greyled hair,
Yellow long sleeved western shirt,
Blue faded jeans hang low.
Bare feet.
Left hand grips the right
Just above the wrist.
Slow and deliberate.

Young rastagangaman weaves
Red yellow and slack bandana over a number 3 cut.
Yellow t-shirt
Blue jeans hang low.
Bare feet.
Left hand grips a plastic bottle,
Piss coloured contents,
Lifted to a mouth loud and angry.

In five minutes,
Thirty years of disappointment
Walked down my street.



KATH MANZIE YOUTH LITERARY AWARD

Oubliette

Shona Welsh

No Light. No warmth. Nothing but the persistent drip, drip, drip of water free-falling through the oppressive silence to land in frustratingly regular patterns on the limestone floor. Limestone is alive. It grows, it swallows all that gets in its path. Maybe I will be its next victim; the stone devouring my skin, a task it has already begun, creeping over my bones, giving them greater life than that of the animal they previously gave strength to.

Oubliette: a place you put people to forget about them. I wonder how long they intend to forget about me? It seems forever since I stopped pounding at the walls, screaming, wailing, begging for mercy from a person disinclined to hear. Forever since I tore my nails out against the bare stone walls, trying to climb to freedom. Since the last attempt to cling to the water pail on the way out and the bone-crunching fall that followed. Scraps are still thrown, water still lowered. However, no voices. They are determined to break me.

Time stretches, bulges, bursts, shattering my sanity with its razor sharp splinters. I linger lovingly over memories of the outside world, the walls around me recede and I escape, escape into the refuge of the mind. Time no longer has any meaning, nor does sanity. All that matters is the past – wind and rain, sunlight and darkness, intertwined with friends... family. Love. Hope.

Running through the trees, Caleb hot in pursuit, laughing at his deliberately fumbled attempts at catching me. He knows where I am heading but the chase is part of the game. Leaping twisted roots and fallen branches we burst into the small clearing beside the brook – our destination. Caleb lunges, one arm twining around my waist, the other scooping my legs from under me, my skirts dangling. He tries to take a step but the skirts twist around his legs, tripping him and sending us both laughing hysterically into the undergrowth. It is our first time alone in the months since the wedding, having finally escaped our silent watchers for long enough to enjoy each other's company and the serenity of the forest. The laughter trails off and I nestle in the crook of Caleb's arm, heart hammering as my thoughts wander to what I know will happen later.

"I love you, Gwen," he whispered, staring intently into my eyes, letting me know this was no casual conversation. Caleb is uncomfortable with direct eye contact and will only do so if the situation is serious. "Even if you were penniless I would have married you. There will be no other." I take a breath; now is the time to share my news. "I know, love, and you know that this is true for me as well. There would be no other man I would trust to be father to the babe inside me."

Caleb's eyes widened and a jubilant smile turned the corners of his mouth. Slowly, with infinite care he splayed his hand across my as yet flat stomach. I laughed. "You will not feel anything yet my love, it is too soon, but rest assured it is certain that you are to be a father." In a rush his mouth claimed mine and we lost ourselves in heat and laughter...

I no longer believe that Caleb survives. If they could do this to me, what would they do to the father of my child, the man who might have been Regent if the Fates had spun their threads a little differently? He is strong and clever – he may have escaped. Yet if that was so, I am sure I would not be here. The rack and hot irons would be the only option, they would not stop until they knew the name of every lord, every crofter who would possibly give him succour. At least here it is only my sanity that is threatened. My body is still free of pain, if undernourished. I wonder if my brother still harbours some shred of feeling for me, and this is his way of pandering to his own whims. Still, there is no regret. My actions were noble and just.

Belly burgeoning in front of me I rushed down the spiralling staircase towards the room where I had been informed my brother had taken his latest toy. This was a first. Until now Eamon's 'dalliances' had been confined to the bedroom and to the serving women who could at least be paid to endure his perversions. This was not right. He had ordered Lord Ashling's 16 year old daughter Caitlyn to attend him in his private chambers, which was unseemly at the least, but rumours of his activities before now had reached my ears. When a nervous guard left his post to inform me of his escorting the Lady Caitlyn forcibly to the bowels of the castle, I knew it was time to act.

"Stand aside!" I commanded the guard, partner of the one escorting me, stationed at the door. A look of relief crossed their faces at the intrusion, for no-one relishes being forced to endure another's torment. I swept past

them as they opened the door, entering my brother's version of heaven. The scent of burning flesh permeated the room, the heat so unbearable that I immediately vomited, then did so again when I saw Caitlyn. The poor girl was nude, arms dangling from the ceiling, legs chained to the floor, hanging exhausted. But that was not what caused me to empty my stomach. Across her young body our family crest was carved into her flesh, sealed by a hot iron that was still dangling, snakelike, and dangerous from the king's hand. I swallowed another wave of nausea. "Stop now, Eamon!"

He turned slowly, taking in my distended belly and red face. I looked into his eyes and all I saw was madness. He smiled slowly, "I don't think I will, Gwen. You see, this is an audition. As you seem so intent on providing heirs for my throne, I think that I should catch up. If this one proves fertile, in perhaps, a month, then I will marry her. But I do not think I will leave this to chance. Tomorrow another will join her. Then another the next day and so on until I have my heir." He laughed. "A fine idea, do you not think, sister mine?"

I fled in panic, knowing that reason had left him and I could not save the girl even if I tried. He was now afraid of me, and fear breeds hate, hate ends in death. The castle is no longer safe. I must escape...

When a king goes mad it is the duty of the aristocracy to depose him. Taxes had been raised to impossible heights, the populace was starving, young men were forcibly recruited into an army to fight a war not of their making. Then came the executions, the torture and finally, the defilement of hundreds of innocents all in the name of producing an heir. All were burned at the stake when they failed to produce a child. Unfortunately, some see an insane monarch as a ripe opportunity to plunder the provinces for their own end. Even a mad king has his confidantes.

And his spies.

Safe. Content. Exhausted. My son finally slept in my arms, Caleb by my side and all signs of pursuit had evaporated villages ago. We had been offered asylum by Lord Ashling and through the last few nights, Caleb and our benefactor had been lost in deep discussion, plotting to overthrow the mad king. Last night I had given birth. Yes, I was filled to the brim with love for my tiny darling, but it had taken more out of me than expected. I was still in much pain and movement out of my bed was impossible. I

rolled onto my side, wincing, laying a sleeping Connor between us, and stared at my husband, drinking in his features like a desert starved of rain. Two more days. A messenger had arrived from our informant in the palace yesterday, our plans had reached fruition. The bird was ripe for plucking.

The ring of metal against metal rang out through the night, followed by the scream of a dying soldier. Caleb was instantly awake. "Gods! How did they know? We were so careful! We must away Gwen..." He realised what he was saying and an anguished look passed across his rough-hewn features. "I cannot carry you both. You must try to walk my love!" I nodded and carefully rose out of bed, only to find myself back there again when the pain overtook me. I tried again and this time managed to follow an anxious Caleb out onto the landing. I waddled painstakingly towards the servants' stairs, Caleb cradling a well swaddled Conner and checking the passages remained free of the king's soldiers. A shout rang out from behind me. I turned, saw our pursuit, and then screamed, "RUUUNN!!" Caleb started towards me, then hesitated, tears streaming down his cheeks as he looked from me to our son. "Go! Save him! If you go I have hope!" I fell to the ground, watching as the other half of my soul ran with my heart in his arms until there was nothing but blackness. A mercy.

Spiders, flies, creeping through walls, listening at windows, buzzing behind curtains, watching from the shadows. If only we had been more aware of that fact before making our plans. It was thought, as the king's older and much favoured sister, that his spies would stay well clear of me and my husband. This was in many ways true, but there are always those with a hidden agenda and thirst for power that rivals any moral sensibilities with which they might have been born. From the conception of our Connor it became a matter of utmost urgency to realise our plans, for who would want their child to grow up in a world of fear and madness? Assassination is always a possible threat when it comes to the heir of a throne, particularly that of an insane king.

Drip, drip, drip. No way to mark the time, day, week, month, even year. My once lush chocolate hair is greying, coming out in long, tangled clumps. But is this from age or malnutrition? I suspect a little of both. I stuff all that I can gather into my clothing – anything for a bit of extra warmth. Soon there will be none left and this dress itself will be worn into rags. It may be near that already – I cannot see but it is starting to feel quite

threadbare. Will they give me another when this is a ruin? I miss the heat of the sun, the lick of a thousand gentle tongues as it caresses your face. I miss another body beside me, a comforting furnace throughout frosty nights. It is always the same biting cold down here, the damp seeping through clothing as you sleep, only a constant pacing around the walls throughout the waking moments saving me from illness. Still, I grow more waiflike the longer I am down here. Will I eventually waste away, becoming nothing but an echo, a sighing voice riding the wind?

Sun on my face. I wake up in the back of a cart, all I can smell is my own vomit. Pain is tearing through my insides, increasing with the swaying motion of the cart and I pass out again from the shock.

The bucket is lowered at regular intervals. It alternates between food and water. My bodily waste must also go into this vessel if I do not wish to live in it. If I sleep through a lowering of the bucket, sometimes living in it is unavoidable. Every now and again soapy water is thrown down to splash along the floor, though this is not very effective without cleaning implements. There is no scent anymore for me, no gagging and retching. As a pig is immune to the stench of its wallow, so now am I to my prison. I pray for death, but even this is not granted me, for the body's determination to survive is stronger than the mind that controls it. Hope creeps in and undermines my repeated attempts at starvation. I hear the footstep of the guard and think of rescue, no matter how many times this turns out to be false hope. Hope: the conqueror of reason.

I wake up again as they shift me from the wagon. As they carry me on a pallet into Eamon's presence, I begin to anticipate a rescue. Surely they will do so before the king can torture me? As they carry me up the steps and into my brother's receiving chamber, I begin to panic. Eamon's eyes shine brilliantly with his madness and I can see nothing of the little brother I loved from his birth. I start to tremble and he smiles. Tears roll down my cheeks and his grin widens, then he frowns, as if he is confused by the actions of his own mouth. "To the pit," he orders the guard. "She is to be given no implements by which she may kill herself, no human contact and no relief from the darkness. Perhaps when she finally dies she will comprehend the insanity of trying to depose a king."

As they lowered me into the pit the last flame of hope was snuffed. I was left in darkness, hopeless. Or so I thought...

Creak... crick creeeak...crick creeeak... The bucket is again lowered but there is a flickering in its depths that brings a spark of interest to my befuddled mind. Slowly, gently, it settles upon the ground and I think that I am hallucinating. There is a candle, the light is so beautiful but it sears my eyes and I must step away, but not before snatching the parchment beside it.

"We come. Have hope. C."

I laugh, a harsh sound more like a bark, lacking humanity. It is the first sound I have uttered since my pleading elicited no response. *Have hope*. Fool. Hope is all I have ever had! Oubliette: a place you put people to forget about them. Not me. Not forgotten. Not yet.

I wait.

For freedom.



Taj and the Creature

Oceana Pastor-Eisgood

The digital watch winked and the sharp blue light that had only seconds ago been illuminating the shadows on the wall went out. 'Never a good sign,' thought Taj as he pushed himself further into the corner of the crumbling cement room. He had found the watch only a few days ago when he had first entered the city. It had been so tempting that he had overcome his revulsion and pried it off the arm of a dead man. Although the watch had provided its last owner little luck, Taj believed then that it was a good omen. His belief was fading fast. He flicked the watch a few times as loudly as he dared, willing with every section of his soul for it to flicker back to life, willing it to light up the dark again. When his attempts proved in vain he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Not that it mattered much in the end, the darkness was everywhere.

* * *

From the shadows behind the rotten remains of the door, two shining eyes watched the boy. Their owner was impressed. Despite his size the boy had put up quite a fight. It was pointless of course. The creature knew that from the start and now as the light around the boy went out he knew the thought was shared. Everybody would fall in the end. Eventually, the darkness prevailed.

* * *

Taj whipped his head around suddenly, straining to see through the impenetrable void. His breathing slowed and then came to a stop as he held his breath and tried to stretch his ears out to where the sounds appeared to originate. He jumped as he heard the heavy thud of approaching footsteps. Visibly shaking in fear he pushed himself so far back against the wall that it seemed he was about to become a part of it. Flakes of paint and a chunk of cement fell to the ground, loudly. Taj froze and the footsteps approached faster and faster. Then he came to a sudden realization. He sighed and managed a tight grin. The sound had been nothing but his own heart. Exhausted now, he adjusted his legs as a feeling of numbness washed over him. Trembling, Taj brushed his cold fingers across his right calf, feeling the sticky warmth of blood. He winced.

The poison was advancing faster than he had at first anticipated. Taj calculated that because he had been unable to feel his toes for some time the end was drawing closer. Surprisingly, it mattered little to him. As the hours passed he had noticed that the need to survive had crumbled like the walls around him. Taj tried to rationalize death, thinking that if – or more so when – he died he would be able to meet once again with those who had passed. It would be a great thing to see his family again as it had been many years since their spirits spoke, except in the darkness of his dreams. Opening himself up to the spirit world he began to sway and sing the passing song under his breath.

* * *

The creature in the shadows pricked up its ears as the boy touched his leg. Her nostrils flared as the smell of blood drifted strong over to it. The boy was weakening; she could smell it in the thickness of his blood. The creature knew that time would come soon and prepared to pounce. Then, without warning the boy began to talk. As first it was only a mumble but it grew. Soon it was a chant vibrating through the darkness. It washed over the creature and she found herself unable to move. The sound of song was unfamiliar to her and although she stood transfixed another feeling sat silently under the surface. Try as she may she couldn't recognize it. The noise grew again. The boy tilted his head and threw the song up to the crumbling roof and out into the skies. His voice flowed flawless. It dipped and sank into the low before rising up to the highest peak. As he sang the boy smiled. As he sang he closed his eyes and the creature knew part of him wasn't there anymore. But the thing the creature noticed first was the sight of the song. She could see the noise rise and float around the boy like an aura. The aura shone brighter and brighter, causing the creature to scream and turn away. The light burned into her eyes and all at once the pain was there, all over her body. She shrieked and clawed at her ears, trying to rid her brain of the boy, the sound and the light. She tried to run but the light was too strong for her to escape. Instead she continued to claw at her head and her body as the blood flowed in steady rivulets to the floor.

* * *

As Taj continued to sing he felt himself drift. The song had been sung by his people for thousands of years to farewell the dead into the land of the beyond. His grandfather had told him the song was necessary if a spirit

wanted to make the journey from the solid world into the spirit world. In the times of before, when the light had covered the earth, the people didn't sing the spirits of their dead to the afterlife and so they had stayed, and clogged up the sky until the lights went out. Taj felt warmer now. The cold that had seeped into his bones oozed out in a steady motion as though unwilling to be in his body when it passed. Taj smiled and sang louder. He vaguely felt himself stand and begin to walk but was unsure whether it was his spirit or his body that now walked. Surely it was his spirit because there was no pain now. Even the fear of the dark had receded as the song grew and shone in the darkness. This indeed was a good way to end.

* * *

The pain suddenly grew more intense and the creature seized up and began to shake as waves of hurt ripped through every muscle and nerve in her body. Prying her eyes open, seeking a reason for this growth in the pain, she saw something she never expected. The boy had stood and slowly but with an underlying purpose he had begun to walk. His eyes remained closed but from behind them she saw the light shine. His entire body glowed like the ball that had once sat in the sky. Too long did she look and the image of the glowing boy burned itself into her eyes. She tried to claw at him and cut him down, hoping that if she could just make him fall the light would stop. Reaching, she swung her claws towards him but when they approached the light they began to sizzle and burn. Snatching her hand away as fast as her pained body could manage she gathered every single drop of energy that remained in what was left of her body and brought herself to a crouching. Roaring in pain and anger she flung herself at the nearest wall and burst through to the relief of the dark, cool night.

* * *

Taj was aware of himself now. He could feel the steps that he took and the rocks that moved under his feet. He could hear his song and see the light that poured out of him and lit up the walls and every dark, dismal corner of the cement room. It was a strange feeling to be able to see all of this, yet be unable to control it. Taj could not slow or stop his step, nor halt the flow of his song. Yet it took no effort to do either, and his state remained calm and composed. He saw the shadow of his attacker scream and rush through the crumbling wall but he did not flinch or cower. Taj saw the

creature's blood and felt not happiness at its pain, but sadness that it should have to suffer. With the light spilling out, he walked further, out into the world.

In moments he had found his way out of the crumbling building and as he breathed in the cool air the song grew again. The light that had been only glowing around him moments ago burst forth in a blast as everything around him was illuminated. The light could not be described as white. It had no single colour but changed with every dip and rise of the music from dark reds to light blues, glowing greens and shining yellows.



In Fertile Wet

Rosie O'Reilly

I have not seen the sun for near a week:
The gloomy ashen clouds o'er cast its face;
This landscape stretching out is jade batik,
Its folds and furrows form this unlit place;
And through the fabric's silken, wrinkled thread
A satin ribbon river twists unchecked,
With swollen banks from swollen clouds o'erhead,
From laden sky the leaden hues reflect;
But though the golden sun does not caress
This artist's cloth, its features are not dark:
The crafted prospect seems to luminesce
With borrowed emerald light and glist'ning bark;
There's beauty in a land unseen by sun
In fertile Wet, a masterpiece is spun.





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