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Contents

Introduction 5

Arafura Short Story Award

Dragonfly Season, by Jennifer White 7
The Lure, by David Jagger 13
Charlie and the Mermaids, by Jeremy John Hall 18
Hunting with Daisy and Dora, by Toni Tapp Coutts 21
Sorry Business, by Barbara Eather 24
Moonshine, by Kathleen Donald 29
Student Protests, by Jennifer Haydon 34
The Wild Lime Tree, by Marian Devitt 38
Coming Home up the Stuart Highway, by Jo Dutton 40

Red Earth Poetry Award

One Thing, by Alan Whykes 42
Day at the Office Suite, December '96, Darwin, by Marian Devitt 43
Train Times, by Judith Steele 46
The Butcher of Lobeje, by Carmel Williams 48

NT University Essay Award

Smoke Gets In My Alice, by Alan Whykes 50
Keeping Time, by Michael Whitting 53
Revisiting the Green Centre, by Tarla Kramer 56
We Never Had Proper Food, by Kaye Aldenhoven 59
The Land of Opportunity, by Anne-Marie Hayman 61
The Queensland Gentleman, by L. F. S. Browne 66
Kath Manzie Youth Literary Award

Fishing with the Ferals, by Lorna Roberts  
A Scary Boat Ride, by Jake Hanlon  
Let Sleeping Cows Stand, by Briohny Doyle  
On Murulax and Saving the World, by Briohny Doyle

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writers' Award

Suppression, by John Bodey  
Mixed Relations, by Des Rogers  
The Lying Jezebel, by Yaritji Green  
Fifty-seven, by Yaritji Green  
Treaat Train, by Veronica Johns

Prize winners, and details of contributors

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Introduction

The Northern Territory Literary Awards competition has been running for nearly two decades, and has helped to encourage and reward Territory writers of all sorts, from the well-established to the complete newcomer.

For the first time this year, the NT Library and Information Service has assumed administrative responsibility for the Awards, taking over from the NT University, which continues, however, to sponsor the Essay Award. NTLIS looks forward to a continuing role in the future in consultation with the Committee and other stakeholders. Dymocks Booksellers continues its very welcome sponsorship. As in previous years, the Awards ceremony is the opening event in Writers' Week, organised by the NT Writers' Centre.

This year there were 250 entries in the five categories. All Territorians can submit entries in the short story, essay and poetry categories, and in addition there are awards designed to encourage young writers, and writers from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

<table>
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<th>Category of Award</th>
<th>No. of entries received</th>
<th>No. short-listed</th>
<th>Prize</th>
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<tr>
<td>Arafura Short Story</td>
<td>68</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Earth Poetry</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>4</td>
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All short-listed writers were offered publication in this book; all but two accepted. The list of prize winners appears at the end. Elsewhere in the book no indication appears of whether an entry was a winner in its category, so that readers may enjoy forming their own judgments about the entries without knowing what the judges thought.

The Literary Awards Committee wishes to thank the judges: Nicholas Jose, Josie Douglas, Anne Harris, Alan Powell and Philip Salom.

There is naturally a strong Territory feel about most of the writing in this book; contributors come from all over the NT, and they write about a wide range of experience. However, this is by the choice of the writers: there is no restriction on content or style (except for the essay award, which requires some relevance to the NT) and writers may submit science fiction or social satire if they wish. Territory writing is not so much writing about the Territory as it is writing done by Territorians.

Lindal Salter
Editor
Arafura Short Story Award

Dragonfly Season
Jennifer White

I sat on the verandah and watched the rain sheeting down. Muddy rivulets formed in the garden below. Lush flowers as bright as a child’s textas sagged and shook. Almost over now, I thought, meaning more than the rain, meaning the wet season. Soon the air would lose its heaviness, and become thin and dry and hollow. Soon the black mould would slow its steady crawl over bathroom tiles. And soon the dragonflies would be about, iridescent flashes out of the corner of your eye. Things were changing. I could sense it. Another week or two and the world would sound and smell different. After nearly 18 months in Darwin I had begun to understand the seasons.

I liked that. For the first time since Tom had died I felt that I belonged. I wasn’t an unwelcome ghost anymore, hovering somewhere above the action. I raised my stubby in salute to the Top End. But before I had taken another drink...a distinct sense of unease settled gently over me like a cobweb. It was almost as if, now that I belonged here, I existed in a way that I had not previously existed, and because of this I had come to the attention of something. Something had found me. Something was looking. I glanced around. I could see nothing, hear nothing, through the downpour. I felt an easy target up there on the verandah. A dozen sharpshooters could have been aiming straight for my heart.

A hangover, I told myself. That’s all it is. From Tom’s death, and from all the long days afterwards when all I wanted was to be a chair, a book, anything without feeling. When the only feeling had been pain. And so I had become an inanimate object. It had been easier that way. Now, when I could feel again, when I was flooded with feelings, I was unable to interpret them. It had been too long. I no longer spoke the language. Everything felt bad, even when it felt good.

A breeze. My shoulders lifted, a protective reflex, and I turned. Jani, my four year old, was standing there. “Mumma,” she said, “It’s too noisy in there. They won’t shut up.”

“It’s just the rain,” I told her. I sat her on my knee and chanted, “It’s okay,” until she went back to sleep.

We had only just moved into the house. I spent most of the next day wiping down louvres and scrubbing walls, spotted like a sun-damaged face, with Jani hanging off me the whole time. She never let go. She had already lost Tom. She didn’t intend to lose me too. In the afternoon, unpacking boxes, I came across an old hat of Tom’s under a pile of clothes. It resembled a kind of squashed toad.

“Dadda,” Jani wailed. “My Dadda.” She grabbed my leg with her chubby arms and held it tight, squeezing her cheek against my thigh, as if she was sure that Dadda was somewhere inside. She had learned by now that Dadda no longer existed in the corporeal sense, that he was not about to walk through the door, but she still wanted him to. I understood. I wanted him to as well. To walk in, bend down and kiss me absent-mindedly on the cheek. I wanted it so hard I could almost see it. If I really tried I bet I could. But he wasn’t there and we were on our own, and by now the black suit he had worn the last time I had
seen him would be grown lacy with rot. I threw the hat on the pile to be binned later.

“C’mon, monkey,” I picked Jani up. She wrapped her legs around my waist. “Let’s get out of here. How about hot bread rolls for lunch?” She nodded solemnly and put her head on my shoulder. I wondered what she was thinking.

After Tom’s death the rituals which had been meant to comfort had been torture. Ill-fitting, meaningless, they had made me feel even emptier. I hadn’t thought that was possible. I’d thought that if I could go somewhere else I could leave the sorrow behind. I imagined a place of ease and light, of Jani dancing naked in a garden, her skin dappled with sun, and me laughing. It had made sense at the time. Two weeks after the funeral I had flown to Darwin, with Jani curled across my belly all the way like some small furred marsupial. And it had worked, in a way. The pain whenever I thought of Tom was a new wound, but I no longer thought of him constantly. Not everything reminded me of him any more. But still, the emptiness.

I bought the rolls and some feta. I wanted some apples but the fruit, as usual, was soft and bruised. When I got to the cash register Sal, a friend from work, was there too. I told her about the house.

“Oh yeah, I know the one,” she said. “The old place with the huge frangipani out the front.” The frangipani, they grow like weeds in Darwin. I nodded.

“No trouble?” she asked.

“Huh?” I wasn’t following. That wasn’t unusual. I often drifted off in the middle of conversations.

“It’s been years, I s’pose, since the murder.” I glanced at Jani. She always listened intently to adult conversations. I had done the same thing as a child. It was how I had learned, years ago, about life’s curved edges. About everything important. Sitting quietly until my elders had forgotten my presence amongst them, until I had become as invisible as a fairy, a sprite, an imaginary thing, and they had begun to talk openly.

“You don’t know about it, do you? Look, don’t worry. It happened decades ago. It’s a beautiful house and I’m jealous as hell. I don’t know much anyway, something about a couple of kids and the Aboriginal girl who looked after them. You’re bound to get some kind of history with a house that old.” I took pity on her. “Forget it, Sal. I don’t care. I’ve got too many real things to worry about.”

“Yes, Sal said. “Yeah, you’re right.” She hurried out of the dark shop.

It was true about not caring. The house was beautiful. It had thick wooden floors that turned the colour of honey when the sun was on them, and cool rooms of a hot night, and high ceilings, and cupboards everywhere, all set in a garden tumbling with growth. Nothing else mattered, especially not the past. I had left the past down in Melbourne. Up here, there was no past.

But I couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched. I felt it most during moments of stillness and contemplation. It was faintly threatening, an unnatural presence pushing itself forward. I clung to mundane explanations such as temporal lobe malfunction or overweening grief. I learned to keep busier, noisier, that I had been accustomed to, and that was good for me.

One night I woke to the rat-tat of gunfire and the howling of dogs. I peered through the window. In the park across the street someone had set off out-of-season firecrackers. They bloomed like exotic flowers against a stained glass sky. Smoke oozed through the louvres and hung in the air. A tree had caught fire. People gathered around the tree, but instead of putting the fire out they were cheering and clapping and dancing like pagans in a child’s picture book. What kind of place is this? I wondered, moving away from the window.

A house across the road from a park might have been a bad idea. Parks were ownerless spaces, permanently vulnerable to colonisation. I checked on Jani. She was whimpering, but okay. It took me a long time to get back to sleep.

I began to wonder whether Darwin was right for us.

People love spreading bad news. They couldn’t wait to tell me about the house. I listened to it all and forgot most of it. Mangled histories of black maidens and twin girls and harsh fathers. I was jumpy, but then I always was. That wasn’t the house’s fault. And Jani loved the garden. She spent all day giggling to herself. Making tree houses and pets out of lizards and little pathways through the shrubbery. She liked throwing twigs and stones into the little pond.

She would stand there for ages throwing in one thing after another, with a funny look on her face like a ruminating cow. It was as if the repetitive action freed her mind for something else. She hated to come in of a night.

When we’d been in the house a few weeks some neighbours invited me over for a barbecue. They seemed nice. Young, with three kids. I imagined us as friends, dropping in to each other’s houses. I said yes and arranged a babysitter. Midgies pissing on my ankles, mossies diving at my throat, the barbecue wasn’t a success and I had forgotten how to pretend I was enjoying myself. Halfway through the evening an old guy, seventies, came up to me. “You got the old Miller house,” he said. Uh oh, here it comes, I thought. “Yeah, I replied. “So what?”

“No offence,” he said.

I shrugged.

“My name’s Allen.”

We shook hands.

“You probably know all about it,” he said.

“I don’t know a damned thing,” I said. “And I don’t care. People talk shit.”

He laughed. “That’s for sure. But I know. My cousins used to live across the road. Mum drank, so I lived with them most of the time.”

“Kids,” I said. “Kids know nothing.”

“Kids know everything,” he said.

He was right, and he was dying to tell me. I sat back and let him.

“There was this Aboriginal girl, you see.” He paused, reaching for the shape of the story. “She looked after the two kiddies, about three years old. She was about 10 or 11. Too young, if you ask me. Who’s got any sense at that age? Too young for lots of things, including what the kids’ father was doing to her.”

Whisky sloshing through his voice.

“Jesus,” I said. “How would you know?”

“We saw it.” He shook his head, dewlaps quivering. The skin under his wrinkles was gray. He took a drink, moistened his lips. “We were about the same age as her. A bit younger maybe. We were sneaking round like kids do. There are no secrets in those old tropical houses. I remember her feet, small with pale soles. His were fat and scaly. The wife left. He wouldn’t let her take the kids. But the girlie stayed. Maybe she had nowhere to go. Yeah, I think her people must have lived far away. She was meant to be watching the kids, but mostly she just sat around dreaming. She used to come up to the front gate and call out to us, and we’d run off. We called her Smokey. We’d say, ‘Smokey’s at it again.’”
His casual racism chilled me. There was raucous laughter on the other side of the garden. Someone had just finished telling a joke. Allen looked up, confused. He continued. “We weren’t there when she killed them, but we heard about it. Silt their throats. Their father came home, saw what had happened and shot her in the head. He was pretty broken up. ‘Course, he married again and had two more kids. Boys this time. Less trouble.”

“Why are you even telling me this?” I said. “It happened. It’s terrible. But it’s over. It’s nothing to do with me.” Maybe the old guy got his kicks this way.

“Because it’s not over,” he said, exasperated. “It’s that little girl. She never went away. She’s a ghost, and a mean one, I reckon. There’s been trouble in that house ever since.”

I stood up, knocking into him. His drink spilled over my feet. “Just fuck off,” I said, veering away from him. “What is this: confession?”

“You got any kids?” He called after me. “Just don’t leave ‘em there on their own.”

I left straight away. When I got home the babysitter was in front of the TV munching on something she’d found in the fridge. Jani was in bed asleep.

“Have you been checking on her?” I asked.

“Of course,” she said, offended, even though she probably hadn’t been. I sent her away with more money than I had promised.

His telling me that way, so plain and straight, well, I couldn’t get it out of my mind. How can you forget a story like that? The isolation of that young girl. Her vulnerability. The children. Sadness contaminates, don’t you think? Once it is present, it is almost impossible to eradicate. Virus-like, it mutates and spreads. All you can do is leave it behind. But what if you can’t leave? What if it is part of your home, the place you love?

I was watchful but nothing happened. Nothing ever happens, does it? If ghosts really existed they’d have proven it by now.

I’d have seen Tom.

I started taking Jani out more. I wanted her to be more outgoing, less broody and insular. For her sake, I wanted her to be all the things that I was not. Life would be easier for her that way. I bought her a bathing suit and took her to the lake. She loved it. She laughed and splashed, hands spread like starfish.

Lara was there too, with her kids, Bill and Jade. “Come ‘ere,” she called. “What’s wrong with you? You look shithead. Even more skinny and pale than you usually are.” Lara lived in the big flats around the corner. “You coping with it all right? Don’t look like you are.”

“Oh you know,” I say. “Any move’s difficult at first.” I didn’t want to talk about it. Giving it attention was like feeding it. I didn’t want it to thrive.

“Well, don’t you believe that old story, you hear? That’s what the whites say. That’s the story all right, but I say, ‘What would a kid like that kill for? No, that old man done it.’”

“Old man?” I ask.

“The dad.”

“How do you know?” I insisted. Everyone I talked to these days thought they knew it all.

“I don’t know!” Lara said carefully, “but I reckon. And I reckon that’s what’s wrong. You lot thinkin’ she done it. She’s upset, and you better be careful you don’t make her more upset. Them spirits, they’re not all human, not any more. They’re changed. A human little girl, she wouldn’t be doing anything, but a spirit girl, especially when you made her mad... Well.” She stretched that last word out till I thought it’d never end.

I didn’t know whether Lara’s story made it better or worse. There was nothing I could do except try not to think about it. Anyway, the small, regular demands of life were enough for me. Easter was coming. I celebrated it even though I wasn’t religious. For me it was a cultural rather than spiritual event. Chocolate, and thinking a bit about peace and rebirth. I encouraged Jani to dictate a letter to the Easter Bunny. “C’morn,” I said to her. “If you let the Easter Bunny know what you want, maybe you’ll get it.” As well as eggs and bunnies, she’d been nagging me for days about a bedroom lamp in the shape of a dragon. She liked a night light these days.

I sat on the couch with a pen and a notepad. After a moment or two Jani tilted her head to one side. “For Easter,” she said, “I want that girl to go away. Please, Easter Bunny.”

I asked her what she meant. She wouldn’t tell me. It was as if she felt that by saying what she had, she had already gone too far. I didn’t want to make a bigger thing out of it than it was. I reasoned that she must have heard me talking about the house. Even so, I began to keep her with me of a night.

I shouldn’t have dragged her all the way across the continent. I should have kept her safe in familiar territory.

After a couple of weeks I put Jani back in her own room. She kept her dragon light on all night, and I lay awake listening to every creepy, old house sound with the sheet over my head. Some nights I didn’t sleep at all. I thought about Tom and about Jani, about what I was doing up here in Darwin, and about the house and all the stories I’d heard. About the children, and about the girl, of course. Where she was from. What had happened. Whether she had ever really existed. People’s minds can conjure up horrors from sheer air. One night, finally asleep, I dreamed for some reason that Tom and I were divorcing. Halfway through the dream a gentle tide of whispering began. Random-seeming, like wind through leaves. Breath more than sound, air more than breath. Urgent hissse. Then one long sound forming thought more than words, and the thought was danger. I woke lying starshaped across the bed. It was hard to breathe. When I got up I saw that the hallway was filled with smoke, stinking chemical and dangerous. I thought for a moment that I could see something like a face, but I am sure now that it was nothing. Humans see faces in everything. It is our nature. The smoke came from Jani’s room. The damned dragon light. Jani was still, her eyes closed. I picked her up and ran down to the garden.

I flung her down on the grass and knelt beside her, my hands hovering over her body as if I were some nineteenth century mesmerist. I was frozen in the way of dreams. Luckily, she kick-started herself. She coughed and struggled up. I grabbed her. I couldn’t let go. Nearly, I thought. Nearly.

“Too tight,” Jani whimpered softly. I loosened my hold. Together we watched the orange light flickering through the windows of the house, and the neighbours climbing over the fence.

Jani’s room was ruined, but not much else.

“Wiring’s fucked,” the electrician told me the next day. “Bloody lucky you didn’t end up chips, the pair of you.”

The whole place needed rewiring. We moved in with Sal for the duration.

“You going back there?” Sal asked. “After all that’s happened?”

“And what happened?” I asked her.

“After nearly getting killed. That’s what.”

“It won’t happen again,” I said. “Not with the rewiring.”

“No,” she said darkly. “But something else might.”
She reckons the girl did it.

And what do I think?
Oh, I could tell all sorts of stories, and pretty convincing ones at that. I could agree with Sal that the girl had started the fire. That she was bent on revenge. Or I could say that it was the girl’s voice I heard in my dreams, and it was because I finally listened to her that something unspeakable was avoided. Or both. Or even that it was my own damned fault for buying a house without checking the electricals. And whatever I said would eventually become true. Repetition turns rumour into fact. Words can make worlds. But some things are too complicated to explain with just one story. People try, but they only get little pieces of it. So I won’t say anything.

Anyway, Jani and I belong with the house now, and belonging has consequences. I can’t run off. I have responsibilities, obligations.
Jani sits on my knee.
‘We’re going back,” I say.

The Lure
David Jagger

The howling woke me early, before dawn. A much higher pitch than your average howl, and sporadic – it slowly infiltrated then broke my sleep. There’d be nothing for ten minutes but the birds rising and Lisa snoring, lying away from me. I’d drift off again and another howl would prod me and leave me wondering what could cause such a sound and, more to the point, what I was doing in Lisa’s bed listening to it. I’d smile because Lisa’s quite a conquest. My smile would tighten to a wince, recalling some of the things I’d said after sex, things a woman like her just doesn’t want to hear. Wince turned to grimace at the anguish in the howl.

My head began to pound. I’d had barely three hours sleep. Too many dogs wander this town and plenty are so miserable you’d forgive them for howling. None I’d come across sounded quite like this – assuming it was a dog.

I got up and determined to at least find the source of the sound and report back, if I couldn’t stop it. Of course the coolest move this morning after would have been to simply slip away. But I wanted to see Lisa awake again as soon as possible, and ad libbing a reason to hang around was, frankly, the only way I could guarantee that, short of an over-enthusiastic breakfast-in-bed-type gesture that would risk frightening her – or pissing her right off.

There it was once more, the howl straight from hell.

I made a coffee and a piece of toast and took them out the front. The salvage men were already working on the house across the road to avoid as much as they could of the day’s heat. It struck me the howling might have been one of their power tools, though surely they wouldn’t have had them going before dawn. I signalled hello and was heading across to ask if they’d heard the howling when, half way down the drive, I made out a dog’s tail wagging and heard the switch, switch of it in the dry grass on the far side of the rubble next door.

I put my coffee down on an old garden seat Lisa has out there and ventured across the rubble. Soon I could see the dog doing the wagging. I approached it to ten metres away and held out what was left of my toast.

“Come on, dog,” I said. “Come on.”

More wagging. Yet it wouldn’t come for the toast. Most dogs here would kill for a scrap of toast. I edged closer to see what was holding this one back.

Between its front paws lay a lure it’d pinched from someone’s porch – for the fishy smell of it I suppose. Its paws and head were tangled up in the line still attached to the lure. It rolled over as if to better show me.

The dog – a mostly black, short-haired young male bitza, less mangy than most – had got himself into a knot all right, but he didn’t appear too difficult to free. The line wasn’t tightly tangled, there was just lots of it. I offered him my scrap of toast again. He took it. I told him he was a good boy, knelt and patted his head. He wagged madly. I began pulling the line off his paws and he howled and bit me.

The bite drew no blood. He was simply telling me to take more care. The lure was a good eight inches long, a Fredatex Viper, bright pink along its back, yellow along its belly, the colours of highlighter pens, with silver scale and black stripe designs on its sides and eyes like Bambi on drugs. Three-hook clusters hung off the underside at the head, tail and in-between. The dog had
chewed the top of the head. And holding it down he'd got two hooks from the tail stuck through a pad on his right front paw and one hook from the middle hook cluster stuck into a pad on his left front paw. The line was the least of his worries. He was hooked together by the front feet.

The left one offered the best chance to separate the paws. I couldn't see both ends of the hook there as I could on his right paw. It didn't have as far to withdraw. I patted him again and carefully pulled. The barb just dug deeper and his howl went higher and longer, delivered with his jaws wrapped around my wrist, poised to puncture it.

Lisa's planted a row of shrubs down the side of her driveway. It's a recent bit of gardening. A spade and the bundle of stakes she'd used leant against a box under her carport. "I'll be back," I whispered to the dog and went to see if Lisa had used gardening gloves as well. I could have used the protection.

With more than a hunch they wouldn't be good enough, I had to settle for yellow dishwashing gloves. I was pulling them on at her kitchen sink of dirty dishes, some going fuzzy, when Lisa emerged from her room en route to the shower wearing just undies and an old t-shirt.

"You can stay more often," she said.

I stared at the gloves and felt my face flush. She looked so good and I looked like her cleaner. I asked her if she'd heard the howling. She said she thought she had. I told her about the dog and the hooks and what the gloves were meant for.

"Oh, shit," Lisa said. "That makes my blood run cold." She pulled on a pair of shorts and joined me at the poor dog's side to help.

The dishwashing gloves barely softened the bite and perhaps alarmed the dog further. He snapped at me if I so much as touched his paws. Lisa found some rope and used it to pull his head away from his paws and away from my hands but he just kicked and howled, kicked and howled, so there was no way I could get a grip on the hooks. Then he wheeled around and snapped at her.

Lisa suggested we might have more success if we could calm him and get him to trust us, otherwise we'd have to get him to the vet 160 kilometres away. She announced she was taking the day off work and would go inside to ring to leave a sickie message and make a bed and something to eat for the dog. She'd tell me when it was all ready. Without a job to take a sickie from, I was thinking as she strode across the rubble how good it would be to go back to bed with her once we'd got this dog on its way.

I was thinking how lucky I was to have got this far with her. Lisa had come to town about a year earlier looking for a younger brother who'd disappeared after a bit of bar work in this direction, when most of our generation seemed to be heading in the opposite direction. She hadn't found her brother, but she had found a steady job at the video and electrical shop, and looked like sticking at it. She reckoned she could sense her brother around here somewhere. Apparently there'd been sightings of guys who matched his description to varying degrees, though I suspect there would have been similar sightings anywhere. Of course I didn't say that. She was more than welcome to hang around here waiting to bump into her brother.

Me, I guess it was merely the outback mystique that had drawn me this way, many dogs and rubber gloves, that sort of thing.

By now the salvage men were up on their roof stripping the corrugated iron. I could see them watching Lisa too, smiling and watching me in the yellow gloves standing over the dumb dog. They weren't missing much of the heat. I could feel the sun burning the back of my neck already. I decided to get the dog around the back of Lisa's place where there's some shade and wait there for her to ready his bed and food.

"Good boy," I said to calm him as best I could. "Good boy." I lifted him gently to about knee height. So far so good. Then I straightened, slowly, slowly, but not slow enough. The movement tweaked the hooks enough for him to snap again, at my face this time. I reared back, he howled and squirmed and I dropped him. When he hit the ground I was surprised his howl didn't shatter every window left in the street. Lisa came running back. We looked down together at the dog.

"I think we'll just have to cut the hooks off in his paws," I said. "At least then we can shift him. We might get the rest of them out later." I tried cutting the hooks with the pliers from the sad excuse for a tool kit in my car. I couldn't get enough purchase. And we tried the scissors Lisa uses to trim her hair and wrecked the blades. She nodded to the salvage men across the road.

Asking their help was the last thing I wanted to do but it had to be done and I wasn't about to pass the buck to Lisa. The salvage men gushed chocolate milks and listened as I explained the dog's dilemma as it was all news to them, then delivered their solution as though it was one they practised daily: "Gaffer up his mouth, mate, and pull the bastards straight out." They even offered some gaffer tape. I borrowed their tin snips instead and told Lisa nothing of their solution, one that surely would have meant paw pads tearing and fur, like carpet off-cut, stuck to the tape, a neat band of exposed flesh around the snout where it had been.

The tin snips were just the thing. We cut the hooks where they entered the dog's paws and he stood relatively painlessly. He panted and wagged his tail as if to say thanks. "He looks pretty pleased with himself now," Lisa said.

It's like city people with the rings and hooks and studs and things stuck through them everywhere," I said.

"Maybe that's the look he was after," she said.

"Cool," I said. "Cool dog," and bent down to grab him just as he jumped out of reach, moving freely. I lunged for him. Infection would set in in no time unless we could remove the rest of those hooks. I've heard it said this town's the pus capital of Australia. They should build a Big Boil here. "Here, good dog," I said sweetly and moved slowly towards him. He turned and ran straight under the house they were pulling apart across the road.

Lisa and I looked at each other, each expecting the other to signal a lost cause, approval to walk away now we'd done all we could. Instead, almost simultaneously, we set off across the road and took up positions on opposite sides of the house, peering into the dark between the stumps holding it up and calling out, "Dog, good dog." Soon more voices had joined the call. The salvage men had stationed themselves around the house and were unsuccessfully trying some other adjectives to entice the dog out. I decided to go under after him. I could get him to run to Lisa or one of the salvage men.

I thought I could see him, up against what looked in the dark like a couple of cut down 44 gallon drums. But before I could get near him, the end of a pipe leapt out and stabbed me in the middle of the forehead. I yelled.

Lisa yelled back, "Are you alright?"

"I hit my head," I said. I raised my hand to the point of impact then held it back from my face.

I retreated and emerged from under the house to see one of the salvage men with the dog by the scruff of the neck and a big, green frog squirming in his
other hand. I stared at the frog, on its last legs. Half its head was torn away; its lovely lime green skin hung shredded down that side. It stared back at me with its remaining eye.

"The toilet’s full of them," the salvage man said. "I should have thought of it earlier." He glanced at my head wound.

"Let's see," said Lisa, grabbing my shoulder and turning me around to face her as the blood trickled onto the bridge of my nose. "That might need stitches," she said. I hoped so. I needed something to show for all this.

They might do your dog at the hospital too," the salvage man said. "That doctor’s a dog-lover. Get your car. I’ll hold him.

Lisa offered to drive. I lay across the back seat with the towel I use to keep the sun off the steering wheel pressed to my wound. Not sure where to put him, I suppose, the salvage man put the dog in the back too. And somehow the frog ended up in there. So, by the time we arrived at the hospital, just around the corner really, there was little more than its back legs left and the dog was licking his lips.

We pulled up just as Dr Joy crossed the bit of lawn between her quarters and the wards. Lisa called her over before she could enter. "What’ve you done to him?" she asked Lisa, lifting the bloody towel off my head. We explained how it happened helping the dog. "Just a flesh wound," the doctor said. "I’ll get you something and do pooh here. I think the frog’s beyond repair. And she disappeared into the hospital.

Dr Joy returned with a little tube of Betadine and a couple of butterfly band-aids for my head. "Give it a wash first," she said. "Without those gloves." She ordered me out of the car, cornered the dog in there, gave him locals in both front paws, cut his paw pads a little and eased the hooks out.

The big bloke from across the stormwater channel who cooks down at the pub was sitting on the old garden seat in front of Lisa’s place when we returned from the hospital. I had one of his meals, once only. You order from a hole in the wall between the tables and the kitchen. I could see he was pissed bad. The woman who took my order and brought it to me was so drunk I thought she might involuntarily sauce my meal on route, if she didn’t spill it first.

Three things were on the menu. Steak and veg, chicken and veg and fish and veg. I got chicken and veg, consisting of a bit of breast, a pile of boiled potatoes and a pile of boiled pumpkin. The bloke on the next table got steak and veg, a great hunk of charred meat with piles of boiled pumpkin and potato. And the guy opposite landed barra, with lashings of boiled potato and half a boiled pumpkin for his fish and veg.

The big cook had the lure next to him, wedged between the slats on the seat but jerking apparently of its own accord. Out of the car and closer we could see the tight line coming out of the tangle around the lure and disappearing across the dead dry channel towards his house where his teenage son pulled on the other end attached to a rod bowed as though he was hauling in a crocodile. It was, of course, a performance staged to show us just where the lure had come from. "This cost me twenty bucks," the cook said of the tangle jerking next to him. "Keep your mongrel under control or I’ll shoot the bastard."

"It’s not our dog," I said. But he didn’t look convinced, considering I held the dog in my arms like a baby.

"Well, I don’t care whose it is, just get it under control."

"We found it with your lure joining its feet together," Lisa said.

"So it’s my fault, is it?"

"No. It was an accident, and it’s over now," I said hopefully.
Charlie and the Mermaids
Jeremy John Hall

Charlie is somewhat older than the rest of my immediate circle of friends at the Workers’ Club of the Northern Territory. A short, slight man, always well turned out in a well pressed white shirt and long trousers, invariably sporting a discreetly striped tie, he claims to have gained the affection of many a lady over the years. He holds himself confidently erect and, with his swept-back, pomaded hair neatly parted in the centre, a pencil-thin black moustache emphasising his fleshy, sensual lips, this may well be the case.

Charlie arrived in the Territory in the early fifties as a lonely young orphan. His father had been a skilled lathe operator in his home country of Czechoslovakia but as the War started to turn against them, the Germans seized from those countries they controlled anything and anybody that would aid their chances of victory. This small family was relocated to a forced labour camp near Köln where Charlie’s father turned out on his machine specialises in making rings for torpedoes, while his mother was employed in the laundry. At the age of nine, Charlie once disclosed to his friends, he had been given the daily responsibility of boning up fourteen pairs of jackboots, until he could see his face reflected in the soft leather. At the defeat of the Nazis, the family returned to their homeland, but Charlie’s father and mother were denounced to accordingly deported, presumably to Siberia.

Charlie was lucky to be smuggled by his relatives into the US section of Austria and, after attending various Displaced Person’s camps, arrived in Australia. But that is now forgotten history as far as he is concerned. “Oh deary, deary me,” he is reputed to have said, “there can be nothing more boring than Mittel Europeans recounting their troubled past, particularly in this glorious Territory.”

He has run his International Hairdressing Salon for at least twenty years, and Club members patronise his shop for their haircuts, not particularly for his skill as a barber, but because of the small fridge that he keeps loaded with green cans, and freely offers to his mates.

Apart from his self-reputed success with the ladies, he also considers himself a professional concerning the science of studying the form of pedigree racehorses. This claim failed the test when he strongly implored fellow members to place the family silver on a certain New Zealand horse one Melbourne Cup day. Unfortunately the mare failed to gain a place, and Charlie decided to forgo the pleasures of the Club for three months until his fellow punters’ ire had died down.

But on matters involving the placing of wagers, he continues to consider himself an expert. He has, he feels, a certain sophistication when dealing with either women or gambling.

The subject one Saturday afternoon was skill on the pool table and how the choice of one’s partner was even more important than the positioning of the white ball. Most habitués also agreed that females had no place near the green baize, that games of pool and snooker were a purely male preserve.

“Nonsense,” said Charlie, smoothing his moustache and licking his lips with anticipated memories. “Most of the more senior amongst us remember the pool table match between two Park Rangers and a couple of mermaids, as female deckhands are called on prawn boats. The girls may have been as rough as guts but they were good at the game and very, very attractive.”

A couple of the newer members of the Club, seated around four joined beer tables previously needed for a fund raising roulette evening, had not witnessed this classic match, and begged Charlie to fill them in.

Charlie loves to air his knowledge of Club history. With a proprietary air, in his careful, clipped Mittel European English, he started his story.

“Both sides were cuffed up,” he related. “Neither the boys or the girls could see any advantage in playing for money. Both the mermaids and the Rangers had been drinking without any discernible pause since opening time. After general derogatory remarks passed between adjoining tables over the other side’s ability to pot balls, both decided to play a male/female needle match. Confident in their prowess, the girls wanted to humiliate the blokes and suggested eight ball strip. This is a game that one of the mermaids, a Canuck, stated was very popular on the American side of the Pacific. The Rangers similarly believed in their own skill. No doubt they were influenced by the thought of their opponents’ young female flesh being fully exposed. So the game was on. The contest was to continue until one side had no clothes left to remove.

A couple of the newer and therefore younger members sniggered, but Charlie frowned and continued. “After each frame the losing side was to discard an item of apparel to comply with the rules of Strip Jack – or jill – Naked. Both sides wore the Northern Territory basics of T-shirt, pants, and shorts. The ladies started at an advantage for in addition they were wearing brass. However, the Rangers were in macho mode and scornful of female challengers. They willingly conceded this edge, laughing that if the mermaids hadn’t got an ace up their sleeves then they certainly had something up their singlets. Rings, bracelets and other jewellery were not included in the wager.

“Oh deary, deary me, when the word got around the atmosphere in the Club was feverish. Side bets were eagerly placed between members. The Canadian girl drawled, “If these guys are hoping to see my naked funny, then they surely can pay for it. Someone pass a hat around.”

“The young women broke first. Bang, bang, bang, they had a short potting run. Groans from the male crowd. Then a serious break by the senior Ranger. A success, ending in the potting of the black ball. Cheers from the onlookers. Slowly the mermaids stripped off their singlets. Teasingly they displayed their firm breasts encased in scanty brassieres.

“There was a ten minute interval between each frame so patrons could buy more beer. Some went over to the coffee bar or the Don Hotel opposite to tell their friends. Soon maybe two hundred people, naturally predominantly male, were watching the game.”

Charlie was getting quite excited by this trip down memory lane and rattled on, “Next frame, the girls won. Silence from the crowd as the Rangers removed their singlets. And so it went on. They were evenly matched. Impossible shots were achieved. Formidable snookers were overcome. First one team would take off a piece of clothing. Then the other challenger. Cheers from members when the blokes won. Groans when they lost.

“The sight of these young women in lacy bras, their firm buttocks bent over the pool table as they sighted up their shots, heightened the carnal desires of all male lechers. The Rangers’ hats did the rounds after each frame and coins were pitched in by enthusiastic voyeurs. Oh deary, deary me, there was no chivalry in that competition.”
"At the final frame, the girls stood, judging the result of the break, magnificently naked apart from their bikini knickers. The men looked distinctly less arrogant in their drooping navy blue Y fronts. Needless to say both the collection hats were overflowing, not just with coin but notes."

Here Charlie paused to take another swig of that good NT beer, and one of the younger members prompted him eagerly, "What happened then?"

"Two cops walked in and closed the game down. They had been surprised by the emptiness of the streets and alerted by the noise from inside the Club. The girls called them party poopers, declaring that the advantage on the remaining four balls lay with them. But the Law declared the match to be a draw. The police announced that, anyway, the Club had no licence for strip shows, either female or, as presently appeared to be the case, male. The Rangers strenuously declared that the mermaids could not have won the match. But sportingly, or chaufferistically according to your sex, they donated the contents of the hats, some hundreds of dollars, to the girls. As the boys pointed out, no one was looking at them, but at the delectable deckies.

"This certainly was true," ended Charlie. "The blonde girl in the white knickers certainly had the best pair of knockers that I have ever witnessed in forty years of mature, experienced observation."

Table talk faded at this point and Charlie was forced to lead a number of the new members to an empty pool table to show them where the remaining four balls had stood, thus reviving a dispute that had raged for the last ten years.

Sven turned to me, grinning, and said, "Bringe back old and happy memories, eh, Enver? I bet you didn't report that episode to Antonia." More seriously he continued, "Those Rangers were very lucky they weren't matelets!"

"Why," I asked curiously.

"There is an ancient Norse belief that the merpeople need human seed to populate their undersea kingdoms," he replied. "The girls were chanting 'We are the Champions' when they left the Club with the blokes. When mermaids sing, sailors drown!" he added seriously.

Hunting with Daisy and Dora
Toni Tapp Coutts

Dora was the boss. We called her Mum and everyone else called her Old Dora. She had one deformed foot with three funny little toes bunched together, the result of walking into a campfire when she was a little girl. She wrapped a big bundle of rags and a Hessian bag around the foot. The bag was tied on to her foot with a long piece of cord made from strips of fabric torn off old dresses.

Dora got about easily on her bag foot and could still catch us if in a rage about something. It was a sad day many years later that a white doctor from Darwin decided in his wisdom to amputate that foot. She declined very quickly after that; had a stroke and died. Dora was a cranky old bugger and ruled the camp with her tongue and a nulla nulla. She was the oldest person in her small tribal group and did not have a husband. Her word was law. She kept the law. She taught us the order of Aboriginal society according to skin names and relationships. She painted us with ochre and taught dances and the songs. She told us about the dreaming and drew animal tracks and stories in the dirt. She taught us all about the bush tucker and bush medicine.

Daisy, about the same age as Dora, was married to Dora's eldest son Banjo. We called her Buggadu, Gurindji language for auntie or sister-in-law. In the Aboriginal skin system Dora was our mother which made Banjo our brother, so we had to call Daisy sister-in-law, even though she was old enough to be our grandmother. Everyone liked Daisy; she was kind and gentle and never rocked the boat. She was a quiet person who sang corroboree songs in a high sweet voice. She told us the stories about the Dreaming that co-existed with and ruled their day-to-day lives. Daisy did all the work because she was Dora's daughter in-law. She prepared the food: rib bones, goanna and little Johnny cucumbers made out of flour, water and salt and cooked in the coals. She did the washing and made huge dresses and petticoats out of cheap floral material. She sewed in tiny running stitch in black cotton. She cooked beautiful golden leaves of bread in camp ovens. She made bush brooms out of cokkerberry bush tied to a long stick to rake the ground around the camp.

Daisy and Dora wore hand-made half-slips around the camp and when we went out hunting. They had long deep tribal scars on their upper arms and breasts. Dora having had eight children had one breast much longer than the other. They painted their breasts with lines and circle symbols with the white clay found in a dam and soft ochre crushed between two stones and moistened into a paste with saliva.

We would dig in hillaborong for the white ochre. Squishing the mud through our fingers below the water line we could feel the white ochre in hard clumps in the mud. The clumps of white ochre were kept wrapped in a bit of rag and used later for a corroboree. The hardened dry white clay would then be beaten off in small chunks and squished around in the mouth with saliva, breaking down into a smooth paste for body painting or decorating didgeridoos, boomerangs, coolamon and nulla nullas.

The old ladies took us hunting most days, down the creek. The only major creek on Killarney was dry for eight months of the year. The river was a gourmet restaurant of bush tucker of bush potatoes, oranges, bananas, wild gum, brolga tucker, and wild honey called sugar-bag. We had special little steel digging sticks, shaped in the fire and pounded with a rock to give a flat-bladed
end. We'd dig away proudly making little piles of fresh wild potatoes on a coolamon to be cooked for lunch or taken home for dinner that night. I liked them raw and juicy.

In one part of the creek there was a huge wild fig tree laden with masses of figs, and the gum trees oozed sticky clear gum that we chewed on. The Bloodwood Tree’s dry red crystallized sap was kept and mixed in hot water to use as dysentery medicine. Daisy and Dora led the way with the bundle of tools for hunting. Digging sticks and coolamon to carry the bush-tucker and a long stick with burning coal on the end to start the fire. Billy-can, tea, sugar, flour, treacle and coarse salt added to the ingredients of a good feed down the river. A piece of dry, frizzled up corn beef or raw rib bones covered in a greasy dirty bit of rag, ants crawling over it and a thick layer of black flies hanging around. This was the meat to go with the freshly gathered vegetables cooked on the coals and eaten with relish when dinner camp was set up.

The ancient Coolibah trees and the winding creek bed was our world, our fantasy. We raced up and down the creek, climbed trees, at home in familiar and safe surroundings. Playing barefoot, mustering cattle on stick horses with stick guns, soles toughened like elephant skin, wearing only a small pair of pants. We were dirty, burnt brown and tough skinned, bursting with excitement and energy, inquisitive of what was around every corner, in a tree or under a rock. There was sure to be surprise, a goanna, snake, lizards and on the odd occasion a wild bull to scare the living daylight out of you.

We’d race ahead, jumping from rock to rock, screeching and squealing in delight, looking for lizard egs and goanna holes. Dora and Daisy followed up behind keeping a sharp eye on us. It was a big race to the conkerberry tree with juicy little purple berries that made your tongue go black. There was plenty to eat, from the wild orange the size of a golf ball with its red orange centre we called coolingyukka, and bush bananas hanging from a vine, little dry berries every one called dog’s balls, and the small wild onion known as brogla tucker.

The greatest prize was sugar-bag, golden wild honey spotted by the little black bush bees hovering around a hole in the fork of tree. The wax from the sugar-bag was kept to shape the mouthpiece of the didgeridoo. Daisy and Dora would point out dingo and goanna tracks, showing us how to tell if they were old or new.

Food was carried in a shovel shaped carved small tree trunk from the Chitwood tree called a coolamon. The coolamon was also used to carry everything: firewood, food and babies. It seemed like a ten-mile walk away from home but when I grew up and looked at the area it was about three miles. It took us all morning to zig zag to our dinner-camp under a tree in the dry riverbed. Daisy and Dora would start the fire and put the billy on, chattering in lingo as they prepared the food. We were sent off to look for more sticks and grass to put on the fire. The fire was often started in the traditional way of rubbing two sticks together with a little wad of grass to catch the spark and start the flame.

All activity centred around the fire and the bottomless billy-can of tea simmering on the hot ashes. As the preparations were going on kids would be clambering all around the riverbed, swinging out of trees laughing and playing their imaginary games. The odd screech would echo up and down the riverbed from Dora. “Don’t go too far, that debil debil gonna get you!”

When lunch was ready we’d settle in the shade. Fanninikin of sweet, black tea, dipped from the black battered billycan with its own special pungent taste.
Sorry Business
Barbara Eather

When my mother died I had to organise her funeral. This really was not difficult but there were a few logistical issues. I was living in Darwin, my mother had died in Townsville and was to be buried with my father in a small country town some seven hours drive inland from Townsville. Her death was not a surprise. Well, technically it was not a surprise. I knew she was dying. She had been in a nursing home for seven years. I had been warned the end was near but it still did not prepare me for the words from some nameless, faceless person at the nursing home, "I am sorry to have to inform you..."

It was the week before Christmas. The airline was not very compassionate about giving me a compassionate fare. To get to Townsville that week it was the last business class seat or not at all. So I paid a small fortune for the sort of journey that no one wants to make. Support systems kicked in pretty quickly. I had a three hour stopover in Cairns. Some friends came to do "tea and sympathy" with me. In Townsville another friend met me and took me to her house, my base for the next two days. We had fish and chips for dinner. That was Day One. So far so good.

Day Two. I was up bright and early and off to the funeral parlour. Jolly, jolly, jolly - I think not. I could feel that I was coming down with the mother of all migraines. The funeral parlour was a huge establishment overlooking a series of man-made lakes. I walked in the door and was made to feel very welcome. That was when the silly thoughts started. I had this almost irresistible urge to say, "You've got my Mum." I controlled myself and behaved how one must behave when in a funeral parlour. This was a skill I had never been taught. But I seemed to work out what to do. Eyes downcast and talking in quiet voices seemed to be de rigueur. I was ushered into a room reminiscent of a Victorian drawing room. Plush carpet on the floor, a dark ornate sideboard and table, and thick velvet drapes. It was silent. It was so silent I could hear myself breathe. I tried really hard to breathe so I couldn't hear myself. All I could hear then was the quiet hum of the air conditioner. It was claustrophobic. A basted up cane chair underneath a frangipani tree would have suited me just fine. I was offered tea and coffee - I elected for water - and was told a consultant would be with me shortly.

The consultant arrived. He was very nice, for an undertaker; a young fellow, his name was Larry. I queried his pedigree. He used to be a school teacher but had married one of the daughters of the founding father of this funeral dynasty. He was so polite it was nauseating. As well, my migraine was making me feel very ill.

We went through the details. I was quickly learning funeral lingo. I explained to Larry that my mother was to be buried in the country town near where she had lived for thirty-four years but I had difficulty explaining that when Dad was buried they had dug a really big hole in the lawn cemetery and he was at the bottom and she was going to go in on top. It was coming out all wrong. I knew I wasn't using the right language. Politely Larry knew what I meant: a "reopening". Silly me. Fancy not knowing that.

Next we had to choose a casket. I thought I'd be choosing a coffin but apparently in funeral parlour language it is called a casket. Larry was very delicate in approaching this matter. OK, perhaps it would have been a bit much

if he had said, "Let's go shopping". I was given three options. I could go into the display room and view the selection of caskets - presumably they would be unoccupied, I could look at photographs, or Larry could describe them to me. By this stage I was feeling really ill; my head was swimming and I feared that getting up and walking around looking at caskets would be too confronting. I elected to look at photographs. I was handed a very ornate photo album. I looked at all the photos. It was a bit like looking in your wardrobe and saying, "I've got nothing to wear." They were all ugly. I didn't tell Larry that. I didn't want to hurt his feelings. Seeing I liked none of them, I got her the cheapest one. It was still the most expensive present I had ever bought her. Something I made a mental note of to remember for the next life.

Larry asked me if I would like to provide some clothes for Mum to be buried in. I hadn't thought of that. He said she was currently in a nightie. So I agreed to get some clothes for her. A few more minor details were sorted out, such as the cost. Larry ever so delicately asked for a deposit. Out came my credit card which surprisingly worked - it was almost glowing red with that business class fare on it. As to the transport details Larry said, "Mum will be transported out in our custom-made refrigerated vehicle."

"Oh, good," - I felt like saying - "so she won't go off." I managed to resist. Larry would have laughed but I doubt he would have been amused.

I left to buy some burial clothes for Mum. Larry called me a taxi. The taxi driver arrived wearing a Santa hat. I had forgotten it was four shopping days until Christmas. At the shopping centre I really was beginning to suffer from my migraine. Would I feel better if I went and had a big vomit? The Driver looked at me. I floated around with my mission to buy Mum something nice to be buried in. I found a shop that looked like it sold her kind of clothes. Blue was her favourite colour and I quickly found a nice blue blouse with little flowers on it. A very helpful shop assistant approached me. I told her I needed a skirt to go with the shirt. Looking me up and down she said, "Is it for you?" I told her it was for my mother and that Size 10 would be fine. Something inside my head was saying, "Go on, tell her it's for your Mum to be buried in, go on shock the socks off her." She was so helpful and so kindly I couldn't do it. I was glad however that she didn't say, "I'm sure your mother will love it." Then I would have had to hand her in.

As I left the store I bumped into someone I knew. I told him about my Mum. He said the obligatory words, in fact he raved on and really irritated me and I started to wish I hadn't met him. He said, looking at the shopping bag in my hand, "So you're here doing a bit of shopping?" I replied, "Yes." It wouldn't have horrified him if I'd said, "Yes, just getting Mum something to be buried in. Get a load of this. Do you think she'll like it?" I quickly shifted back into funeral parlour behaviour and said none of that.

Leaving the shopping centre, I jumped into a taxi. This taxi driver, in keeping with the Christmas spirit I was meant to be feeling, was wearing an Akubra adorned with Christmas tinsel and bells. I gave him my destination in the suburb of North Ward, and told him I needed to go to the funeral parlour on the way. "OK," he says, "To North Ward via the dead centre of town." This was a joke. I knew it was a joke because when I didn't laugh he told me it was a joke. He said, "So you've been doing a bit of Christmas shopping?" I said, "Yes," in my very best Don't ask me any more questions voice.

At the funeral parlour I told him to wait while I went inside with the clothes. The funeral parlour receptionist knew who I was and greeted me in suitable funeral parlour demeanour. I greeted her back in similarly appropriate funeral
parlour demeanour. Back in the taxi the driver, very keen on small talk, said, "That didn't take long." The bitch inside my head wanted to say, "Yes, well, dropping off a set of clothes for my mother to be buried in is not the most time consuming thing I've ever done, you little ray of sunshine." Instead I grunted a reply. That was enough of Day Two.

Day Three. My first errand of the day was to walk to the corner shop and buy two essentials. One was a selection of Danish pastries. (In times of trauma one should eat well.) The other was the daily paper. This was to check that the funeral notice was in correctly. It was, Larrry had a selection of wordings. I had picked one that sounded sufficiently dignified. It felt weird to be walking along the street with a bag of warm sweet pastries under one arm whilst reading my mother's death notice. It was a beautiful summer day. The sun had come up, the birds were singing. I could see and smell the ocean in the distance. The poinciana trees were flowering their familiar red flame flowers that my mother had always marvelled at. I did a very good bit of comfort eating with the Danish pastries. I had a few phone calls to make to sort out the final details for the church service and then I had one unpleasant task to attend to. I had to go to the nursing home and sort out Mum's belongings. This was not going to be fun.

At the nursing home I was ushered into a sitting room and my mother's belongings were brought to me in three large green garbage bags. I was handling this reasonably well until I opened the first garbage bag. Out tumbled some of her things. Fortunately, one of the items was her familiar embroidered hanky bag. I picked up a hanky and cried some more. I had started to cry, encased in a hanky. I had started crying that morning. I felt that some sort of weirdness was fitting in with my mother's death notice. It was a beautiful summer day. The sun had come up, the birds were singing. I could see and smell the ocean in the distance. The poinciana trees were flowering their familiar red flame flowers that my mother had always marvelled at. I did a very good bit of comfort eating with the Danish pastries. I had a few phone calls to make to sort out the final details for the church service and then I had one unpleasant task to attend to. I had to go to the nursing home and sort out Mum's belongings. This was not going to be fun.

The cemetery is in the middle of a paddock. Horses are sheltering under trees at the edge of the cemetery. Their long faces hang over the fence and look at us curiously. My mother loved horses, so I think it is nice that horses are at her funeral; however, with the rain and dark sky, it is positively Wuthering Heights-ish. The rain stings my back and my legs as it belts into me. The service is quick. People throw dirt into the grave. I don't go near open graves. It's my new policy. People come and shake my hand. They leave grave dirt on my hand. It quickly turns to mud and drips onto my wet clothes leaving a red stain. The celebrant gives me a hug; she says, "She's with your Dad now." I'm as still as a board and am almost a rude hug recipient. The stupid thoughts are coming back. Dad always used to yell at us kids to close the windows of the house when the rain started. I'm feeling like I'm going to start giggling, his whole entire grave is wide open to the elements and we're standing around talking. I can almost hear him saying, "Lord love a duck, the rain's getting in." We adjourn to the pub. The publican offers the ladies a cup of tea. The ladies sit around the tables. The men stand around the bar. Everyone says nice things to me. Everyone is very wet. One giant of a man is positively drenched. When I say to him, "My goodness, you are wet," he says — with the eloquence that only comes after downing a couple of good slugs of rum — "For your mother I would stand there and would not mind how wet in the world I got because she was enormously kind to me right back from when I was a young fellow and for that I will be eternally grateful."

One of the pall-bearers is a fount of information. He says they didn't have a weight problem with the coffin. I manage to stop myself from saying, "Well, first of all it is not a coffin, it's a casket, and secondly if you have Alzheimer's first you forget what day it is, then you forget who you are, then you forget..."
Moonshine
Kathleen Donald

Ron bought me a horse for a wedding present. A letter arrived, complete with photos. Omigod, not just any old horse, a white horse. Moonshine.

His name wasn’t Moonshine at first, just “the horse”. You know how it is with animals. They sometimes take a while to reveal their names. You have to be patient. Before Ron bought him, Moonshine had been called Freebie and kept in a barbed-wire paddock by himself. With the change of owners, he acquired his freedom, a new name and a mate. Soon Moonshine and Red, a fellow gelding, were paired up and feeding together on the lawns all around the Manyallaluk community. Although Red was a bit of a stand-over merchant, the two horses were inseparable, grazing and fertilizing all over the place and frequenting our donga at least once a day. It seemed a pretty good arrangement for all concerned. They had free run of the grounds, had each other for company, could forage for themselves and visit us for extra handouts. Both horses were so docile there was no concern either of them would wander off, get lost, or run off with the brumbies.

Ron was sure Moonshine had been a poddy foal, raised around people and hand-fed treats all his life. He was thoroughly spoiled and certain of his place in the universe as the apple of everyone’s eye. Mr. Id himself. Which suited me down to the ground, as I loved feeding and fussing over him. We put a bridle on him a couple of times, thinking we might eventually ride him but never got that far. It didn’t matter. I was more interested in the relationship than in riding anyway.

Moonshine and I had about a month to fart around together, make friends and get bonded. Then he was left to fend for himself for a few weeks, as Ron and I journeyed to the US. I had to go back to work and Ron was coming over to visit. Also to get married. So while we slogged through a couple of blizzards in January and February and officially tied the nuptial knot, unbeknownst to us, Moonshine was doing his thing in the tropical summer downunder, unravelling a few knots and forging new bonds of his own.

When Ron returned to Manyallaluk, Moonshine was nowhere to be seen. Vanished. Gone walkabout. Red was still there, glooming around in the Wet Season mud, but his faithful offisder was missing. Come to find out, the little poddy foal had gone feral and joined a band of brumbies. Maybe he felt abandoned by his human companions or got sick of Red’s bullying. The brumbry life might have looked like more fun. The herd instinct or the call of the wild might have become too much to ignore. Whatever it was, Moonshine made his decision and stood by it, finding his niche with this little mob and sticking with them until the end.

I was bummed out when I first heard. The mature me said, “These things happen. He’s probably happier running free with the horses. Love him enough to let him go. Blah blah blah.” The real me had a different take on the situation. “Wahhhhh!” Eventually the tantrum subsided. A new frame of reference was needed. Time to act like a grown-up. Time for one of those earnest little self-talks. “Okay, kid, obviously this is not to be your ho-hum, everyday, commonplace, ordinary, hands-on, “Me master, you horse” kind of thing. What we have here is a horse of a different colour, so to speak. I mean, we’re talking about a metaphysical union of soulmates, a spiritual connection, not some
mundane manifestation in the material realm. This calls for a Zen-like attitude: non-possessive ownership, detached contact, acceptance of what is rather than desire for what isn’t.” Or something like that.

When I finally moved to Manyallaluk later that year, I was reconciled to the idea that Moonshine was gone. Although the Aboriginal kids reported spotting him out bush occasionally, it seemed unlikely we would see much of Moonshine again. Ron caught a few fleeting glimpses of the ghostly galloper now and then and his enthusiastic description made me smile. There he was looking like a proper brumby, racing full tilt through the long grass, head held high, tail sticking straight up, black mane and tail flowing, the epitome of boundless freedom. I never saw Moonshine at all, not for six months or more. Although there were several brumby mobs foraging in the area and frequently in view, there were never any light-coloured horses, let alone my little darling white one.

One evening, just at dusk, it happened. We were at the donga, sitting outside and watching sunset fade. In the half light, we heard, then saw, a small pack of horses down the hill on the dirt road, where they were milling around, agitated and on edge. Suddenly another small herd burst on the scene. Each group, led by its own stroppy stallion, seemed reluctant to mix with the other, so one mob got around the impasse by heading off the road and up the hill, which brought them right past our donga, not twenty feet away. Here they all came in single file moving quickly through the scrub. And then I saw him.

There was Moonshine, running with the herd, just as Ron had described, proud and high-spirited, practically right through our back yard. He looked our way as he galloped past, but gave no sign of stopping for a visit or a feed. What was his reaction when he saw us? Did he remember us? Did he question his choice of the gypsy life and the road less travelled or secretly wish he could leave the herd and come back to us? Did his “inner poddy foal” long for a little tender loving care? Did he look at us in awe and think, “Oosh, they are such beautiful creatures”, the way I was rhapsodizing about him? Did he even recognize us at all or were we just part of the passing landscape? Who knows?

Actually, in my heart, I know we exchanged soulful glances.

Because it was my first look at him in ages, it was a really big deal, calling for immediate action. Off into the half-dark, with no torch, flapping along in thongs, calling out enticingly and futilely, “Here Moonshine.” Whistle, whistle. “Here, boy, come here.” Trailing behind them, stumbling over rocks and spiky spinifex grass, until they were well out of sight, until I couldn’t hear them anymore or even see their tracks in the dark. Images of young Brandon De Wilde came to mind. There is he, chasing after his departing hero, as Shane rides out of town, tall in the saddle, without looking back, “Shane, Shane, come back, Shane.” But rather than feeling disappointed or abandoned, I was ecstatic. I’d seen him. He was real. He was still around. He would appear again. We might even get him back. Like the eternal optimist in that tired old joke, “I know there’s a pony somewhere in this room full of horseshit.”

And I did see him again, a couple more times, but always on the fly, never near enough, nothing personal, just a cloud of dust and a hearty Heigh-ho Silver. Still, I kept fervently wishing for a close encounter, but without much hope. Maybe I should have prayed to Saint Anne, the patron saint of lost things, or even Saint Jude, the one you invoke when the situation seems impossible. But I didn’t think of it. However, somebody must have heeded my unspoken prayer.

About a month later, when returning from town one afternoon, we saw Moonshine not too far from the road. He was with his brummy mates, a few dark mares and foals and a beauty of a reddish-gold stallion. They were all grazing in the scrub, about fifty yards from the road. Scrunch, quietly, to a halt. Inch by inch we got out of the car. Don’t breathe too loud. Whisper, don’t talk. They were still there, giving no sign of spooking or scattering. Just for a lark, I started moseying towards him and the other horses. Slowly picking my way through the underbrush, whistling and calling out to him the way I used to, but fully expecting him and the herd to take flight. But he didn’t budge. He watched me approach, ears pricked forward. Closer and closer and he still didn’t make a break for it. When I got within about thirty feet of him, lo and behold, he started walking toward me and met me halfway, as the other horses moved off a little amongst the trees. This can’t really be happening. Yet, there he was in front of me, next to me, nuzzling my hand. Stroking his sweaty neck, rubbing the top of his head, running my hands through his mane – oh boy, oh boy! I could hardly stand it. Just like old times.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Ron coming from the car with some bread. This could either make it or break it. Just in case Moonshine tried to bolt, I wove his mane through my fingers and hung on tight. Although a bit jumpy at first, he calmed right down and let Ron come close too. We fed him the bread and then let him go but he didn’t leave. Instead, he hung around, maybe hoping for a second helping. Back to the car for more bread. By the time I returned, he’d joined the other horses as they began moving further into the forest. “What the heck, I’ve come this far. Let’s see what happens.” So I followed for a bit and kept calling. Sure enough, he separated from the herd one more time and came back for another feed. And a few more hugs and kisses.

It was one of those incredible, unforgettable “communicating with nature” experiences. “Saint Francis got nothin’ on me, man. Move over, Horse Whisperer.” I was rapt. Transported. At that moment, nothing would have surprised me. Moonshine could have turned into the Incredible Talking Horse and said goodbye with an Aussie accent: “Cheerio, mate. She’ll be right. No worries, I wouldn’t have batted an eye. A chorus of kangaroos and kookaburras with voices like Alvin the Chipmunk could have burst into song and it would have seemed like the most normal thing in the world. UFOs could have landed. The angel Gabriel could have appeared and played trumpet. Moonshine could have sprouted Pegasus wings and taken flight. Who knows? Maybe he did. When something so totally extraordinary like that actually occurs, you sort of feel like anything is possible.

As we walked back to the car, still shaking our heads in disbelief, we agreed this meeting had been a very special reunion. It wasn’t long before we traded in the mystical for the mundane, plotting and scheming how to capture him, bring him back and keep him at home with us. Although feasible, the idea never got off the ground. We would have had to fence him in and neither of us had the heart to deprive him of his freedom and his brummy buddies. Better to refocus on the Zen connection and enjoy the chance encounters whenever possible.

As though to confirm the numerous occurrences of our relationship, Moonshine chose the perfect occasion to make a reappearance on a misty moonlit night, an overcast Wet Season evening, with the almost-full moon glowing from behind the clouds and filling the atmosphere with liquid silver. We were beat, having just moved from our donga into a real house, over on the other side of the hill from our old place. After a long, hard day of painting and cleaning, we were finally relaxing on the verandah with a glass of contraband and a bag of taco.
chips, celebrating our new home, and listening to the night noise of green frogs, insects and the thrumming generator down the hill. We heard some animals rustling in the bushes around the Bloodwood trees nearby. Soon a brumby mare and foal emerged timidly from the shadows of the foliage and began feeding on the lawn, just a few metres from the verandah. They seemed oblivious to us and kept right on grazing. We were too exhausted to pay them much mind either and resumed chatting and munching, rehashing the day, mostly just vegging out.

Next thing we knew, Moonshine sort of ephemerated from out of nowhere. Suddenly there he was in the moonlight, right next to us. Poof! Out of the blue, like some spooky apparition, as though Star Trek had just beamed him down. Can horses do that? Just appear like that? You’d think there would be the clipp-clop of hooves, a snort, the snap of a twig, or something. But there was nothing, no warning, no sound. He simply materialized in a twinkling of pixie dust, right at the edge of the verandah behind where we were sitting. I just happened to turn around and came face to face with Moonshine’s muzzle. There was no doubt about it. He was taking a break from the herd to come pay us a visit. This was just too much. The moonlight, the mist, and then Moonshine. Naturally, we fawned all over him, feeding him taco chips, bread, apples, anything we could find in the house, until we ran out of goodies. Then, faithful animal companion that he was, he took off and rejoined the herd, as soon as the tucker was gone. I like to think he came to visit us, you know, sort of an intimate, deeply meaningful, personal experience. Ron says he just came because he was a guts and always looking for a handout. Whatever the case, it was great to see him again, especially the dramatic way he just appeared out of the moon shadows. Hell, it was more than great. It was a full-on epiphany. And because this time he took the initiative and came to call on us, we started thinking again about the feasibility of enticing him back to the domestic scene. “You don’t know it yet, mate, but your brumby days are coming to an end pretty soon, if we have anything to do with it.”

Wrong. We never did catch him. In fact, we never saw much of him after those two incredible encounters. At least we never got that close to him again. Ringo was partially responsible for that, I reckon. A mongrel mutt who adopted us around that time, Ringo saw it as his moral obligation and sacred office to chase away every equine quadruped that ever came near our place, a duty that required endless nocturnal barking down on the flat. He successfully routed many a mob of horses, including, I am sure, Moonshine and his gang. The few times I spotted Moonshine and the brumbies on my morning walk, Ringo was with me and always went berserk in pursuit, barking and nipping at heels, until they were well out of sight. Doggone dog. It annoyed me no end. But I couldn’t really get mad at him. He was only being protective and he approached the task so earnestly and with such a sense of accomplishment. Once the horses were gone, he’d come back, head high, tail wagging, practically bursting with pride. Good dog. And a wistful sigh at the sight of Moonshine disappearing into the scrub.

When we eventually departed Manyallaluk, we left with fond memories of Moonshine roaming wild and free with his mates. However, his brumby days soon came to an end, but not in the way I had imagined. He didn’t get captured; he died. Months later we learned that Moonshine was no more, that he had met his end not long after we left. The details of his demise were a bit vague, although it seems pretty certain he broke his leg after getting tangled in some barbed wire. What was unclear was whether he lingered in a slow, painful death or whether one of the Aboriginal men shot him before he suffered too much. Although both versions of the story were being circulated, clearly the latter scenario is the way I hope it happened. But it’s doubtful we’ll ever know for sure. So sad to think that our little horse was gone. And how ironic his fatal injury. A bit of fence, the very symbol of the domesticated life he’d left behind, turned out to be the cause of his death and the end of his freedom.

Moonshine, of course, isn’t really dead. He lives on. Heck, even when he was alive, he was more ethereal than real. I mean, tell the truth, how many ordinary horses do you know that just materialize on a misty moonlit night? Actually, it’s a well-known fact that all white horses are magical. They run free, they fly, they never die. Everyone knows this, whether they know they it or not. White horses are bound up in who we are, deeply imbedded in the unconscious, galloping through dreams, feeding fantasies, firing the imagination, guiding instincts, leading the charge into battle. Moonshine has been on the scene for eons, long before he happened to show up in material form at Manyallaluk. He’s Pegasus, the knight’s white charger, the good guy’s faithful steed, the hero of horses. He was there during countless hours of play in childhood and has visited in dreams, drawings and paintings throughout adulthood. I’m quite certain he’ll be there to escort me over to the other side when the time comes and he’ll be around long after I’m gone. Actually, he’s not really my horse; he’s yours too. Moonshine belongs to all of us.
Kyle instinctively checked the rear vision mirror. There was no sign of trouble, but as a precaution he decided to indicate that he was leaving the curb.

"Ah, there he is. Quick!"

David slid out of the Cortina’s passenger side door, opened the boot with a firm thump of his wrist then casually swaggered towards the beetroot-faced attendant who stood wiping his clammy palms on the front of his polyester shirt. The sweat stains spreading from his arm pits had reached almost to the sign upon his chest. BOB.

David did as instructed. The sudden movement put Bob on edge.

“What’s that car doing parked there? That’s a no standing zone.”

“Do I look like the kind of guy who’s afraid of a parking ticket?”

Bob’s fogged bifocals were dislodged as he shook his head from side to side and his adam’s apple bobbled in his throat as he swallowed hard. Unfortunately guys like David were an occupational hazard. Bob remembered his employee training. In only three four-hour sessions he had learnt that the customer is always right. “Play it cool,” he thought. “Don’t upset him. It could make the situation worse.” (If that was possible.)

“Come on, hand it over,” said David. “Stick it in the boot.”

Bob complied, and as he leaned forward he discreetly checked his bulging pocket. He was once again relieved that his employee training had held him in good stead. With slight of hand he extracted his requirements as he rose. “Sign here, please,” said Bob as he slammed the boot and slapped his yellow docket on the duco.

“I already signed something when I gave you the TV.”

“Sorry to inconvenience you, sir, but you’ll need this one for proof of ownership of the goods you’ve just taken delivery of,” said Bob in a manner that was far too smug for David’s fine-tuned sensitivities. At that pivotal point in David’s life his latest pledge to peace was the only thing standing between young Bob and a black eye.

“Chances are I’ll be needing that,” said David as he snatched Bob’s medium tipped, gold, uni-ball biro in his left hand and made his mark.

Bob’s sickly smirk was quickly altered. An amateur intuitive graphologist, he sensed divinity in David’s distinct uprights and looping curves. “Have a nice day,” Bob called as Kyle smoked the tyres on takeoff. They had just taken possession of a state of the art, 40-watt simplex transmitter and a souvenir pen.

That evening, Radio Black Liberation began broadcasting from the front bedroom of Rachel’s Fannie Bay unit. Who knows how long they would last in that location. Just as the squallid buildings that had been slapped up decades ago to solve the “Aboriginal problem” were beginning to take on a homely feel, they had been marked for demolition; considered by some to be an ugly bight in a suburb that had set its sights on grandeur.

Apart from the CDs and tapes that Kyle had knocked off from parked cars before he’d been encouraged to go straight, their music collection consisted of donations from a small group of enthusiastic friends and some were on loan from the Nightcliff library. They should have been taken back months ago, but small things will slip the mind of the busy activist.

“Five seconds to air time. Four, three, two, one.” David twiddled the dial, flipped the switch and selected lines from their theme song blared out.

At the midnight hour.

He cried more, more, more ...
“Welcome to the very first broadcast of Radio Black Liberation. Just call us ReBel.” He released the pause button and the music continued.

With a rebel yell,
He cried More! More! More!

“Hopefully by dawn we’ll be hearing you, the listener, crying out for more too. We’re here to address the problems caused by two hundred years of subjugation. We want to provide a forum where people can say what they think without the fear of retribution. We aim to encourage black people to assert themselves confidently, and hope to inspire everybody who tunes in to support the cause. Phone Radio Black Liberation on 8996 1000.”

Kyle and Rachel gave David the thumbs up and hurried out as he continued his diatribe. “We’re going to kick off with two hours of talkback. Let’s start by looking at those issues that the other stations would rather avoid or cover up.”

David paused for effect. “Until now black people haven’t had a voice in this town. It’s time for change. If we don’t speak for ourselves, who will? This is your station. If you’ve had a raw deal, let someone know about it. If you’ve been the victim of harassment or discrimination call me now. If you see harassment on the streets, call me while it’s happening and tell all of our listeners so they can get out there to check what’s going on. That number again is 8996 1000.”

As Ruby Hunter purred out over the airwaves David stepped over the mattress strewn with Rachel’s sleeping kids and grabbed a cola from the fridge. He popped the tab and centred his thoughts as the cool dark liquid slid right down his throat. The music ended. It was back to business.

“ReBel has found a new way to tell the truth. The black truth. An unedited truth of the hidden histories of our families’ continuing struggles. This is possibly the most powerful, hard hitting forum for political expression you are likely to come across anywhere in this country. We are determined to uncover the lies that keep our people down!”

The formulation of his thoughts resulting from two centuries of family oppression and months of anticipation of this opening night assembled on his tongue and were just about to spew forth into the public arena when the phone trilled twice. He knew he had to pick it up before the third. He’d learnt that much about public relations in the time he had spent serving time at Lifeline.

“Hello this is ReBel.”

“Hello, David?”

“Congratulations, you’re ReBel’s first caller. When we’ve finished, don’t hang up. Leave your name and number so I can send you a copy of our special commemorative photo. Personally autographed by ReBel’s Black Pack!”

“Daib, it’s ya Mum. Can ya bring me some baccy in the mornin’?”

“Mum, I’m on air!”

“A pack a Port Royal’d be nice love. You’re doin’ good but ya should stick ta playing music, Daibey. And by the way, ya know what ya can do with ya c’memorative photo. I already got one and it’s underexposed.”

“Well, thank you for sharing that with our listeners, madam. Are there any more callers out there? That number again is 8996 1000. Let’s go to a song from Archie Roach.”

As Archie cracked into life, David had to hand it to her. His mum had always had that special knack of keeping him in line, just when his chronic sense of invincibility was reaching its crescendo. When he was three she’d saved him from drowning in Rapid Creek, but not before he’d taken in a belly

full of water first. She’d obviously deemed it wise to act with haste on this occasion.

It was a humble start and apart from engaging in some poorly stage-managed talk back with Kyle and Rachel who were strategically positioned in the phone box round the corner, his good old Mum was the only caller he had all night.

In subsequent weeks the townies and the long grassers who had access to a radio raved about their new Messiah but it would be difficult to gauge the overall level of success until after the review came out in Deliria.

David drummed the table as he passed the centre spread and leafed forward through the pages. He could not believe it. ReBel had been bumped off centre page by a Romanian anthropology student’s field report and a few nude snaps of a startled Dean on Casuarina Beach.

The review was discouraging. Their deadly mix of non-commercial music and contentious political message aimed at exposing Darwin’s shame received an apathetic plug. ReBel’s management team reviewed their strategy. By the following month they’d made the headlines of the NT News.

David knew it was election year but it would have been unimaginable, even to an experienced agitator, that the police would cordon off two blocks around the units, evacuate residents, batter ram ReBel, headquarters’ front door and use capsicum spray to subdue David and Kyle as they dragged the children screaming from Rachel’s arms.

As we are left to peruse the photograph of police officers in full riot gear, carrying two bewildered children to a waiting paddy wagon, we are left to ask, “Is there any position in Australian society from which an Aboriginal person can speak and be heard?”

The confiscation of assets shut down ReBel for a while but with public donations they have replaced essential equipment and are now back on air, insisting that their environment was perfectly stable before their very public persecution. The children have now been returned to their mother and the increasing groundswell of community support is likely to protect ReBel from a repeat of the unfortunate incident that initially brought them national recognition.

In a special edition of Australian Story Ray Martin asked, “How would you sum up the work of ReBel?”

“We are set up to provide culturally appropriate entertainment to a section of the community that has been ignored by commercial radio.”

“Do you deny the fact that its primary function is as an organising tool for your fledgling political movement?”

“What are you suggesting, Ray?”

“How do you react to allegations that you are a troublemaker and an extremist?”

David took a measured breath. “Didn’t someone say that about Martin Luther King?”

Ray leers; right eyebrow raised. “Do you liken yourself to King?”

“Only by the fact that we are both black ... and I also favour a peaceful solution.”

Inspired by David and the ReBel Team, other unlicensed, low-power, Aboriginal broadcasters are springing up all over the country to spread the word. We all have a dream. Call now. The lines are open.
The Wild Lime Tree
Marian Devitt

Moses Ezekial ran as hard as his small legs would carry him through the park. It was a cool morning and the dew still clung to the stubby grass on either side of the track.

In the town where Moses came from, there was no grass to speak of, let alone a proper park. He was amazed at the difference between the hard rocky ground at home, where the thorny bushes struggled to reach any higher than his shoulder, and the beautiful trees here in the park. The trees in the park were very tall and straight. The high branches whispered and waved. Moses felt certain the trees were talking to each other.

Every morning Moses stopped at the edge of the park to check the wild lime tree. Every morning, he shook the lower branches of the tree but no fruit ever fell. It was very disappointing. In fact Moses had yet to see any fruit at all on the tree.

Maybe it's not a lime tree, he thought. But the tree had thorns and the leaves were small and green and wild bees buzzed in and out of the small white flowers.

His mother, Sarah, had described the lime tree many times and Moses often fell asleep dreaming of the day when he would finally hold a lime in his hand. Sarah told him that the flowers of the wild lime were beautiful, the fruit firm and fragrant, but the taste was bitter, and one day he would learn that many things in life were like the lime tree.

"Don't forget," Sarah said as she walked him to the bus. "Bring me back some wild limes from the tree on the edge of the park. Wild limes are good for all kinds of sickness."

"When am I coming home again?" Moses asked in a small voice.

"I'll bring you home when the limes turn yellow and fall to the ground. Until then, be good. Uncle Zakariah will look after you. Don't do anything that will bring harm or trouble to yourself ... or anyone else. You're old enough now to know the right way."

One day Moses saw that something was different about the lime tree. He knew the tree so well now, he wondered why he didn't notice the change before. Right at the top of the highest branch he could see the tiny beginnings of six wild limes.

Day after day Moses checked the fruit and each day he noticed the six limes swell just a little more. Day after day he shook the branches, but the fruit did not ripen. It stayed green and glossy and out of reach.

Moses began to spend many hours in the park so he could guard the tree. He imagined that the limes might go yellow all of a sudden and he worried that the big crows would get to the fruit before he did. Besides, he was sick of living at Zakariah's house and wanted very much to go home. As soon as the fruit turned yellow he planned to shake it down and run to his uncle. He would tell Zakariah that the yellow limes meant it was time for him to return home.

But the days passed and the six green limes still did not turn yellow. Moses tried throwing sticks at the limes but he could never throw high enough.

Moses began to despair. Although he loved the park and the tall whispering trees, he wanted very badly to go back to the hard rocky ground of his home.

He knew that something was wrong. He had often asked to be able to speak to his mother, but his uncle always seemed to find some excuse as to why he couldn't ring. First Zakariah couldn't find the right phone number, then he didn't have the right change for the public phone, then the phone was broken. When it was fixed and they did finally make the call, Sarah's phone just rang and rang.

The weather was turning cold and Moses knew it was time to act. For the past six nights, as the moon grew full, Moses had crept out of the house to sit beneath the wild lime tree. The six limes still clung fiercely to the highest branch and refused to turn yellow.

It was time to climb the lime tree.

Moses was soon scratched and torn as he struggled up through the thorny branches. He climbed and wriggled and pushed and pulled his way upwards until at last he just managed to bend the uppermost branch down. With one hand he held the branch and with the other he plucked the six green limes and stuffed them into his pocket. As he climbed back down to the ground the wild lime tree scratched him even more, but he hardly noticed at all.

Moses crept back to his uncle's house, covered in scratches and blood. He lay down on his bed and slept for a long time. When he woke he begged Zakariah to take him home. Zakariah was so shocked by the sight of his blood-scratched nephew that he agreed to drive Moses home himself.

As they drove along, Zakariah told him the truth about his mother. Sarah was very sick. That was why she had sent Moses to be with family who could look after him.

"That's why she needs me to come home now, thought Moses. The limes from the wild lime tree will make her better. I just hope that green limes are as good as yellow limes.

As the night came down Moses stretched out on the seat and closed his eyes. He slid his cold hands inside his pockets. In each pocket he felt the warm, smooth fruit and he dug his nails gently into the skin, until the smell of the six wild limes filled the truck. The scratches on his hands stung but he didn't mind.

As he drifted into sleep Moses smiled, knowing that he carried home the wild limes that his mother said were good for all kinds of sickness.
Coming Home up the Stuart Highway
Jo Dutton

Grey green salt bush lies flat before the wind. We are on a rise and Lake Heart stretches out in a lazy arc, all pink and soft cracking salt. Pooh is trying to trick the honey bees with his cloud caper. I know each word on the tape. We are out of batteries for the Walkman and into the second day of hard driving. Sydney is one sleep behind us and we have only stopped once to refuel.

“You should have got batteries,” the eldest complains. “I feel like wringing Pooh’s fucking neck.”

“Don’t swear,” says his father.

“Look! Lake Heart,” I tell the kids pointing, but the distraction fails. The middle one’s re-reading her travelling books because we’ve under-estimated her appetite for words and the eldest has got the pillow over his face.

We are going home and I am tired beyond caring. The coast is a distant memory. Already I can hardly remember tall trees, green rivers and the pleasure of floating in a sea. In the passenger seat my husband falls into the only type of sleep available; uncomfortable and short.

I steer us over the rise and into the flat. Like an endless ribbon the road unfurls. The air-conditioner works well and the heat is no more than bright light falling on the glass. Really this should be easy driving but I’m struggling. My husband’s hand squeezes my thigh.

“You’re doing good,” he says and goes back to sleep.

I take a big breath and remind myself that single vehicle roll-overs are the most common fatality in remote and rural Australia. I open my eyes wider. None of us want to die. We just want to get home.

Pooh has a new idea in his never ending quest for honey and Christopher Robin agreeably assists.

We are getting closer to Woomera. Earlier we had heard a report about a riot and the news that reinforcements were on their way. We had both agreed the policing diversion would reduce our chances of the annual speeding fine south of Coober Pedy. We didn’t speak of why people might be trashing their rations and wanting to harm themselves.

Now we are near. No more than fifty kilometres away razor wire wraps up women and their families. They too have been on this road. For them it is the last step in a journey that began many sleeps ago. They would be exhausted. I am only tired. New to this country surely they would not yet be comprehending where they are going. Maybe they think that they are passing through here, like I am.

There is nothing in this piece of country to offer comfort. It is where horror road movies are filmed and nuclear tests are taken. At night I’ve been caught on this single strip of bitumen by lights on the horizon that make no sense. Even in daylight I am terrified of breaking down here and I listen closely to the engine, monitoring its well being.

Nothing happens: the blue sky stays put and the road keeps falling under my wheels as I drive my family home.

What would those other mothers be thinking as they are driven here? I pray they haven’t seen images of children floating in the sea and heard the lies about their selfish and love-less hearts. I think of their burqas stained with tears on the inside.

I cannot imagine this place being the end of my journey or of being secured in a building no more comforting than a cell, separated from my husband, exhausted of possibilities to comfort my children with. Those mothers would have expected a refuge – that, after all, is why they have been fleeing. I think of their bags that they have carried across oceans and I wonder what they have in them. I imagine photos and scraps of lace. Do they unpack their bags at Woomera or leave them closed until they are free?

In the rear view mirror I see all our bags bulging with new gifts and am sickened by our excess. I stare at the road. It is still beneath my wheels and we are on our way home across this arid plain.

Pooh has not got the honey. But his optimism makes us love him, the youngest and I.

The youngest is fidgeting, asking me something as she cranes her head dangerously out the window. “Please sit down,” I tell her.

“Where’s the heart gone?”

“What heart?”

“The big heart. You said it was cracking.”

“Oh. That. It’s gone.”

“I wanted to see if it had love in it.”

“It’s a lake. Not a real heart. There’s no love.”

“So there’s no heart, nothing at all.”

I can feel the women behind the wire looking at me, pleading across the starchy ground. And all the tears in the world are pressing me into a futile service. Weeping is not an answer.

Suddenly I decide. I stop the car and stand the youngest up on the roof.

“Look for the lines in the earth: they’re the channels.” She looks intently. “One day water is going to spill across there, all the way into Lake Heart. There won’t even be rain here. The water will be pushing through, changing this country. It’s going to travel a long way, sometimes underground.”

That’s how love is, I know. It spills over with its own force making the most courageous of journeys, changing the world. That’s what’s going to happen, I promise those mothers behind wire.
Red Earth Poetry Award

One Thing
Alan Whykes

You came empty-handed and departed empty handed.
You were human.
Your birth, your life, were like a floating cloud that appeared.
You grew.
You were bewildered, a desperate dictionary without an alphabet. You watched
the cat chase dragonflies and the pitcher plant unfurl its traps one by one. You
pestered the sores more than the flies did. You gave names to your moods, and
gave them gifts. You believed in stories of stars, told by comets, recorded by
angels, blushing. You were sung to sleep by cyclones. You ate animal crackers
to extinction. You remembered on the esplanade things forgotten in the cul-de-
sac. You were addicted to placebos. You studied the anatomy of the new left.
You ranted in the cafes and the baklava faction nominated you for president.
You blew a fuse, and the fuse thought it was love. You kissed her expresso, so
dark and bitter that the taste could only be washed away with another woman.
You flattened the grass with the rented furniture van because you couldn’t
afford a mower. You felt the dengue break your back and nail it to the wall. You
waited for number A65 to be called. You wrote poems on the days it was 5 am
all day. You prayed for the decrepit bodies of mechanical things. You drank
sunburn at the cricket until your clothes peeled off. You ate smoke and faked
sleep. You smiled at lilac dresses. You switched off lights to save knowing
where you were. You played the tapes backwards and saw buildings rise from
rubble to sky. You picked up tear gas bulbs, bare knuckles clenched around
potent beauty. You mended pipes, elbows, knees in the year his voice broke.
You waited two months for a replacement part for the transmitter while the
airwaves died of stillness. You shaved your head and found a scar. You were
drawn to scorn dawn’s yawning. You heard them take her away in the night,
and bolted your door. You let the scarf you weren’t wearing fall into the dust.
You withered.
Your death, your life, were like a floating cloud that disappeared. You accepted
the floating cloud itself originally did not exist. You knew the one thing which
always remains clear. You bathed in what was pure, independent of life and
death, untouched by mortal realm.
What, then, is the one pure and clear thing?
Office Anxiety

I always imagine
I will be late
wrong
ill prepared
disorganised
not the right person for the job
I always leave too early
over prepared

The phone rings
through the drone
of the ageing air conditioner
and the lawn mowing crew outside.
I ignore it.

I can smell cut grass

I decide to walk through the park
to take the long way
across newly mown lawn
through the Weeping Rosewoods
I decide to arrive with wet feet
and grass seeds in my cuffs

While enduring the important meeting
I will pluck out the grass seeds
and drop them in
a tapering mound on the carpet
where, hopefully,
one day, they will take root.

Man In The Rain

Come that wild season
just past the birth of Christ
cought between intention and resolve
the rain drives us all
in our own way
into homelessness.

A man is lying
in the car park
in the rain.

Red Earth Poetry Award

It begins to rain harder,
his image blurs.
His legs twisted beneath him
as though his knees are broken
his arms stretched out
either side.

It is hard to know if he is dead or alive
his head turned away from his own dishabiliation
back towards the park
where a woman was killed last year,
another raped.

He doesn't move
He lies so motionless,
The rain runs down my fingers
towards the cavity of his neck.
It collects in a muddy puddle.
Hard to tell if what I feel is the rise and fall of his breathing
or just the hammering down of the rain
on his chest.

The rain falls harder now
I am drenched
There is no pulse
I call the Ambulance,
they suggest the Police
I let them know this is something other than public drunkenness
thinking he cannot
if he is alive
keep lying in that rain
in that deluge.

Just before the Police arrive
He rises and stumbles away
and I have to caution myself,
to remember
the need for faith
in the resurrection.
Train Times
Judith Steele

Coming halfway home on the Ghan last time, from Adelaide,
passing at twilight through remnant railway camps
between Port Augusta and Pimba, I saw ghosts —
railway children wheeling cats in a pram, marking tracks in the sand,
shovelling stones with their hands for ballast —
for railways ran in their blood, their lives, their games.

"Now go to work on the section car" they tell the cats: clack clack
goes the rickety pram ...

yes go to work for the time of work is the time of rest from the iron fists.

From the window of the Ghan I see my ghost of forty years ago
behind the children
watching ...

that phantom lifeline, the east-west express i watched from windows or verandas
watched from stony hills holding the baby, waiting for the other lights —
the drunken ones inside our house — to flicker out,
watched silhouettes of others line flash past in narrow corridors
of light like fleeting false horizons on the darkness of my life.

Railways ran in the blood and shrieked through the days and nights
of the Iron Men, and the women and kids; life on the line could be peaceful,
in camps that were safe but there were camps half-empty, where booze flowed
into vertices of violence — and men whose strength is all in their fists
need little excuse to make a settler’s house an iron cage

where railways ran in the blood my blood I wiped from walls in the morning
keeping the house clean good girl
cooking chips comfort food to eat through split lips,
smiling for the baby touching my yellow and purple face.

Settlers’ families don’t travel express shifting camp: was it the goods train,
or the Tea ‘n’ Sugar? can’t remember — i remember being trapped in a carriage between
one blow and the next i threw out the window the English dinner set
— white plate with curly edges crimson rose — somewhere between Tarcoola
and Kingoonya, the tending present roses spinning in the desert.

That was just before all hope was gone, before the fighting breath and strength
was taken up by the negative breath that the no-mind breathes in spite of all
keeps breathing

where railways ran in the blood my blood I wiped from walls in the mornings, keeping
the house clean, good girl, waiting for avenging angels to come.
The Butcher of Lobeye

Carmel Williams

He is a blessed man
All his fingers after 20 years
Long fingered, thick skinned
textured hands
that hold a child
who knows what it is to be male

Posture of war
bent over a tiny table
takes tea with pixies
Thin metal edge
between him
and what is raw

Likes the edge
whisper fine - always ready
Takes his phallic symbols
seriously
an hour to feel up a good steel
and make it his

This man brings gifts
Pigs eyes
sheeps kidneys
for his lambs
Tender eye fillet flowers
for his lady love

Loves his work
honest trade of flesh
morsel of muscle
Watch him work
slides the blade
as he would part the water

One perfect pink cut
brings a tear to his eye
He will want to share it
Everyone understands
youth and beauty
flesh and bone.

Spots a whinger
with a boning knife
body to carcass
Gets juicy on roast lamb
He has his scars
a stab to the hip

when he missed
the scabbard
Likes his wounds licked
quietly at home
Simple man
knows a bad kill

by the colour of its flesh
rolls his own
makes a solid fence.

Married a poet
with a taste for viscera
passion for sharp objects

Wears love
like a satin harness
Give him something raw
he will wrap it
put a date stamp
on the far right-hand corner

Yet, he's a man
who can be convinced
that some things
are best
eaten raw.
Northern Territory University Essay Award

Smoke Gets In My Alice
Alan Whykes

Synopsis:
This essay is a personal view of travelling to central Australia. It attempts to place Alice Springs within the context of both its traditional and cultural roots and the modern tourist industry and facilities upon which the town depends.

"You may have noticed the bush fires as you flew in," chirps the coach driver, "so the sunset should be particularly good tonight." Environmentalists 0, Spin Doctors 1. As we pass the Blatherskite Park sports facilities on the road into town I begin to wonder whether skipping the verbal fantastic is something of a local specialty.

It's a town like Kabul in all truth, a brief scramble of low-rise buildings set against rocky mountain ridges, dusky handmaidens to a brooding desert studded with date palms and camel tracks in the sand. The Afghans here, instead of being world enemy number one, are key figures in a nostalgic past of sturdy explorers and settler struggles against a pitiless climate. Sadadeen High School, The Ghan railway, Mahomet Street. Once outsiders, now the Afghans and their exploits are on the map, in the museums and safely buried in the pioneer cemetery facing Mecca.

Where Europeans once searched for a vast inland sea, people of many nations come to seek the quintessentially outback, the red centre, timeless vistas of giant monoliths, dingoes howling and sunsets that burn with crimson fury. The aircon buses, shuttle flights and rented four-wheel drives spit them out on to dinosaur plains to marvel at watercolour waterholes and barren river beds, sheer gorge cliffs and anerobic native trees casting their modest gaze downward.

Rocks, ridges, rivers. According to the local Arrernte people, the landscape was created by the Nyarrike caterpillars. The embodiment of one such caterpillar - a spines-tufted and boulder-lined rise - is adjacent to Barrett Drive. More correctly, what remains of it is. The caterpillar's tail is no more, summarily amputated during construction of the road. Even stone caterpillars are no match for bulldozers, especially those that are creating pathways to the modern sacred sites of resort, golf course, casino.

Then there's the wit, as dry as the Todd River and probably easier to find in full flow. A ten-pin bowling alley is The Dustbowl. "Ugly stuff, beautiful food," proclaims a cafe in calculated self-deprecation. A camel train is brought up by a dark beast called Satchmo: he's black, he has big lips, and when he stands up he lets fly with a trumpet blast. In the end a sense of humour is probably a useful survival tool, a necessary diversion from the forty-plus degree days of summer and the toe-clicking nights of winter.

Even on a spring night, the prime local recreation appears to be swearing in the streets. Loudness too is mandatory as the desert has few echoes to prop up the diminutive of lung. Nightclubs put on a passable attempt at urban grunge complete with pallid wails in dreary black, stubble-crested skinnies and chunky Samoan bouncers. If Priscilla was ever queen here she's long gone, perhaps abducted mysteriously at a deserted roadside while dingoes watch anxiously from a safe distance.

Tired dogs and charcoal bodies kiss the pavements or wobble along the riverbed. Despite being only a part-time river, the Todd comes close to defining Alice Springs with its smooth pebbles, rough grasses and quirky gullies. And, ploughing through the shifting sand furrows and dribbling along the causeways, its endless oddworld of itinerants, drifters and fringe-dwellers. Sometimes there are so many of them as to suggest, with the awkward logic of battered plastic shopping bags, that the fringe is really the centre and the centre indeed the fringe.

I search on for the centre of the centre, needing a vantage point, and chance upon a small hill. It was once the backyard of a pioneer settlement where goats were turned loose during the day. These days only discarded clothes, empty wine casks and fast food boxes peer from the tufted grass and knobly rocks of Billygoat Hill. For two-legged billygoats, the view is at least some compensation for the short rubbish trek to the summit. A panorama of the entire town opens up, from the grey streak of the Stuart Highway to the sumbrell backdrop of the MacDonnell Ranges. It draws distant winds over the palate yet does not completely satisfy. There is more.

While the MacDonells just proudly from the bedrock of home-grown geology, McDonalds as ever makes no concessions to local taste of style. No Aboriginal artwork adorns sacred red and yellow walls, while the fibreglass clown with permanent grin does not care how "things that make you say Mmmmmmm" translates into Warlipiri or Pitjantjatjara, if at all. Happiness is bungs not witchetty grubs, thick shakes not honey ants, and in not knowing whether this is McDonalds in Alice Springs or Chicago or Istanbul or Helsinki.

The art is there nonetheless, fighting for survival in shops filled with vivid postcards, fluppy toy camels, plastic boomerangs and didgeridoos-that-can-be-posted-anywhere-in-the-world. Designs are abstract or symbolic or plain incomprehensible to the outsider, but dotted with perentie dreaming and secret waterholes and emu tracks to the people who care the stories in their bones. Yet the song of the land calls from the yellows, browns and reds, pure pigments of pure earth, clay, rock and dust.

Aboriginal art is even the streets, where a woman with a once-navy beanie has a painting to sell. Slapping rough has not been kind to her, nor the canvases now smudged with red thumbnails. I ask her what the artwork depicts but she can only slur, "It's Aboriginal way, you know." She is more interested in having me part with ten dollars, whiteletta way, you know. No Ten dollars would not even cover the cost of materials and I have no idea what the painting is really worth, even without the smudge. She stuffs her canvas in the shopping bag of a multinational department store and moves on.

Handcrafts in more presentable guise jam the Sunday market. The pale pavestones of the mall become crowded with crocheted nick-nacks, opal fragments. Aboriginal wood carvings of tiny dragons, contorted bottles, medjool dates, old books, Thai vegetables and The Rock emblazoned on every imaginable object. Bush tucker is, apparently, still largely in the bush yet sashimi, continental crepes, soggy samosas or fried fajis are no problem. They're not quite my thing. A proselytising Baha'i pushes a pamphlet promising endless world peace at me. His hand and mine hesitate at the same instant. The pamphlet blows away to preach peace among chip packets pinned against the wall of the original hospital.
Sultan’s Turkish café may be more like it. Somehow, the belly-dancing and brass trinkets pander satisfactorily to Western fantasies of desert harems, silk traders and beturbaned cameliers. While spangles are shaken, veils tossed and hips wiggled at Sultan’s, across the road a bunch of Aboriginal men and women are slugging it out in an empty car park. Once upon a civilisation, they too were dancers. Instead of casting off veils, alcohol has drawn its mean-spirited shawl over this group at least. The dancers finish with a flourish and the applause subsides. I order a baklava as the distant sound of smashing bottles cuts through café clink. The night is damaged, and even pistachio nuts and honey syrup cannot heal the unease.

By the time I remember to look for stunning sunsets, days have passed and storms are circling. Shards of glass ring in my ears. The desert gulps at sweeping rain but thirsty vehicles still pant heavily at the petrol pumps. Doctors fly overhead. Every stubby hill begs a watercolour makeover. A desert dog of no particular breed raises its laconic muzzle to the wind. Tumbleweeds gather at low fences, gossip carelessly, then roll on down the track.

The airport bus swoops while smoke still mingles with stormclouds on near horizons. “Bloody firebugs,” grunts the driver. “They’re ruining the bush. What a waste.” Spin Doctors 1, Environmentalists 1. A week is a long time in bus driving. Perhaps not such a long time in central Australia, where millions of years of subtle geology and nomadic visions are laid out like a softly rumpled tablecloth. Take your seat, order a drink, rub the smoke from your eyes and dry your tears on an airline serviette as the ground falls away in the dreamtime.

Saturday morning, 6:30 am. The pink glow on the eastern horizon is tinged with orange. All is calm, so it is a good time to write. In about an hour’s time I will go out to the orchard to fix twenty-two flow control taps to the irrigation system so that we can monitor our new plan to fertilise the mature trees through the pipes. But right now I am sitting here concentrating upon time passing. Not for me the mundane matters of life. Better to get to the bone of things, concentrating upon time.

Just before the end of March the earth slightly changed its angle to the sun, with a resultant lowering of temperatures overnight. We had cool mornings and light afternoon breezes in Katherine – at 5 am on March 19th it was just 15° on the verandah and by the Wednesday before Easter we had recorded a low of 9°. Thus began the season of mildness here in the Top End, the time when tourists from the south, east, west and parts international arrive to participate in the Territory lifestyle. In his landmark poem The Wasteland T. S. Eliot referred to April as the cruellest month, because of what it promised but did not fulfil. The poem is regarded as his masterpiece: it is about many things – the collapse of faith being one of them, but its success relies upon timelessness, its destruction of natural time, natural rhythms, and how this is linked to the crisis of faith.

The Aboriginal seasonal calendar tells us that it is the harvest time for the natural world in the Top End: a time of plenty for bush tucker and animals, and a time of invigoration for us humans who have suffered the brain-numbing humidity of the wet season for long enough.

On the previous Saturday morning I had also sat on this verandah but felt guilty wasting just sitting. “I’d better get busy washing something,” I thought. I had arranged to borrow a neighbour’s tractor to get much-needed slashing done in order to save time for other tasks later down the track. So I spent six hours on that day and a further two hours on the following Sunday morning, by which time my brain was overworked and I was beginning to make mistakes. As I was almost finished anyway I parked the machine under a mahogany tree, made a pot of coffee and slumped on a chair on the verandah. I put a John Coltrane CD on the player but promptly turned it off. There was something inappropriate about the unreleased tension in Coltrane’s saxophone.

So I sat there and watched the grasshoppers zipping about munching on the greenery and the dragonflies hovering and darting over the pond water. And I started to think and think. Round and round. What time had I saved, I asked myself? Is it actually possible to save time? My thoughts strayed around these questions for many minutes without any resolution of substance. Meanwhile the grasshoppers continued to hop and the dragonflies continued to hover. I noticed also that the ibises had returned, probably because the irrigation of the orchard has left the ground wet enough for their delicate picking and pecking;
our noisy friends the peacocks were about as well.

There was something prophetic about my thoughts, however, because just three days later we had more rain - just enough to ensure that I had to slash once again. I cursed for a few seconds, but then I began to laugh at myself and regain composure as I realised there was no point in cursing nature since it ignores you anyway. And the answer to my previous questioning became clear through this seasonal event: we cannot save time because time embraces us. Time is not ours to save or lose. We continually hear such statements as the one I made in referring to slashing: "Oh, I thought I'd save time by doing such and such..." whereas the saving of time is impossible.

Aboriginal people once knew time like we never will. They knew the natural cycle like some people know the stock market or Adam Gilchrist's batting figures, and there are remaining bush communities in this country which still live this way, in complete ignorance of the clock which divides time passing into hours, minutes and seconds.

You don't have to go far out of Katherine or any other NT urban setting to find a school environment in a designated town where the teaching of time as defined by the mathematics curriculum is a trial of Kafka-like proportions. Such a town, situated a few hours out in the bush, might house a two-to-three teacher school. The town will have a conventional power supply, reticulated water, local council, health service and so on, but this does not mean that its indigenous residents have completely adapted to our ways. I visited such a school a few weeks ago and after looking around for the morning I asked the principal how the teachers were going to be spending time to the kids. "Time?" he replied the principal. "Ah, yes...well, I guess you could say that it's problematic. It always was, and always will be."

There are no hurried children living in indigenous bush communities. Their parents are too clever for that. No outback Aboriginal children will need to be advanced beyond their peers and no therapy will be required for those children unable to meet the overreaching expectations of their parents. The individual does as the community does. The indigenous conception of time is critical to this aspect of Aboriginal life.

Many years ago Benjamin Franklin thought he had a firm grip upon the concept of time when he wrote. "Time is money." This immediately struck a chord with all the lawyers who heard it because they knew the equation better than Ben ever would, but they were ecstatic that an international hero had raised the governing principle of their work to a higher order. Perhaps more importantly the emerging bourgeoisie saw the relation as the beginning of something awesomely profitable, much more than even lawyers would ever realise. But, of course, the process of unnatural time was well-developed before then. The progression of abstracting time from nature was a gradual process accompanying the growth of industrial communities and salaried employment. Some people say that it was not the steam engine that showed the way to the modern age, but the humble clock. And maybe they are correct.

Eventually the industrialised world evolved to accept the assembly line as a means of production. The essential feature of the line is the fracturing of time in a manner that is still with us. In many work places we now have robots to do what once was done by humans. So what are we doing with all this time at our disposal? We are certainly not working less time.

The natural cycle has never vanished, however, rather it is that we tend to ignore it - often at some risk, such as the next El Nino, or with resultant frustration, such as the slashing of weeds around the block before the wet season is over. Seasons come and go with the movement of our planet. If only we could adjust sensibly to them. Not that I would hope for an unequivocal return to ancient times - let us not forget there have been societies who believed that a virgin female needed to be sacrificed daily or the sun would not appear in the morning.

On our mango farm we press on with whatever has to be done and we are directed by the seasonal change. There are forms of work which are dependent upon nature for its rhythms and its possibilities and farming is one of them. There comes a time when the job is finished, at least for that season or part of season, and my favourite book of The Bible, Ecclesiastes, summed it up perfectly for all time: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven." But the application of this nature/time theory falls completely if work is cut off from the natural cycle of seasons. And this is how many of us work today, including my wife I and when we work for salary in the town. But when time = money on an exclusive basis, there is no time when the job is done. If you are one of those people unhappy about the notion of there being no limit to the time devoted to the work where time = money, such as myself, then we must make time for other things. Farming can be one of them, as long as one accepts the natural rhythms and does not get totally absorbed by the dream of financial rewards. It is better to concentrate on the growing. Another activity is voluntary work, where intrinsic motivation and not financial reward is the operating variable. Voluntary work can be gratifying in ways difficult to get down in print - I always enjoyed voluntary work for the AIDS Council of South Australia, for example, but not so for the Communist Party where it became a curse, and for some people an addiction worse than television. Voluntary work can promote belonging in ways not affected by money and some people manage to do it for a lifetime.

Perhaps the simplest tactic is to work part-time for when time = money. Then there can be time, as distinct from saving time, which can be freed from the vice-like grip of money. But there lies another conundrum: part-time work at one salaried job will not yield enough to live on, so maybe we need to need less. And how would one manage that?

The aim of this writing was to ruminate upon the idea of time passing - specifically that since time is not ours to save, it is better to consider how we might break Franklin's equation of time = money. Since beginning the task the weather pattern has reversed itself. Temperatures have risen, clouds have formed early and stayed late, the humidity has reached levels normally expected of November, and yet there has been no rain. On some days we have also had warm south-to-south-east winds blowing across the district just to ensure that nobody was getting used to the idea of a strictly seasonal pattern.

We were ready to alter our diet to dry season fare when this abnormal heat upsurge arrived. Nobody was prepared for it. Beer sales have risen sharply, some folks say there has been an increase in domestic disturbances and other people remain waiting for Godot. Some people have become grumpy and others have become sick. But not us. Well, neither of us has been sick. But now my head is troubling me and it is time to get to other things. Maybe that John Coltrane CD. Maybe the time is right.
Revisiting the Green Centre
Taria Kramer

Synopsis
This essay is about the short and long-term effects of heavy rain in the Red Centre. I wrote most of it during Alice Spring’s ‘big wet’ in February 2000, when I observed changes in the environment caused by the unusually heavy rain that season. After speaking to many long term residents it seemed that the Greenhouse Effect had arrived here, while the summers down south had become a lot drier, at least this part of the world was affected positively, or so I thought. I was moved to write the last section after a recent drive west of Alice Springs, when I saw the countryside in various stages of recovery from bush fires that have swept through the area over the past year or so. The buffal grass has pretty well choked out every other kind of grass around here. Parts were still smouldering from a fire that had gone through a couple of days earlier; other parts were black with shoots of green coming through after just a few weeks, not even needing rain to spur on growth. Large areas had also been burnt out last year; while some plants had survived and were shooting, many were nothing but pathetic black twigs above a sea of knee-deep buffal.

It was the wettest February us whitefellows could remember.

One Monday evening there was the smell of rain in the air, so I shut the windows of my car. The sky was starry and bright which was odd, as the rain smell was distinct, not just a figment of my imagination. It began as a few spots the next morning, from a band of cloud that moved in from the east. Most weather that means any business up here moves in from the northwest, so even that dark lugubrious sky was probably all show.

Normally when it rains here, there is no more than two days of it, with the sky clearing on the third day. Instead, Day Three woke me with a heavy downpour. While I normally turn over and ignore the bright early summer sunshine, there was something about the sound of steady rain that captivated and held. When I took my son to childcare a bit later, there was a wonderful atmosphere there. Everyone was so happy! That was the morning that Alice Springs, in the dead desert heart of Australia, became an island, with all roads cut by flash flood.

The tourists were stuck for days, unable to head down to the rock, and unable to fly out. Instead tours included visits to ‘as far as you can go along Larapinta drive’. In the meantime I wondered whether there would be a baby boom in nine months time, like that story about an American town which was swamped in for the weekend.

The Alice Washouse must have done a roaring trade, because any washing got no drier than damp before the swirling drizzle closed in again. I was down to my daggis underwear, and was glad I had paid those two dollars as I listened to two hours of downpour at four am on Day Seven.

All the rain and misty weather made me dreamy, and I was unable to concentrate well enough to maintain a sane conversation. When I sat outside and closed my eyes I could pretend that I was in some exotically tropical location. I had been saying since I arrived in Alice Springs that I would like to move somewhere really wet next, just to get my love of rain out of my system. Somewhere like the west coast of Tasmania, or the South Island of New Zealand, or England, etc. As the now ‘green centre’ attempted its own version of One Hundred Years of Solitude, a book in which it rained for four and a half years without a break, maybe I wouldn’t have to.

The rain stopped at midday on Day Seven, but heavy showers were frequent during the next couple of weeks, causing the local rivers to flow several more times. The bright green buffal grass grew like mad, even spread to the top of the ranges, something that people who had been here thirty years or more had never seen before.

I drove out west one Sunday afternoon until I came to the first river. Wandering across it and back, while watching several other cars pass through safely, I figured I would probably make it, but by then a mass of clouds was closing in. I decided it would be wiser to head back to town, but stopped to watch the sky. If you had never been to the Top End before you might have thought that a sky as black as that meant it was judgement day. The thunderclouds had rolled in from the west over the MacDonnell ranges, until the brightest thing to see was the lush green grass from all the recent rain.

As I sat on a small hill, a car roared down the highway at top speed, followed by another. Dickheads. No matter what the weather was like out here, I never drove faster than 80 kph – the scenery was just too lovely to miss. What is it with people, why do they have to go so fast all the time? Most people are dead from the neck up, and that is the trouble: what a waste of space!

There is another part of me that tries to be tolerant of different people, which is something that has been hammered into us at church now and then. I suppose if everyone was a dreamy type like me, and always going into the clouds, the human race would soon become extinct of starvation.

Church, that was something else. What was it about organized religion, that I felt closer to my maker at a time like this than in a month of Sunday sermons. And why was there a touch of guilt because I decided not to go today? I used to proudly count years between church attendances.

Flashes of lightning drove me to the safety of my car. Now the clouds were so low that they covered the tops of the hills, and it had become so dark that cars had their headlights on. ‘I wasn’t going to hang around any longer – any moment the heavens would open.’

As I drove back towards town, I passed an Aboriginal family parked at the top of a small hill. Thank goodness there were other sane people out there!

All the water created an explosion of life. This meant waist-high grass everywhere, and record numbers of mosquitoes, red-back spiders, snakes, caterpillars, and other creatures about wreaking havoc. Wild budgerigars flew about, which I haven’t seen before in town, and I noticed the absence of galahs, which usually graze on the local parklands.

I was affected by cockroaches more than anything else. They were everywhere in my house. In a normal year they would crawl around the kitchen at night, but we coexisted satisfactorily. Not any more – we were now at war! They made their nests under three or more papers, behind posters on the wall, inside my sons’ toys, in the microwave, in my radio, in all of the kitchen drawers. Nothing seemed to stop them – I had twelve baits around the place, and they kept on breeding. I put surface spray everywhere, but as soon as the smell died down enough for humans to return, they were back. I stepped on them, and like cartoon characters, they quickly got up again and wandered off – sometimes with their guts hanging out. Nothing was sacred - I found them in my stack of photo albums, and discovered two adults in each one, like couples
living in a block of flats. There is something almost human about them, the way they populate across every possible corner and shit everywhere.

My old enemies of the previous summer, the ants, were now my friends. Wonderful clean creatures they are, moving in to clean up leftover crumbs and cockroach bodies. Everything is quietly taken back to their houses, as if humans were not good enough for ants to want to live with them.

This was two years ago, and as the months went by I enjoyed the masses of wildflowers that bloomed around the place, although they will eventually be driven out by the ubiquitous buffalo grass, which was brought in from South Africa (I think). Apparently the dust storms used to be so thick no aeroplanes could land, so someone had the bright idea of importing this grass to cover the ground and it was planted around Alice Springs in the 1960s. Now aeroplanes can get in and out of the place whenever they like (most of the time anyway), which is good for people waiting on the flying doctor, but not so good for the town council, who have to mow it all the time!

With all the rain that the centre has seen since then, the buffalo grass has spread further and further, in many places taking over completely. I watch smoke drift into Alice Springs from the many bushfires, and as I drive out of town now, the devastation is clear.

Buffalo grass grows really thick, so bushfires are much more prevalent than they used to be, wiping out larger areas of bush land. The buffalo also seems to burn hotter than the finer native grasses, and many more native trees and shrubs are killed where in the past they would resprout; in the meantime the buffalo springs up green in just a few days, choking out any new seedlings which might have sprouted. A decrease in the number of plant species will only be followed by a decrease in the animal population, at habitats are altered forever.

This weed prefers to grow in the lush parts of the centre, while the deserts further out of town aren't at such a risk. The once beautiful woodlands of diverse plant and animal life in the MacDonnell's are turning into wastelands of blackened branches above a sea of never-ending yellowing buffalo.

We Never Had Proper Food
Kaye Aldenoven

Synopsis

More on NT experiences eg kawares, echidna, Nungaral's afghan bread, rabbits, snakes, oysters. King George Whiting, illy seeds, turtle eggs, daging sambel, maggie goose curry. Don't eat flying fox because it makes your skin smell like a bat.

At Umbakumba, after school we took handfuls of dried vegetables from a silver tin that sat on the verandah by the front door. Those dried vegetables: pea pellets, cabbage that looked like bones, and carrots that were hard as coins. The silver tin had washed up on the beach from Scandinavia or some dark country like that, where they have no sun so they have to eat dried vegetables. Mum just said, "Have a big drink of water so the vegetables will swell up in your stomach."

We didn't even know what Peter's Ice-cream was until we were 26, oh maybe we were only 24, you know. We thought everyone beat cream to get ice cream, and chose the flavours that their kids wanted. The best of the batches was chocolate and mint and the worst production was when Mum made Vegemite ice cream to trick us.

We were dragged out of our warm little beds just to pick mushrooms in the paddocks wet with green winter grass. We shivered in our thin tartan flannelette pyjamas and once I caught my youngest brother stepping on the biggest ones with his yellow rubber boots because he only wanted to eat those pretty little white ones in the box at Eichiners Four Square Store in town.

The sagging fly wire door at the shop scraped on the cement step, but I liked the Coke bottle painted on a sheet of tin that was nailed to the bottom half to cover up the hole that Uncle Steve had kicked. We were only allowed Coke on Dad's birthday. Mum said Coke dissolved your teeth enamel. We only had ginger beer that Nana made for us from a scary gingerbeer plant that had to be fed sugar and powdered ginger every day. Nan screwed the lid back on the jar real quick, so we reckon she was scared of the gingerbeer plant too. God knows what it did to our teeth.

We never had any real food. We just had duck eggs and vegetables from our garden, and our mother made a weird kind of bread from wholemeal flour and yoghurt, you know, fermented milk, and she made us help her cut the dough into animal shapes and cook them in the frypan. We turned them over to brown both sides and they puffed up and floated.

We went night hunting for fat quail in the wheat stubble, spotlighting them and chasing them till they grounded. Mum stuffed them with breadcrumbs, herbs from next to the back door (we couldn't afford dried herbs like other people), and almonds from off the tree out back. We actually liked the almonds even though they didn't have to be bought with money. But it still wasn't real proper food like other people got.

Dad and Mum dragged the net at night, waist deep through the cold heavy sea, and we had to lie on the beach, near a fire, wrapped in blankets from the cold while they caught mobs of silver sweet tommy roughs or mullet for our tea. She had the sharpest knife to fillet them because we did not like the bones.
Stuart’s job was to roll the fillets in flour and my job was to slide them flat into the hot butter without burning my fingers on the edge of the iron fry pan.

Sometimes we stopped by the old water tank on the way home from the beach and collected feral pigeons that roosted in the wooden supports of the old roof. Mum had to marinate them in honey, lemon juice and spices before she roasted them in the oven. The honey used to make the skin crisp and shiny and the lemon juice was an acid that made the meat tender enough to chew. Talk about weird tucker.

In the bath room in the winter buckets of dill cucumbers lined up against the wall out of the way. Dad pickled both round white cucumbers and the long dark green ones. Nobody else did this kind of strange stuff to food so dad had to grow the dill himself down by the ducks’ fence. You could not buy dill at the shop at all. First we had to roll up the sleeves of our woollen jumpers, then we had to lift the limestone rock off the plate that prevented them from floating, and reach into the cold salt-vinegar, feeling around for the size we wanted. Dad said: “You have to have a limestone rock, that’s part of great-Opa’s recipe.”

In the winter we had a wood fire burning twenty-four hours a day. Mum made porridge every morning. “It’s cheap and filling,” she said, and our Nana’s sister gave us leftover cream every day so that made porridge even cheaper. We had to put a spoonful of bush honey on it to make it taste bearable, but we always wanted that authentic Kraft blended honey.

Looking back we reckon they were pretty hard times and it is a miracle that we have grown up to be healthy and well grown. We have however, turned out a bit strange because of this harsh dietary regime, and we find ourselves compelled to catch wild barra and fry those sweet fleshed little Daly River cherrapin with homegrown ginger and lemon grass. One of my brothers even brews his own homemade beer!

You probably can’t expect much more from kids raised like we were! We never had proper food.

The Land of Opportunity
Anne-Marie Hayman

Synopsis

The essay is about the opportunities available in the NT, opportunities which are hard to find elsewhere even in Australia. It is written for entertainment and is autobiographical. It covers the period of my life from just before I married until the present day, detailing how, from very humble beginnings, we were able to establish our own cattle herd and set up our business. The emphasis is on the fact that this is only really possible in the NT, where people will still give you a fair go and helping hand to get you started and where people respect hard work and effort. Intertwoven in this essay are stories of life on the land and other anecdotes which demonstrate that the NT is the Land of Opportunity.

We started with a swag, a port and one rucksack. Ten years later we have 7 horses (of various grades of usefulness), 700 head of cattle, 2 cars, 2 very useless dogs, 2 even more annoying cats and a house that we own more of than the bank, and the lease of about 15,000 acres of land. Where else but the Territory could we achieve so much in such a relatively short time?

We met, as you do, on a station. I had spent six months working in the Pilbara on a small family owned place. Coming more or less straight from the UK I had fallen in love with station life, the miles of empty space, the working to your own pace and of course the people. I had my own “bedroom”, a shearer’s cot, out the back on the verandah. The owner’s room was much more salubrious; they had a double bed on the verandah at the front. On cold nights they had to wear bennies to keep their ears warm. Every night they checked the pillows to make sure no eggs had been laid there. Only the children had a bed inside. If you wanted a bath, you had to keep an ear out for visitors, because it was out on the front verandah. Being surrounded by the bush on all sides, it was very peaceful and relaxing, but you never knew if you would get caught out! The nicest time was in the dark, when you could bathe by starlight. I suppose it was all the differences that made me love this life so much, the lack of luxuries and the closeness of the bush, it was incomparable with what I had left behind. I never wanted to leave this place, but of course, the day came when eventually I had to.

I was very lost when I had to move on. All I wanted was to work on another station, to recapture the life I had led for six months, but I didn’t really know where to start looking. I rang every station I could, but no-one wanted an inexperienced jillaroo. I was beginning to lose hope, when I finally got a start. I was overjoyed and couldn’t wait to get out there, but this place was very different.

It was a company-owned station where I was definitely a worker, not one of the family. I had a bed in the quarters and even though it was indoors, I longed for my old verandah. The room was filthy, full of cobwebs and a fan that looked like it was ready to drop. I swapped my lovely scenic bath for a frog-infested shower that ran down brown water. Before I had eaten with the family, now I ate in the big kitchen with all the ringers – and no-one spoke to me at all. These men were a different breed, people who had been working in stock camps for years, ever since they were little more than kids. They told yarns of fiery colts and chasing bulls, of the days of proper mustering before it was “all
laneways and choppers, when you could still have a bit of fun." I sat there trying not to let my mouth hang open and realised I had never felt so out of place nor out of my depth.

I managed to hang in there for two weeks. A very long two weeks, I hated every day of it. It was the day in between filled with me stumbling around after everyone else and not knowing what I should do or where I should be. I felt stupid and useless and made up my mind to leave whenever I could. Finally we were allowed into town. This was my great escape; I was free and I’d never be going back. I even wrote to one of my friends describing my horrible experience and how glad I was to be out of it.

So how come I went back and stayed there for another two months? I met up with the rest of the camp in town and gradually, despite the huge differences in our backgrounds, we started talking. My future husband asked me to come back and give the place another go, and against my better judgement, I did.

This time was better, this time the rest of the camp were on my side. They’d help me out, show me what to do, tell me where things were and give me some on the job training. Eventually I could help out drafting in the yards, without getting hurt, or — more important — in anyone’s way.

We moved out to an outstation and here set up our first “house”. It was very basic, there was no hot water and in the cold dry season nights this was a hardship. The main area was an open shed, where a huge goanna used to wander in and lick your toes as you had a lunchtime nap. The shed was a great vantage point for spectacular sunsets where you could look across miles of uninterrupted bush to the hills far beyond. It was breathtaking.

But all good things must come to an end and it was time to move on. All we had was the swag and the two bags of clothes, nowhere to stay nowhere to go and no job. Anywhere else and this would have been a major problem, but in the Territory it was situation normal. In the Territory you head to the pub and have a few drinks while you think about it and see what turns up. Sure enough that afternoon we got offered work and a place to live. It was easy. Of course the other thing about the Territory is that you shouldn’t be too fussy. It’s better to grab whatever comes along than hold out for your dream job and so we went to live at the meatworks.

It was beautifully placed, surrounded by hills, but you had to get used to the smell and the constantly circling hawks. We had a bed, but there was a steep gradient between the head and the foot and you felt you had to cling onto the head to stop yourself sliding out the bottom. It was worse if you’d had few drinks. After searching high and low, we finally managed to find a very basic caravan to rent in a very basic caravan park, for a ridiculously large amount per week and there we stayed for the dry season.

Once we were married I was ineligible to work, not due to male chauvinism but because the Immigration Department wouldn’t let me. So we had to pay through the nose for the caravan and live on one wage and I had to keep myself amused on no money and in a town where I knew no-one. It was a hard time and I did a lot of reading! We splashed out on a luxury car, an old XC Falcon, that had been round Australia once courtesy of the backpacker brigade and had seen much better days. In the Wet we had to take the carpets out and drill holes in the floor to let the water drain out. It was easier than trying to stop it leaking.

The work at the meatworks dried up and we moved to Katherine, still with nowhere to live. We survived by camping on people’s floors and it would be another six months before we got our own bed and could finally, after a year, stop sleeping in that single swag. After chasing up work here and there and being promised jobs that fell through, we got work chasing buffalo in Arnhemland. I say we, but I was only allowed to come because I had nowhere to live and I could earn my keep by helping out doing cooking etc. The advantage of these type of jobs is you got fed and had nowhere to spend your pay, so even though the pay was not high, you saved every cent you earnt. Plus whilst you’re sleeping under the stars, you don’t have to pay rent or power bills, so if you stick at it you can earn quite good money.

Looking back now I cannot comprehend how we slept together on a single shearer’s cot. The wire mesh on those things always sags in the middle and they are narrow even for one person. I guess when you’re newly married you don’t care how close you sleep, whereas now on our queen-size bed, there still never seems to be enough room.

We spent six weeks up there and I saw country like I’ve never seen before. There is nothing there except bush and scrub, and the true isolation of the place hits you. We travelled right to the top of the Katherine River where there is the sweetest water I have ever tasted. Way up here, to our horror, we ran out of beer. It had been a bad day, the wind had changed at the last minute so we had failed to get a single buffalo in the yard. The chopper then flew around and pushed out the big bulls onto a flat where the guys rolled them and tied them up. I remember being terrified as my husband jumped out of his catcher and ran in front of a bull, waving his hat at it to get his attention, so it would spin around ready for the other catcher to roll it. I'm glad he has quick reactions! We retired to the camp after trying up ten or so bulls. Everyone was gasping for a beer and there was only enough for one each which was somehow worse than no beers. The first beer gives you a taste for it, and when you’re 500 kins out in Arnhemland, there is no bottle close by for another carton and no way of quenching that thirst. We settled down for tea. I remember it was a good tasty stew, but for some reason it was full of grit and almost inedible. We rolled out the swags to sleep and it started to rain! The first proper rain of the wet and we had no cover. The boss got pick of the places and slept under the truck, we got the catcher. Four-wheel drives may be renowned for having high clearance, but when you’re claustrophobic and trying to sleep under one, there really doesn’t seem to be much room. I spent the night cramped and unable to roll over, blocked by the diff. It was the perfect end to a perfect day.

With the start of the wet, we had to pick up camp and leave. We were too far out to take the risk of getting flooded in and had to get all the plant shifted into town. So with a few weeks pay in our pockets, we were again homeless and jobless. A chance meeting with another mate gave us a floor to sleep on and another mate knew someone else who had "a few weeks' fencing to do" and so we headed out bush again. This time I had to cook for my keep. I can't have been very good, because when we came in for a break after two weeks the boss didn't want me out there again.

The fencing was another experience. Again we had a shearer's cot to sleep on. The guys got up before it was light so they could work in the cool, but I made the most of the luxury of having the bed (all two feet of it) to myself and stayed in bed until the sun came up. What drove me out then were the flies. We had a mosquito net, but somehow they still got in, and although I could put up with one or two, when they really woke me up I could stand it no longer. The camp was empty by then and there was nothing to do, nothing at all. Our camp was by the fence line. There was flat ground and red dirt and nothing but a fence line for miles. After they'd all left for the morning there was me and no-one else
around. It was build-up time and there was no shade, except the tarp rigged up in front of the boss’s “silver bullet”. I could sit out here, but you couldn’t read as you needed one hand constantly to wave the flies away. I’d retreat into the boss’s caravan, where he kept his air-con going all day. It was cool, but very depressing. Locking yourself inside a dingy caravan all day is not healthy. I read everything I could, even books I despised, even cereal packets, anything to pass the time. I only had to cook one meal a day and unless it was stew or something, I couldn’t start that until the evening, so the day dragged by. There was nowhere to walk to, no hills to explore. The nearest creek was three-quarter of an hour’s drive away and I had no transport. Finally the others would come back for lunch, but after being in the sun all morning all they wanted to do was sleep. With the boss back I was kicked out of the caravan and had to suffer the heat and flies with everyone else.

In the evenings I struggled to cook over the campfire and we had some very blackened steaks for tea. One day as I was reading inside I heard this crackling noise. I kept thinking it was the tarp flapping in the wind. I ignored it for a while, and eventually looked out the window. The wind had caught the camp fire and there was a ring of fire spreading from the campfire round the caravan and heading for the generator! I’d never seen a grass fire before, I was the only one there and hadn’t a clue what to do. I grabbed a bucket and filled bucket after bucket from the water tank and threw it on the fire. I was petrified and had visions of everything being burnt. Amazingly I put it out. I was very relieved. Of course when the others came back they thought it was funny. If I’d known better I could have put it out easily using a leafy branch to smother the flames. The grass was very short and there was no real danger, but of course I didn’t know that then.

The fencing lasted until Christmas and after that I was allowed to work. I grabbed the first job I could and went to work on a fruit farm, packing bananas, picking papaw and cutting asparagus. I was started on the huge sum of $8 an hour! After a few weeks I was promoted and got an increase to $8.75 an hour. It was hard work but it was good to be earning my own money again. My husband got a job at the meatworks in town and with two wages we could afford the luxuries in life, like chocolate biscuits! We also finally, after living in caravans, on people’s floors and shearsers’ cots, got our own one bedroom flat. It was heaven! I cleaned and cleaned it and added every homely touch I could. It was my own space at last.

The fruit farm was OK, but it was hard work, especially the asparagus picking. The rows were about 500 metres long and you had to work along bent over all the time cutting the asparagus off an inch underground. The true meaning of the phrase “back-breaking work” suddenly became clear to me. At the same time I began to find the sight of green bananas spinning on a wheel waiting to be packed nauseating; and then I discovered I was pregnant! I quit the fruit farm and instead got three jobs which earned me more money for less work. Again it was a case of taking whatever turned up and not believing you were too good for any job. My husband now had a lovely job, a “stop/go” man for the road crew painting the bridges around town. It was hot, it was boring, but it was paid. Although I could work, I couldn’t claim any benefits, so if we were on the dole, my husband could only claim for himself, not me too.

About this time someone told us about 500 acres for lease. We could have it rent free as long as we did some improvements. On that block, we put our first 20 head of cattle. I thought that would be that, and never dreamt that within about five years we would grow that 20 head to a herd of about 600. Of course it helped that the mine started up and for three long years my husband tolerated a job he hated to get us started, and he found some more country he’d like to lease. The owner really wanted to sell it, but, on meeting my husband when he went to look at some bulls, decided that here was a battler trying to get started and agreed to lease the country until it could be sold. As he said to my husband a while later, “There’s not many young men who have the testicles to have a go like you.” So with his help and a bit of finance we gradually built up the herd. It was and is hard work, requiring a lot of running around and the need to constantly check fences and waters and floodgates, even when you’d prefer to be some where else, but the experience you get from doing it is worth the hard work.

But despite all the hard work, I don’t think we could have done this anywhere else. In the Territory it’s the contacts, the people willing to give you a hand, and the types and variety of work, that truly make the Territory the Land of Opportunity.
The Queensland Gentleman:  
RMSS Gothenburg’s mystery passenger  
L. F. S. Browne

Synopsis
My essay has a twofold purpose - to report research and to entertain. It takes as its starting point a reference in John Lewis’s autobiography “Fought and Won” to the fate of the swindler who fleeced the Palmerston community of some $5,000 in the collapse of the Morning Star Gold Mining Company in June 1874. Throughout the relevant excerpt, John Lewis withholds the swindler’s name, referring to him only as “the Queensland gentleman.” Lewis ends the anecdote by saying: “However the poor fellow got his (just) deserts. He left as a passenger by the Gothenburg and that was the last ever seen of him.”

My curiosity was aroused to such an extent that I decided to see how easy (or how difficult) it would be to identify the Queensland gentleman. The resultant research journey took me from exotic (and I use that word in its literal sense) quartz specimens at the bottom of the Morning Star mine shaft to the half submerged decks of the RMSS Gothenburg viewed on Flinders Reef and, along the way, brought me face to face with some interesting, and hitherto little known, Territory characters.

The essay begins with an outline of the Gothenburg tragedy and its effects upon the tiny Palmerston community. It then presents the references to the literature to the Queensland gentleman and attempts to identify him (unsuccessfully) from the known facts of the shipwreck and its aftermath. It then moves on to examine the events surrounding the collapse of the Morning Star Company and the questionable behaviour of one Company proprietor in particular. From this and other evidence presented, it is ultimately possible to establish, beyond reasonable doubt, the identity of the Queensland gentleman.

On the morning of Wednesday, March 3 1875, a group of curious Palmerston settlers, diverted from their workaday tasks by the urgent tolling of the telegraph bell, converged upon the public notice board at the Port Darwin Telegraph Station to investigate the cause of the commotion. What they found struck fear into even the most stalwart heart. The settlement’s supply vessel, the royal mail steamer RMSS Gothenburg, which barely a fortnight before had departed Port Darwin for Adelaide via the Torres Straits with a full passenger list of some 88 Palmerston residents – men, women, and children – had been lost in a cyclone off the North Queensland coast or about February 25. There were few details of survivors. Four seamen adrift in the captain’s gig had been rescued by the steamer Leichhardt in the shipping lanes near Port Denison. Three lifeboats with 90 passengers were supposedly still adrift – and yet (and this was the most puzzling aspect of the telegram) the Leichhardt had abandoned the search! Those who could, sought solace in such real or imagined incon sistencies; those who could not, kept their own counsel.

It took several days and numerous telegrams before the main events of the tragedy were established with any degree of certainty. At 6 pm on the evening of Wednesday, February 24, in squally weather with limited visibility and a falling tide, RMSS Gothenburg had grounded on Flinders Reef, an outcrop of the Great Barrier Reef near the small coastal town of Bowen. Unbeknown to her
and created a separation in Port Darwin when exhibited. An astute and successful businessman always on the lookout for a good investment, Lewis had once attempted to inspect the Morning Star workings, but had been denied access to the shaft by a guard on duty at the site. A few weeks later (November 1873), Lewis was one of a group of potential investors (which included two victims of the Gothenberg; the editor of the Northern Territory Times and Gazette, Mr Richard Wells; and Palmerston businessman and French Vice-consul Monsieur Eduard Durand), who on visiting the mine by arrangement were:

allowed to descend the shaft, where one of the miners had a dish and was scraping up from the bottom of the shaft and taking dirt from the side with a little pick. He remarked, "You see now there is no deception about this; you can see me taking it out of the reef." The dish of stuff was taken to the top and carried to a water hole about half a mile away, where it was panned out, and it contained about four ounces of gold, some in nuggets and a great deal in quartz specimens... One of the directors — Captain (W.C.) Paul — was present, and when the dish was washed off he presented each of us with a valuable specimen. He must have given quite two ounces away. His co-director remarked that he did not think it fair to give so much gold in specimens; whereupon the honest old man (Captain Paul) said — "Oh, there's plenty more where that came from. If we get this quantity out of one dishful what will we get out of a thousand tons?"

After we had left, the editor (Wells) said to me, "What did you understand by that man saying 'You see I am taking it out of the reef; there is no deception in it'?" I told him my opinion, which proved to be correct. They sent ten tons to the battery... and got about twenty ounces of gold. They afterwards sent fifty tons and got only three ounces...

By this time some of the directors realized they had been sold and a monster shareholders' meeting was held at Port Darwin, at which Mr Radford (Thomas Radford was another Gothenberg victim) presided. He was a straightforward honorable South Australian, and he explained that he went into the mine in good faith, but discovered later that it had been salted, and the men who had done it deserved to be punished. The shareholders knew Mr Radford would not be a party to any fraud and exonerated him. The Queensland gentleman who had no doubt been the manipulator, stated that this was only one of hundreds of mines that had been disappointing. In how many other mines had they struck rich patches of gold and then the gold had given out? He was quite right but in this case the stone with the gold in it had been carried there and was not in the original deposit. However the poor fellow got his deserts. He left as a passenger by the Gothenberg and that was the last ever seen of him.

So there it was, the writing on the wall: the one and only reference to the swindler's untimely end. I was intrigued. Who was this "Queensland gentleman?" How difficult would it be to identify him? Were there other clues in other books?

Where better to start the hunt than Ernestine Hill's vast repository of oral tradition about the rough and tumble pioneering days. "The Territory. Surely in her exiled ramblings through the Territory's wildest and most remote places, some weather-beaten old cricketer knocking back a nobler of sunset rum had spilled the beans on the Queensland gentleman's last moments aboard R.M.S. Gothenberg. Regrettably, no. There were harrowing scenes set against "the valkyrie ride of the gale" of little Monsieur Durand darting about the half submerged deck "making shrill outcry that someone had stolen his Gladstone bag with £3000 in gold;" of Judge Wearing enveloped "in a conclave of unearthly green," shouting unintelligible words before being swept overboard; of "the half drowned forms of fourteen men clinging to the foremast, in the smouldering cyclone dawn." But of the Morning Star scandal and the Queensland gentleman who caused it, not a word.

There was a (vaguely remembered) story of the floating corpse of a man with a money-belt full of gold still around its waist, which should have been in Hill — but wasn’t. A fitting end for a swindler, I thought. Surely that was the Queensland gentleman’s body? Alas no. When I eventually relocated the story — in Digging, Squatting, and Pioneering Life (of all places) — Harriet Daly had already claimed the body as that of her good friend, the life and soul of every ship’s saloon, Monsieur Eduard Durand.

Gold-filled money-belts were the instruments of death for two other passengers who refused to part with them, according to Hector Holthouse (Cyclone). Scrambling onto the ship’s rail to make a leap for a lifeline was one Charley Lebane (whose name incidentally does not appear on any of the passenger lists) "with about 300 ounces of gold in a canvas belt around his waist." Ignoring the exhortations of his mates in the boat to discard the gold, Lebane jumped "and fell a short stretch. His outstretched fingers missed the gunwale by an inch and he plummeted down into the ocean like a stone.

Jewish passenger Simon Lifgar met a similar fate when he refused to discard "a large quantity of gold stored in a belt around his waist and in his pockets," and was soon washed from his precarious perch in the rigging into the sea where he sank immediately.

Here at last were two prime suspects. Lifgar (correct name Lissar) was none other than the notorious Foo Foo, gambler, gumman, and part owner of the Royal Mail Hotel at Pine Creek. Originally employed as a cook with Patterson’s Overland Telegraph party at the Jepner River, Foo Foo’s fiery temperament and gambling proclivities soon led to a violent confrontation with a fellow worker. In the words of S.W. Herbert:

A serious quarrel occurred here [Butt’s Camp] between our cook and a fellow gambler, over a game of cards. Foo-Foo the cook, (a fictitious name) sic, a Polish Jew, attacked his opponent with a pocket derringer with intent to kill. He was so violent and persistent that after being separated it became necessary for someone to protect the other man from further attacks. After leaving Mr Rutti’s party two months later Foo Foo went to Palmerston and gained his living by gambling. On my return to the NT as a gold prospector, I did not see Foo Foo for he was up country searching for gold, so no doubt by using a pack of cards. Mr (James) Fitzgerald, one of the survivors of the "Gothenberg"... informed me that he saw Foo Foo on deck fix his heavy belt of gold around his waist and then deliberately jump into the sea.

According to eye-witness accounts, Foo Foo was terrified of the ocean and lost his nerve quite early in the night. "The only case of loud lamenting I heard," James Fitzgerald is reported as saying, "was from one man who had strapped a quantity of gold around his waist - Simon Lissar."

Still hot on Foo Foo’s trail, I suddenly found I had come full circle with the discovery of the following news item, published in the Northern Territory Times & Gazette on September 9, 1876.
It will be remembered that last February, twelve months, the Bunyip was chartered by the Government to go to the rescue of any survivors of the wreck of the Gothenberg who might be on the surrounding islands. On that occasion a sum of £240 in notes was found in a belt on the body of a man (supposed here to be Foo Foo) [sic] which came to the surface when the Bunyip reached the wreck. This money has now been divided (amongst the Bunyip’s crew).

Perhaps my first insight had been on target after all; perhaps the body with the money-belt was that of the Queensland gentleman. But to be anything more than mere speculation, corroborating evidence was needed, and by now Foo Foo’s trail was stone cold. Of Lebans I could find nothing, the most likely explanation for which is that Lebans and Lizzars were one and the same person. Giffhouse (or his sources) had probably used a corrupt version of one of the many variants of the name “Lazzar” appearing on the passenger lists.

So much for the actual shipwreck. It was now time to delve into the Morning Star, and there, unlike John Lewis, I struck pay dirt almost immediately. The Northern Tertitory Times & Gazette on November 7, 1873, noted:

The Morning Star Reef is one of the latest discoveries in the gold-bearing country. (Henry) Seale and party are the discoverers and the situation of the reef is about 6 miles from the Howley Reef, and south of the Brittanica line... What is most noticeable is that with the exception of five or six hundred shares the whole of the number have been taken up by the promoters and by (ordinary) working men and others in the Northern Territory... The specimens brought down are very good and pronounced to be the best which have been shown in Palmerston.

The mine itself was located on or near a lease at Fountain Head, which appears to have been originally owned by William McMinn [sic] (or by companies with which he was associated). By 1873 the Fountain Head lease had either been abandoned by McMinn or sold to a syndicate of Queenslanders, two of whom, as we have seen, visited S.W. Herbert in mid 1873 with the unique quartz specimens. The Company prospectus describes the tenement as:

Claims 4 and 5 (each of twenty acres), south of the Alexandra Prospecting Company’s famous Claims on the Brittanica Reef... On Claim 5 a shaft has been sunk to a depth of 45 feet and then driven, and the reef has been cut showing stone exceedingly rich.

It was this shaft that Messrs Durand, Lewis & Wells had descended in November 1873. Wells also described the visit, in an editorial dated July 10, 1874, in which he contrasts the qualities of two ore samples from the claim.

No. 1 sample is nearly pure white and is thickly veined with gold. This is one of the “noble specimens” such as delighted the eye (of the beholder) last September when the Company was floated and when all the shareholders saw visions of fabulous wealth drawing near to them. This is the stone, in fact, which was brought up from the Morning Star shaft whenever visitors were present and we ourselves saw some of it picked out by Mr Seale himself last November. In fact we were presented with one of the noble specimens ourselves.

The Promoters of the new company - Henry Seale, John Rabbich, William McMinn, and Chas Herring - were each to receive 5,000 fully paid up £1 shares, and the Proprietors (who seem to be either the Promoters or the Discoverers, or both), £5,000 in cash. Two of the most experienced mining men in the Territory at that time, Captains G.M. Newman and W.C. Paul, had reported favourably on the prospect. Captain Paul had no hesitation in saying the claim would yield at least 25 ounces of gold per ton and had the greatest confidence in recommending it to investors and capitalists. Captain Newman, having seen some spoil washed which yielded several very rich golden specimens, said he had not the slightest doubt that with a reasonable outlay of capital other valuable reefs would be discovered.

Notwithstanding such expert opinions, tongues were soon wagging in Palmerston about the authenticity of the “noble specimens”, a glittering collection of which was by now on display at the ES&A Bank. Such rumors were strongly contested by Captains Newman and Paul at the first shareholders’ meeting at Edwards’ Restaurant on Saturday, November 8, 1873.

[Captain] Paul addressed the meeting in confirmation of all that had been advanced by the promoters; and Mr T. Radford testified also to the value of the property from personal inspection and the groundlessness of the statements that had gained currency. Mr H. Seale’s ideas for developing the mine were enunciated by the Chairman and the announcement of his (Seale’s) appointment as mining manager was received with applause.10

“Palmerstonians are jubilant,” crowed “Rambler” in his Town Talk column in the Northern Territory Times & Gazette. “Have they not raised a company unto themselves? The Morning Star rises into fame as the first company formed in the Northern Territory. Adelaide has been left in the cold, whereas Northern Territory shareholders rejoice much.”

The jubilation was short lived. The source of the “noble specimens”, the 45 foot shaft on Claim No. 5, collapsed shortly thereafter. Undaunted, Mr Seale:

set to work again and sank another shaft from which after a time he was able to reach the drive out of which the golden quartz had been taken; but alas! there was no more of it to be met with; the gold had entirely disappeared. - "A moment bright, then gone forever." 15

Eventually a load of some three tons of ore from the Morning Star was sent for crushing to Captain Newman’s battery. Accompanying the shipment was Mr Henry Seale; accompanying Mr Henry Seale was his specimen pouch from which, according to one Thomas Carmichael, he took a few samples and popped them into the stamp box, a serious breach of mining etiquette which later prompted Mr Carmichael to state with unconscious irony that “it was only fair to let the shareholders and the general public know the way things are done in the Northern Territory.”

By June 1874 the bubble had well and truly burst. The Company manager, Mr Adcock, informed an angry meeting of shareholders that there was only £10 left in the till. It would be better, he said, if they all folded their tents and silently stole away. Mr A. Croe wanted to know what had become of the capital of 625,000. The Chairman, Mr William McMinn, said that everyone should be aware that only six shillings per share had been paid up. By anybody’s reckoning that still left £7,490 to be accounted for. Mr V.L. Solomon was all for retaliation. He said he would be one to put down money to bring the offenders to justice. Many in Adelaide had been ruined and begged by such conduct; and it would be only right to expose all trickery and dirty work in connection
with this case so that the guilty might be made to suffer. Mr Seale loudly declared that there had been nothing wrong; the stone now being raised was identical to the stone raised from the first shaft; he would assert positively that it was so; most decidedly. To a chorus of hear, hear, William McMinn told Henry Seale to his face that the whole thing was a complete swindle. To loud laughter and thunderous applause, Henry Seale tendered his resignation. It was probably the last time in Palmerston town that anybody spoke to Henry Seale.

The Morning Star affair was not the first Territory gold mining scandal; nor would it be the last. Bubble companies such as the Golden Reef and the Larrikeyah continued to trade on the Adelaide Stock Exchange and attract gullible investors. Known (and sometimes admired) swindlers such as the infamous Firman Deacon continued to operate with impunity. But Henry Seale was finished. His mistake had been to prey on his own community. As an incredulous Richard Wells put it:

Hitherto it has been supposed that it was necessary for deluded shareholders to live at a long way off, and that distance lent enchantment to the view. But now we find that all the materials for a first class "speculation" may exist on the spot; and that it may be as easy to "get at" people who live within a few miles of the quartz reefs as it is to humbug those who live in Adelaide.

Henry Seale never did get his day in court. But not long after his public denunciation and humiliation at the hands of the shareholders, he defended himself in writing

Sir - At the meeting of shareholders held at Edwards on Tuesday last, the feeling of the meeting seemed to be that a swindle had been perpetrated by the promoters; and as I happen to be one of them, I feel myself bound in deference to make a public explanation. Mr McMinn was certainly present as well but he pleaded ignorance and assured the shareholders that he had been easily "got at". Mr McMinn knew just as much about the original prospects of the Morning Star as I did, and up to the present time has had as many opportunities as he wished for satisfying himself as to the value of the ground... Several practical miners and managers have visited the reef, inspected it, washed stuff for themselves and reported on the prospects of the property; and until it can be proved that these reports are false and that the gold was placed in the ground, the shareholders are not justified in condemning any person connected with the claim as a swindler, no matter how they have been disappointed in their expectations.

Which, if nothing else, suggests that Henry Seale's education had been somewhat above average.

On the basis of the evidence thus far there could be little doubt that Henry Seale was the Queensland gentleman. But what evidence was there - apart from the seminal statement in John Lewis's \(\text{\textcopyright} 1976\) - that Henry Seale was a passenger aboard \(\text{\textcopyright} 1976\)? The answer - if there was one - had to lie in the passenger lists - and their name, unfortunately, was Legion.

Passenger lists from many diverse sources were analysed and combined by Helen J Wilson to produce a definitive list of both victims and survivors for her article \(\text{\textcopyright} 1976\). Passenger No. 58 on Wilson's list is recorded as SEARLE, mate, [nothing known] (not in official NT list) \(\text{\textcopyright} 1976\).
out genuine specimens, which he secreted in his pouch. We are not told how these specimens assayed, but the tone of the narrative implies that they differed from those taken in the dish to the waterhole.

As a young journalist in Sydney, Ernestine Hill had a liaison with her employer (Sir) Frank Packer which resulted in her becoming pregnant. To hide the scandal, she was sent North with a rowing commission to report on what she saw and experienced. Thus supported she was able to visit practically all the remote settlements in Northern Australia.

Sunset rum was a mixture of methylated spirits and kerosene, flavoured with Worcesters sauce, ginger and sugar.

S. W. Herbert. Early Experiences in the Northern Territory, 1870 - 1875.

The Melbourne Argus, Saturday March 20, 1875.

One of the Territory's first colonists, McMillan had risen to celebrity status in South Australia in 1865 following his escape from Finnis's Palmeston (at Escape Cliffs at the mouth of the Adelaide River) in an open boat (the Fanny Hips) which be and others sailed to Geraldton (WA). McMillan was the Superintendent of the Northern Section of the Overland Telegraph Line during its (initial) construction phase and returned to the Territory in 1872/73 as Manager of the Alexandra Gold Mining and Prospecting Company.

Published in the South Australian Register October 6, 1873.

Northern Territory Times & Gazette

Northern Territory Times & Gazette, November 14, 1873.

Northern Territory Times & Gazette, November 14, 1873.

Northern Territory Times & Gazette, Friday, June 12, 1874. A sample of Mr Richard Wells' humour.

Northern Territory Times & Gazette, June 26, 1874.

Northern Territory Times & Gazette, June 5, 1874.

Northern Territory Times & Gazette, June 12, 1874.

Northern Territory Times & Gazette, June 5, 1874. Henry Seale's stocks were so low in the community that the only way Richard Wells would publish his letter of rebuttal was if he (Seale) paid for it. The letter was published as an advertisement.


Kath Manzie Youth Literary Award

Fishing with the Ferals
Lorna Roberts

The old Daihatsu chugged along through the bright humid bush land. She naturally would chug with three heavy bodies in it ready for a fishing day out. The Daihatsu was not just a boring old car. She was a female and her name was Lady Di or the Winfield Blue Packet. Her appearance was as if someone had just pushed her rear end and front end in together so she looked like a blue square with wheels, and I'll tell you - she's bloody bouncy!

Bouncing along like a bilby in the bush we drove, Barry, Dad and I. Both of them were sucking on cans of VB beer at 10 o'clock in the morning. Barry's my Dad's mate and he fiddles around with the GPS that Dad bought after we got lost out in the middle of nowhere. Dad just cruises along, talking about how much a son of a gun the O'Lady Di is, showing off and making smart alec cracks about how Barry would not be able to bring his flash Nissan out here.

Finally, we are there! The first one out of the Lady Di gets the best fishing spot. We all rush out. Barry and I always have our fishing rods ready before we go, although Dad does not. The long grass had shot up from the last drunch of rain, so I am walking through metre-high grass thinking things like, What if there is a crocodile sunbathing here and I step on it? Or What if there is a snake going to take a strike at me? Now I know to always wear a hat so that if I happen to step on a snake, I'll have my hat to chuck at it, so that I can make a meal of my hat, rather than me.

The pandanus is so thick on each side of the riverbank it is full on job trying to fish through them. There is a strong smell of pigs and mud. Barry's body odor is mildly less offensive. The smell of rain that has sunk in the soil will always remind me of the old bush smell as well as Barry and Dad.

Barry and Dad are the typical Aussie Territorians, the scuzzy old thongs, Dad's blue stubbies and Barry's old football shorts. Their big beef guns hang over the shorts. In my words they are just plain feral.

Barry's wavy mullet hair flows in the wind as we bounce to the next fishing spot along the river. Barry jumps out of the Winfield Blue Packet and heads down to the riverbank and I follow him. I watch Barry try to get further down to the river. All the grass is bent over making the ground look flat: flat it is not! Crash! In one second flat Barry is sliding down on his rear into the crocodile waters. He jumps up to look around and make sure that nobody saw his embarrassing moment. Sorry, Barry, I saw it, and I was holding my stomach with stitches of laughter. Embarrassed, Barry pointed at me and said laughingly, "Shit up, Lorna." It took me about an hour to tell Dad what had just happened because I had to take breaks from laughing. I still tease Barry to this day about this incident.

We continued fishing and with one sharp strike across the other side of the river Barry was reeling in a real barramundi, which is called a saratoga. His colors reflected in the sunlight and he was big and beautiful but no good to eat – too bony. We took some photos and then chucked him back in the river.
The sight of two blokes in stubbies bender over is terrifying. One thing that I hate is when blokes bend over and their bum cracks are always showing. Why should fat blokes inflict such terror on poor innocent me?

Dad recently bought Bazza a knife. Barry calls it a Real Knife. Dad has an ancient little knife and he believes that this one is the real knife. Dad chuck his knife around in the fire, in the trees, acting like he’s killing a king brown snake. Trying to act like Adelaide River’s Crocodile Dundee. Barry won’t chuck his knife around though, he says his is too good to chuck around. Although he did have to confess that his Real Knife’s handle broke and he was devastated when he realized it was just a crusty knife after all. I told him that it must have been a Real Crappy Knife.

We recently made a name up for Barry. We do call him Bazza but his fishing name is Barratoga. So when Barry gets lost again in the bush, you will hear those names being yelled out. My Dad’s name is Bill but Barry calls him Billy. So when we are out fishing those are their code names.

Dad and Barry drink beer after beer after beer and I drink my coke and water whilst fishing, so of course they repeat their stories, like “the fish was this big”, and the arms get wider through the stories. I usually catch all the fish, whilst they catch a big fat zero.

It’s time for lunch, so we stop near our usual spot, which is a little waterfall. Dad fiddles around with the corned beef, biscuits and chillies. Dad and Barry have a food cycle, it goes – corned beef, biscuit, chillie, beer, corned beef, biscuit, chillie and more beer. I tell you, they must have sore bums on the toilet at night. Anyway there’s nothing better than a mouthful of flies as they are always hanging around your food.

The sun starts to build up its heat and it feels like we are the only ones that he is beating it down on because it is so intense. We drive on and on in the little Winfield Blue Packet.

“The stupid idiot!” We got bogged in a little pig pool of mud. Dad spins the wheels out trying to get out of the bog. “Go put a few sticks under the wheels, Bazza,” says Dad.

Barry jumps out and does as he is told. “All right, Billy?” Barry yells and with a few fast spins of the wheels Barry is covered in mud from head to toe. Luckily Dad and I were in the Daihatsu and we were laughing so hard that it hurt. Barry yelled once again. “Shut up, Lorna!” It wasn’t a great loss anyway because he was in his crappy clothes as usual. I tease Barry every minute of the day saying things like, “Don’t trip over Barry,” and “Watch your step.” We finally got out of the bog thanks to Bazza. Ha, ha, ha!

We usually walk about seven kilometers on a day’s fishing, but I am pretty sure that Barry walks about ten, because his fishing lure spends more time out of the water on the other side of the river stuck up on a tree rather than in the water. He therefore has to find a way to the other side to retrieve it. Barry’s favorite lure is called a B82 so sometimes they have to shoot the lure out of the tree rather than leave it there.

Dad let me shoot a few shots of the .22 rifle. I aimed it at a coke can. Barry jokingly said that I could put the coke can on his head and shoot at it but he quickly changed his mind in case I took him up on his offer. Anyway I shot the hot little bullet right through the can – what a shot!

One day, Barry was walking in the long grass and he stopped on a big pig. It screamed its lungs out. So did Barry but with different words of course, “F*#! off!” There was a bunch of little baby pigs as well and Barry ran around like an idiot trying to catch one for me. He did catch one, but I wasn’t allowed to keep it. Of course Barry felt at home mixing with his own kind. Ha, ha.

Just as we were heading home, there was a little creek that we had to cross.

Dad wanted to go around it, but Barry being Barry said, “Go on, Billy, you big wuss, just cross it.” So we did, and the car ended up being full of water.

“Oh, good one, Bazza!” So what does Bazza do? Blame it on little Lorna, of course. We then had to use the winch to get us out. Barry thought that it was picture perfect.

At the end of the day we go home and tell our adventurous stories to his lovely wife Anne (who, I might add, has to put up with him all the time). I laugh at the stories the heroes told about the one that got away but really, I know the truth.

I would have to say that Barry has the mind of a dippy blonde although definitely not the figure. I do love going fishing with the fellas as it’s great entertainment value. I saw a drunk rolling down the river bank, and I saw a mad man chucking his knife into fires, and I also saw a pig chasing away his own kind. What more could you want, for another Crocodile Dundee movie starring Barry and Bill? The rumors from Hollywood are that there is a carry-on to the movie Crocodile Dundee to be set in Adelaide River.
A Scary Boat Ride
Jake Hanlon

 Crabbing in an isolated area is a tough heavy-duty job for a man. My father is a crabber and he's a hard man to work for. Most men that work for him end up running away because it's too much for them. As a ten-year-old boy my dad put me in charge of mending and taking care of fifteen crab pots.

 My family and I live in the Gulf of Carpentaria on North Island. There are six other islands around us. The rule was, if you didn't work you wouldn't get fed at night. So my brothers and I had to do most of the jobs around the house. There was never any time to sit down; the only rest you got was at night when you'd finished the dishes.

 Horse meat is what the crabs crave but there are no horses where we live. Mud crabbing is the best eating crabs in the world. Mud crabbing is a dirty dangerous job. If your motor breaks down there is no chance of getting a lift back home or swimming. The worst thing that could happen is running into rough surf with a faulty motor. You would probably end up flipping the boat and would have to sit and wait on the keel until someone finds you.

 Mud crabs have blunt claws and can jam on like a clamp. In four years I have been bitten by three mud crabs on three different fingers and, boy, do they hurt! To remove the claws you have to use screwdrivers and a hammer to break the claw away from your finger.

 We planned to build a tourist resort with a few more little huts around it. One day Dad asked me to load up the boat with cement and take it round to the corner of the island, which was called Paradise Bay. He told me to carry the bags of cement up the beach to a little hut that we were going to fix up.

 Anyway, it took three hours of non-stop carrying 40-kg cement bags on both shoulders through the water and into the boat. After the boat was loaded I started her up and took off round the island.

 When I got round the corner, the white caps started rolling in and they were pounding in to the side of the boat so I slowed the boat to half throttle.

 My thoughts were of that Aboriginal man that was taken by a croc and the only part they found of him was his arm. If the boat tipped over now I would probably be bitten in four different pieces by sharks or crocs.

 The cement bags were staked in the middle of the boat and I could hardly see over them. My eye caught something. It was a cement bag that had fallen to the right hand side of the boat and the waves were crashing on the left. I knew what was going to happen because I have already been in a boat that has flipped.

 I wasn't that scared because I have been through the same thing before.

 Another bag dropped on the right side, then another. I felt the tilt in the boat and three cement bags fell to the same side. I waited for a few more seconds and when the boat was just about to flip I jumped into the air like I was sky diving.

 When I burst out of the water the waves were crashing down on me. I couldn't tell where I was. I saw the boat a couple of meters away lying upside down and I swam as hard as I could. I jumped on the bottom of the boat where the flotation was.
Let Sleeping Cows Stand
Briony Doyle

“She can’t get up!”

It’s true, she can’t, but I can’t stop laughing, and Jenny’s screaming and convulsing as we run down Mitchell Street towards the Mall. I have to stop outside Sizzler to catch my breath. I’d been choking on my own lungs for the past five minutes, laughing and running isn’t good for ya.

Jenny’s staring in the window, her eyes widen and she’s got that lusty smile happening. “Johno, let’s get a sub.”

It’s my last ten bucks, but we split a foot long and a long neck.

Jenny’s getting a bit drunk, cause she could never handle her piss, and there’s a smudge of gravy on her chin, and she’s singing Barney’s a bit too loud so I try to change the subject. “That was a good one tonight,” I say.

“Yeah,” she goes, laughing now, “it’s all to do with the size of the back pack, I reckon. Some of ‘em have smaller ones, so they might get up, if they’re good, an’ chase ya.”

“Yeah,” I say, pissing myself. “If you’ve got a big one, you can’t get it up.”

Jenny rolls her eyes at me. “Come on, Johno, we better get home.”

We walk down to the bus stop. Not talking, because we don’t have to.

Me and Jenny grew up together, out at Tennant Creek. We went to school there. She liked Rick Springfield and I liked her. We used to sit on the trampoline at her mum’s and smoke holiday cigarettes and make out.

Every Friday night we rode our bikes out of town to tip cows. We got the idea off watching Footloose. I’d pretend to be Kevin Bacon and she’d pretend to be that hot minister’s daughter. Sometimes we’d go with friends. Sometimes we’d go alone. If we wanted to be romantic.

Jenny had a real good technique; she was light on her feet. The cows never knew what hit ‘em till they were on their backs and hollerin’. I fell in love with her in a paddock. It was the first time we went cow tippin’. We were out there with some mates. Dwayne and Sylvie. Dwayne had some whisky. We all got drunk and dirty and Sylvie fell in a cow pat and spoiled her favorite tracksuit.

I remember sitting under a tree, puffing from running around so much and just watching Jenny. She was chasing this calf and singing guns and roses. It was a full moon and she looked like she was glowing. I wanted to kiss her so badly, but I was pretty shy back then.

Later on we were all just sitting around and talking. Sylvie was just wearin’ her bra and knickers so Dwayne gave her his clothes to wear. She never put them on but. They went off to the other side of the paddock and left me and Jen alone. We sat there in silence for ages. I kept trying to think of things to say to her, but nothing sounded good enough.

Jenny finished off the whisky, and after a while she said, “Do you wanna make out, Johnno?”

After that she was my girlfriend. We did everything together. Sometimes I think living in the country like that would have been a bit boring if it wasn’t for Jenny. Sometimes we’d fight. Like the time she kissed my brother. But then we’d just end up out at a field somewhere tipping cows, and it would all be good again.

I left school in Year 10 and started working for my uncle at the milk bar. Sometimes Jenny would wag and come and sit with me and I’d give her free lemonade.

We moved to Darwin when Jenny finished school. I joined the dole queue and Jenny scanned groceries at Woolworth’s. At night we’d sit on the empty floor of our Rapid Creek apartment apartment and sweat and watch Footloose over and over and over. Draining every last second out of vicarious thrill. Once we tried to jump the fence at Berrinah Research Farm but Jenny got electrocuted and we called it a night.

I could feel us drifting. Jenny became quiet and disinterested. Every night I dreamt of the way she used to look, in the paddock, tipping cows. Graceful and elegant as she pirouetted towards her prey. But as the months went by Jenny became more and more clumsy; she dropped cans over the register at work, she tripped over the doormat. Her kisses were awkward and wet. She joked about it. “The curse of the cows” we called it, and laughed. But it wasn’t very funny.

The saving grace came on a Sunday. Sipping mango juice on the street and commenting how the back-packers were like a herd. A herd in need of rounding up.

Jenny looks up at me with a wicked sparkle in her eyes and that smudge of gravy dried on her chin. “Next week I want to break the record.” She giggles.

And that’s why I love her. And that’s why tonight, we’ll go home and watch Footloose and listen to Iron Maiden and make love on the floor. And why next week, we’ll be back on Mitchell Street tipping back packers, and the cows will be sleepin’ in the fields.
On Murulax and Saving the World
Briony Doyle

This is the story of how I came to understand my mother, and subsequently find my calling in life. I relate it to you now in contemplation of her death and my peace prize. It serves as a written eulogy and a literate manifestation of my lamentation and glory.

It took place in childhood, back in the days when they used to call me box boy, on account of my security box, which I would take everywhere, and crawl into when feeling harassed.

My mother had been summoned to the school, on account of my prepubescent peculiarities, my head lice, agrophobia, etc. She arrived in proper attire, guns blazing to see my principal, and after the meeting, from which I was precluded, she gathered up my box and me, never to return. They had tested her patience, she said, on the long walk home.

My father, reduced to servient levels during their relationship, shied away from us at the door to our cottage. He remarked on the weather and nothing else. I retired to the cupboard with my box, and played prison games for the duration of the day, though, in reflection, the activity could have lasted months.

My mother went on outings during the day and would bring back a task to keep me occupied during the hours of her return. They started off as simple. To sort all the black jellybeans away from the colored because amused was her desired flavour, or to collect all the cockroaches and moths from the corners of the house and prepare them for the animal’s daily meal. Slowly however, my mother seemed to tire of these tasks and would order me further and further from the house on errands the design of which could only be understood by her. Collect something red from the washing line of every house on the street, or a snail from the garden of each residence in the town. I brought my box on these missions and crawled into it on sight of any children my own age. I suspected they knew me however, for they always cried out box boy, box boy, with childish malignancy.

When my mother’s errands began sending me further overland to cities and towns, often seven days walk in distance, I started to suspect she wanted rid of me.

On one of these missions, I began to understand her. I was at Melbourne zoo collecting scat when fortune had it that I chanced upon my father. I was shocked to notice how his countenance changed once out of my mother’s company; he no longer shrank and shriveled but walked upright and dignified. I waved and found him to be more amiable than was usual. He bought me a drink at the zoo kiosk and related to me a tale, which changed my views completely.

You see; my mother was always constipated, her gastric problems an attribute of her personal etiquette. My mother never, in her whole life, farted in public; not even a silent whisper of gas was released from her sphincter in the seventy-three years of her life. What was worse was that she never even used a public toilet. Rather than suffer the indignities and health risks of an alien toilet she would hold on until she was at home, sitting on the wooden seat of her own waste throne. Then it was a different matter. My mother omitted such foul sounds and odours from behind that door, olfactory assault if you happened to be next in line. She gurgled, popped, strained and splattered on this toilet and nowhere else as long as she lived.

As my Father explained this to me I began to understand. For who could live sanely, under the tremendous weight of a fear of their own body, and guilt at its functions? He told me that we were sent from the house so that she might fully utilise its amenities without fear of eavesdropper’s ridicule.

I decided that it was my duty to help her, to aid her emissions and save her sanity. I began my work straight away. It was two years before I discovered an unrefined version of what you know now as Dr Morrison’s Marvelous Murulax, my peace-prize-winning medical breakthrough. It was tested on my mother, and this, I believe, is a reason for its great success.

I noted how our life at home began to change as my mother started consuming the formula with her morning gruel. Her sheer physiognomy seemed to undergo transformation. My father was allowed back into the marital bed and I, having restored stability to my own life, came out from the cupboard and left my box in the corner.

The succeeding years went by in studies and relative peace, my mother’s strange habits all but vanishing, and health restored to our family. It is, as is outlined in my research, a common problem amongst our more anal-retentive friends (my mother included) that physical constipation spreads and causes an emotional constipation detrimental to both kin and country. In my early twenties I was able to register the problem on sight and always had the formula handy to hand out on detection. Soon our town was the happiest in the region, smiles from bus drivers, relaxed shop assistants and general merriment throughout.

Alas, my mother was taken ill, and it was quite beyond my capabilities to help her. My father and I decided that she should be admitted to a nursing home forthwith. I gave the Sacred Heart’s nurses my mother and the formula, and bade them take good care.

She died three months later, after having abstained from excretion the duration of her stay. Her kidneys exploded. When questioned, the nurses told me it was their policy not to administer outside medicines.

I made it my mission from that day forth to see my formula in cabinets in every hospice and hospital the world over. The rest is better known fact, and brings us to my peace prize following Murulax’s part in ending both the Middle East struggles and the Australian condition tall poppy syndrome.

I will not blow my own trumpet however, for I merely desired to tell you a little of my mother, and why I no longer dwell in boxes or cupboards.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writers’ Award

Suppression
John Bodey

“Hi, Sam, I’m ringing about that Indigenous Writers’ forum you lot are holding in the near future.”
“What can we do for you?”
“I’d like to know who the speakers are?”
“Well, there’s such and such and such and such, and such and such the publisher will be speaking on publishing issues…”
“How many?”
“I’m not sure.”
“Who else?”
“Such and such and such and such…”
“Sam? Aren’t all these speakers women?”
“Yeah…”
“And aren’t they all white?”
“Yeah…”
“Are there any blacks speaking?”
“Yeah, such and such who runs the indigenous publishing house from such and such…”
“Hang on, the last time I rang that mob a white woman was in charge.”
“I heard they got a new one.”
“And she’s black?”
“I think so.”
“Who’s organising the forum?”
“Such and such.”
“Is she black?”
“No.”
“Are any black men going to speak?”
“Are you kidding?”
“So it’s an Indigenous Writer’s forum organised by white women and run by white women discussing black people’s writing issues.”
“Yeah.”
“Don’t we have a say?”
Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha, the cynical laughter sounded loudly in my ear. Scary, I sat collecting my thoughts as he regained control.
“Did you have an issue to discuss, Brother?”
“I thought I did.”
“Run it past me.”
“Well,………”

When an Aboriginal Elder sits at a camp fire, or hunches, sipping a luke-warm pannikin of tea on an ancient wire, broken these long years, sprung Army bed, enthralling an enrapt gathering of members of his tribe, or in this day and age,

Community, he doesn’t have seated beside him another blackfella who touches him lightly on a withered leg to interrupt the flow of his words and say:
“Hey, you can’t talk about sex in front of all these children, you can’t tell stories of violence, it’s not the done thing, it’s immoral, unethical and against protocols, guidelines and censorship rules and regulations as laid down…”
At that moment, Jackie Jackie is laying into his wife, belting the shit out of her, smashing his bony fists into her already pulverised misshapen face, from past times and the many frays he’s taken his frustration out on her. She screams her lungs out, her blood flows, he’s using every vile, offensive, adjectival invective he’s ever learned from his learned colleagues, the Whiteman, handed down through the years by his people’s association with the white race, words that could never be written in the Whiteman’s ‘good’ book, nor were never heard before the coming of the Whiteman therefore was never a part of his own lingua.
“How come?” says the storyteller, the sounds of conflict just another background noise. Off in the night dogs scrap loudly seeking their rights in their own social hierarchy.
“It’s called censorship.”
“Oh, all right.”
The people grow restless, he continues his yarn.

Nor does he have another blackfella sitting on his other side, dozing, or is he listening with silent intent?… He reaches and touches the other leg.
“Now what?” asks the teller of tales
“You can’t chop and change your tenses, you either tell the story in the first tense or stick to the third, you can’t flick from the tenth to the seventh tense and then go back to the first…”
“What the fuck are you on about?” says the teller.
“It’s called grammar…”
“Fuck that grammar,” groans a voice from the dark, “get on with the story.”

“You know,” says Sam after a pause, “I think you have something, I think you should come and put your point across. How about ringing this number and ask for such and such and tell her I told you to ring.”
Dumb me, there are always suckers. I rang the number, a cultured voice answers, I relate the same narrative I’d just given Sam. Then she cuts this poor little black poppy down and tears my conjectural thoughts to pieces.
“Publishers aren’t interested in your ideas, they are there to sell books and all your hypothetical issues mean nothing, selling books is…”
You supercilious white bitch, I think as I hang up the phone while she rambles on, I’d love to have you in my camp, you mightn’t like my methods of teaching, but you’d sure learn about suppression.
Mixed Relations
Des Rogers

When I was about, say, three or four years old, living in my home town of Alice Springs, I'd stand every morning on the corner of Warburton Street and Lindsey Avenue. Immaculately clothed in a stiff grey shirt and shorts, and shiny black strapped sandals, I'd hold tightly the hand of my Mother. Well, maybe it wasn't Mum, but one of my many Aunty's. This old blue van would suddenly squeal to a halt in a huge cloud of smoke and car fumes. Engulfed, we cough uncontrollably and with tears running down our cheeks I'm shoved into the back compartment. BANG! The van's huge sliding door slams shut. Off we'd shoot, desperately trying to grab hold of anything. Me and a couple of other kids sliding around the smooth floor, ramming into the sides with shrieks of pain. Unperturbed, the driver charges onto his next stop. We pick up kids from all over town, and as the van fills, I'm wedged into a corner, quietly staring at this mixture of colours.

Pulling up at the shed, we'd pile out and run screaming out words that made no sense to me. Even today, I still wonder what the hell they were all shouting about. Alongside the shed, high on two steel poles, swayed a large bell. A frayed, tattered rope dangled some way down towards the ground. Imam, who wore a long flowing gown, would appear as if by magic, as the slow, Gong! Gong! Gong! echoed eerily throughout the surrounds. He stood motionless, except for his outstretched arm that slowly rose up and down as the bell continued to toll. We sit on our legs, on little grass mats, our shoes neatly placed on the outside of the door. I wonder what they taught us. I think most of us only went for the biscuits and cordial. I can't remember.

My Mother married a year later and we shifted down south. I went to school down there and could only come back, "home," at school holiday time.

"I'm your cousin, you know?" All these kids would say to me. These Aboriginal kids, these black kids. We'd laugh and play. We'd shout and fight.

"Don't hit him. He's my cousin you know?" I've got so many cousins. Such a big family. A history that I don't even know.

I remember my Grandfather, who had a stroke and spent many years in bed. He always seemed content lying there listening to the races and the ABC news. You could walk all over town and hear the wireless blaring away from the houses. The volume always seemed to be full bore and even now, almost four decades later, that music of the ABC news makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck. Grandad was always there, to that wireless, all day long. The only time it was turned off was on a Sunday arvo when these two old Aboriginal men came visiting. They'd talk in language. Quietly, whispering, smiling, nodding and sometimes muffled laughter would slip through the thin walls or escape through the louvre windows. Grandad was happy on Sunday arvos.

"These are your straight cousins!" my Grandad would shout to any of my uncles that were within earshot. They'd just nod and look down. Nobody would talk, say anything about our Aboriginal side, our Aboriginal family. Grandfather knew who he was. He and his father brought supplies to all the places along the track from Queensland down through Marrree, up to Coonamatta and into the Northern Territory. Reaching his place of birth, Horseshoe Bend he then followed the winding Finke River (Larapinta), to

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writers' Award

Hermannsburg (N'Taria). Turning then to the East, he eventually reached a place that is today known as Alice Springs. His father was an Afghan cameleer and his mother a Southern Aranda woman from on the Finke River.

"Afgan!" my Nanna would say.

"Afgan?" my Mother would say.

"Afgan!" my Aunty and Uncles would say.

I remember them things.

Down south, we'd sometimes go to this big building with high pointy towers. A mosque. All these Afgans. The women all in black with scarves covering their heads and faces, only dark eyes looking out. The men would be crammed into this small room, white walls and polished wooden floors. They kneel, sitting on their legs, bowing and mumblling towards a small shrine at the front of the room. We'd only go if our relatives came down from up north. The rest of the year I'd just be a blackella. Down south I'd be me. But back home in Alice I didn't know who to be.

Two big shiny pots sit on the old wood stove. I stare at them up. I know that one is full of rice and the other full of curry. They are always there. No matter what day, no matter what time, the smell of curry is always in the air. You can smell it from way down in the creek. I love curry and rice. Tea time is dark. The sounds of plates and pannikins hanging together would shout out "Tucker time!" If you hung back or waited for the rush to die down you'd miss out for sure. "First in, best dressed," my Nanna would sing.

I run around amongst all the legs, reach up and grab a piece of bread. Then stand by the stove looking up waiting for someone to slap a big spoonful of curry and rice onto my plate. All my Uncle's ignore me, but without fail, one of my Aunty's grabs my plate and, elbows everyone out of the way, shouts, "Get out of it. Look at this poor little bugger!" It never fails. I rush off to grab a good spot, but somehow I always seem to end up on the floor with all the other kids. Shoovelling my food in I stare up at my Uncle's and Aunty's hoping the day would come soon when I'd sit at that table.

The house in Warburton Street wasn't mine, but I've always referred to it as my place, or our house. We all do that. My Uncle John and Auntie June lived next door and along side them my Uncle Acky and Auntie Margaret. The corner block on the other side of us was empty. I remember when they started building a house on that block. They had the cement floor down and the first row of bricks. I dropped threepence down in one of the bricks and no matter how hard I tried I never did get it out. I didn't tell anyone, they weren't getting it. Guess it's still there today.

Our yard had this small square patch of green lawn that sat alone between the house and the tree-lined front fence. Hand shears kept the lawn in check and over the years it had risen a good foot above the surrounding bare dirt. All the way round our yard were Athol pines that whistled in the wind. It was a comforting sound that delivered peace and serenity at night. Two large orange trees stood green and shiny, defining the boundary from the front to the back yard. Our small shed house was against the back fence and was permanently occupied. The only time you could guarantee it would be available was when the night cart visited twice a week to empty the buckets. Down the other side of the house was our wood pile that never seemed to alter in size. A pile of logs and stumps untidily strewn from the house to the side
pines. At varying times all of my Uncles split some of this wood into smaller pieces that would keep Nanna's stove going around the clock.

Down south we lived in this really old house. I'm sure we were the only mob in town that had an inside well. Everyday after school I had to use this hand pump to pump water up to a 44 gallon drum on a small tank stand that stood about 10 foot off the ground. We used the quadge for bath water. I wasn't ashamed, and all them other kids thought it was great. I reckon we were the talk of the town at Sunday lunch. Real blackfellas. Pump... Pump... Pump... Pump... to and from. If you pumped too fast the water would shoot out the top, showering Mum's new wringer washing machine in the laundry under the back veranda. In an instant, the whole area would be ankle deep. The laundry floor being lower than the outside earth meant I would spend the next hour mopping. I opened the louvres to hear the water hitting the side of the tank. Splash... Splash. Strange sound that, hard to describe. 245 strokes. 123 right 123 left and the tank went from empty to full. It didn't take long once you got into the rhythm. Maybe half an hour.

One of my daily jobs is to clean out the chip heater and get it ready for the night baths. Usually four a night, less if we had visitors. That never happens very often. Our rellies were so far away. I love lighting the heater. The family are always shit-scared that I'm gonna send that chip heater to the moon. I have it roaring in no time. The thing would be hissing and the chimney would be unable to expel all the fumes. Slowly the bathroom would fill with thick grey smoke. Unperturbed, I'd continue to shove wood into its wide mouth. Brother! it was so red hot you could see through it. The corrugated walls shake violently, the taps rattle and the room is so hot I think I've invented the first sauna.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" yells my Mother. "Get out of there before you blow us all to kingdom come. Go and empty the sewage pit."

The sewage pit, I hated the sewage pit. Not only were we the only ones with a well, but we were definitely the only mob that had a sewage pit. I was really embarrassed about this. No one knew. This was the most guarded family secret. Twice a week, on Wednesdays and Sundays, under the cover of darkness, I would emerge with my wheelbarrow, bucket, length of rope, patching kit, hat and bandana secured around nose and mouth, fully prepared to tackle the pit and fertilise the lawn. My stepfather and his father engineered three 44 gallon drums, tops and bottoms removed, welded on top of each other and buried in the ground behind our laundry. Into this pit flowed all the bath and washing water. Really, it was just dirty water, but about once a month the sludge that continued to settle got higher and higher and you would have to remove this to make way for the new water.

Stink! Mate, I'm sure you could smell this in the next town, and that was twenty miles away. Everyone knew where that smell came from, but never a word was spoken. Never did anyone say anything. Funny that.

Two or three times a year we'd go to the beach with our southern rellies. My stepfather's rellies, actually. A heap of other people would tag along, and when we set up camp, it'd look like a small town. We'd all camp in caravans. Well, not us, we'd be in these tents, and I had this stretchy, a low sort of canvas bed. It was far better than my sissy wire bed back home. The beach is OK but all these other mobs thought it was unbelievably great for some reason. Just a big heap of quadge if you asked me, a heap of water that you couldn't even drink, or even swim in most of the time, 'cos of sharks or just far too friggin' cold.

I think we went camping to the beach at school holiday time. Not Christmas holidays. I'd come home at Christmas time. I know it wasn't exactly Easter time as I remember looking for Easter eggs in the sandhills. Well, not me. The other kids. I never believed in the Easter bunny and Father Christmas. That's all stuff.

Funny how I would go trappin' rabbits and then watch my sisters running around following rabbit tracks and finding Easter eggs. I never really liked trappin' the rabbits, but everyone was pleased when I came back with a couple. We ate a lot of rabbits. I had this slug gun that wasn't very powerful. When you pulled the trigger, you would wait patiently for the slug to leave the barrel. In slow motion it would travel towards the target, normally dropping well short, harming nothing. I don't think I ever shot a rabbit. I did, however shoot this huge sea bird early one morning. There was a big mob of them just bobbing around out in the ocean. Way, way, out they were. I knew my slugs had no chance of reaching that far. I aimed way above the birds, like the Indians do with their arrows, and pulled the trigger. Smack! wouldn't you know it? It hit this bird right in the middle of the chest. Its wings shot out sideways and it started squawking loudly. Well, I don't know what it was saying but everything that could fly came blustering in. Hundreds, thousands of them kamikaziing this poor stricken bird from every direction. Swooping and pecking at it. I was shifting myself and, filled with the fear that they could at any moment turn their attention to me, I ran back towards camp and found refuge in my canvas bed.

We packed up the troo carrier last weekend and headed off for the Idaceawon Station homestead which is on the banks of the Finke River (Larapinta). Aunty Joyleen's birth place. On the way she pointed out significant places and landmarks that would be of little consequence to the normal traveller. North of Rainbow Valley she suddenly shouted, "This is all Pernaree country, you know!" She sat quietly in the front seat looking this way and that, a sparkle in her old eyes with a slight hint of comfort and content... the excitement of being back in her country, our country. It reached out to all in the vehicle. No one spoke, we just contemplated as she freely shared her book of knowledge.

"Up here, I got it all up here. Don't need them paper. Them books. I know!" We turned off onto the Maryvale road and proceeded towards the new railway line where Aunty then directed us south towards the Finke River. Aunty continued to identify hills fence lines and rattled off in her quiet way stories of her exploits in this area. At one point, she started to sing in language. But almost before she started she abruptly stopped. She sat quietly for a time until we came atop a small rise.

"Chambers Pillar way over there somewhere," she suddenly announced. Startled we all snapped back to reality. Way off in the distance we immediately identified the tip of Chambers Pillar. Aunty was well pleased with her memory and once again spoke freely of times past.

On reaching the Finke, Aunty stated that this was our great-great-grandmother's country. "She born at Uluja, (main camp). Her name Kantija. Walk round here," Aunty ordered. We each walked, alone with our spirits.

"Three's enough for family," shouted Aunty from her position of authority. The front seat of the troopy.
"Yeah, and what do we do now?" I whisper to my cousin. He stares down at the dead kangaroo and says nothing.

"Pull 'im up here and we cut 'im."

Aunty knows what to do. I grab the roo by the tail and drag it alongside the vehicle. Suddenly out jumps this joey from its mothers pouch, and screaming its head off it bounds out across the open plain. We take chase. Half crouched, arms outstretched and at full pace, we zigzag this way and that. Thankfully, the baby roo soon tires and collapses in a puff of dust. We fall alongside, completely exhausted. The baby roo is wrapped in a warm jumper and we stumble back to the vehicle.

"Cut that big one there. See if 'im not too fat."

Our best bread knife is put to the test, and eventually I make a small excision.

"Pull skin that way. Oowa, 'im OK." I got no idea what I was looking for, or at, but Aunty was happy with the morning's hunt. Elated, we headed for town.

Arriving mid morning and with one of Aunty's sons, Dougie, an with some real knives, we once again headed bush, to his favourite cooking site. He showed us how to prepare the fire and the roos for cooking in the traditional way. I arrived home at about 11 o'clock, covered in blood, stinking a smell that Old Spice had much difficulty in erasing, but elated with the weekend's events. I'd learned more of my culture in two days than I had in my last fifty years.

Not one member of our direct family was taken away, as we were "identified" as Afghans. For reasons of protection I was intentionally denied my Aboriginal heritage and culture. I do not deny my Afghan descent, of whom I know much. But it's the strong Aboriginal pull back to my people, country and culture that compels me to find out. I must find out. I must go back.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writers' Award

The Lying Jezebel

Yaritji Green

Morti's dogwatch on the Lying Jezebel had been an edgy one. He had spoken to Old Blue, the bosun, to hear his report on the sails and rigging. They had a rough passage between Africa and Madagascar on the swift current and submerged rocks. And now they were being followed.

To look at Morti, one would see a giant of a man, baby faced with blond hair and a twinkle in his blue eyes. There was always a hint of a smile on his face, the look of eternal optimism. The only thing that could rile him was his name. Morti's real name was Mortimer, but nobody called him that except his mother. The last man who used the name his parents had blessed him with now had a permanent limp.

Morti always felt freer sailing out on the open sea; he enjoyed the challenges the sea gave him. Old Blue had been climbing up and down the ratlines, directing shipmates to sail and scrub the decks. Even going as far as to harass Pete in the galley for his secret salted fat stash. Morti knew, as did Old Blue, that Pete sold leftover fat at their arrival home in Bristol for a bit of extra money. The fat was from the barrels of salted meat stored in brine to preserve it on their long journeys. Over time the salted fat would excrete from the meat and congeal on the sides of the barrels.

From England to India the journey was long and perilous. They were becalmed for nearly two weeks out at sea after the trade wind dwindled into nothing. The Captain docked at Lagos, an English-run port, to restock their supplies. Then they continued downwards around the southern-most tip of Africa battling black swells and fierce winds. One of the sails tore with the force of the winds causing Old Blue to curse everyone and everything near him, while tenderly mending the sail.

The Portuguese claimed the fame of being the first to sail around the tip of Africa, much to the dismay of the English. It took the Portuguese three failed voyages before Bartholomew Dias succeeded around the 1490s against the sea currents.

Lying Jezebel's cargo was full of tea, boxed items for some of the gentry and some papers that Morti was not to know about for the Lord who commissioned this journey to India. Morti knew that some of those boxes contained rugs, material of silks and cotton and even precious stones embedded in gold idols. As for the papers he had no idea what was in them. It must be something real important if the Captain didn't even trust his second in command with the contents. Usually Morti knew everything that was happening on board; the papers drew his attention like a lodestone.

By the time they had arrived in India everyone was ready to disembark. The Captain allowed three days for a port call just to unload, let the men have a free day off for drinking and whoring and the last day to load up and leave at the season's tide. If any of the crew were not at the muster call on the third day, they had two choices; find their own passage home or take the Cat-o'-Nine-Tails over the gun. Once the cargo was loaded and the tide ready, they were pilots out of the harbour for the passage home.

The fair winds were favourable to the Lying Jezebel as they followed the current across to Africa and down the West coast, squeezing in between Madagascar and Africa on the Agulis current. The Captain and Morti had
discussed whether to sail the current in the rock-infested sea or sail the other side of Madagascar past II Sainte Marie, the pirate town. Just as Ulysses had to choose between Scylla and Charybdis, so did Morti and the Captain.

Morti had watched the Captain becoming more and more tense as each day passed. Although they had no problems the Captain kept watching the sea, keeping a lookout. A week after leaving Madagascar behind Old Bluer left the Madagascar behind Old Bluer and Morti on the deck. The Captain seemed to relax when told that, as though finally he could deal with his worries. Jezebel's colours were displayed, but the other ship played coy, not giving a hint of who they were. Morti, the Captain and Old Bluer spread the warning of trouble to come, and the crew began to prepare.

Morti was relieved when the Captain appeared at the end of dogwatch. He could have left the helm to Old Bluer, but with the waters they were travelling in, the only person he trusted other than himself was the Captain. Morti and the Captain had known each other for a long time, further back than anyone on this ship. The Captain expected loyalty, first and foremost, as did Morti, the Captain's second in command. Everyone knew the Captain was not lenient. Anyone who disobeyed the rules was punished; keelhauled or dumped on the nearest piece of land. The sea and her temperament better than any man alive. He could tell the signs in the sky, read the warnings in the sea and smell them in the air. Morti trusted the Captain's judgement, for time and time again he had proven to be right. Giving the Captain a run down on the goings on, Morti left him at the helm as they headed for Africa Town.

The seas here were dangerous. Monster waves that engulfed and swallowed. Winds that howled and screamed, ripped and destroyed. The elements were alive. Already the swells were as high as Jezebel. Morti knew he had to get some sleep now or there would be no time. He shared the same cabin as the Captain. He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes not expecting to sleep at all. Gradually he got used to the pounding and let go of his awareness into a dreamless sleep.

Morti was woken abruptly. Being thrown out of bed usually does wake an unsuspecting sleeper. The floor tilted back towards the bed and he found himself sliding along the wooden floors, crashing into the base of his bed. Rubbing his head, Morti staggered to his feet. Christ almighty, he thought, what is happening? Was it Jezebel? Was it the other ship? Was it the sea? Morti knew.

Dragging on his clothes, he staggered out of the cabin to find the Captain. No sign of the Captain would Morti see. Morti was running, staggering through the preparations to protect the Lying Jezebel and her cargo. Jezebel was the Captain's life, where he was lord over all while sailing the seven seas. He'd never got married, never stayed in port long enough to find a woman. Jezebel always got her way in the end.

Jezebel rocked from side to side, the waves playing with her as a child would play a toy boat in the bath. Morti could hear the dull roar of the sea before he even got above deck. Jezebel was pounding through the seas, but he could not hear the rains yet. Reaching the deck Morti watched the clouds billow in, grey, dark and threatening. Thunder rolled through the clouds, heralding the coming storm. The deck was wet and slippery as the waves reached over the sides, spraying a fine mist. Morti gathered his oilskin around himself. Scanning the deck he saw the Captain at the wheel. The other shipmates rushed about checking and double-checking that everything was secured, the other ship long forgotten.

The larger sails were lashed to the masts. If all the sails were up and they became back-winded, the strength of the wind's reversal could snap a mast in half and wrest the others from the deck. No sails meant no control. Control was needed especially in this part of the seas where the elements battled each other. Only the foresail was up, with the fore jib to direct. Wild winds raced around the deck, weaving, pushing and testing the strength of everything tied down. The sky was a pewter grey swirling tumult; alive, seething with power.

Morti shivered. Balancing himself, he made his way aft towards the Captain at the helm. He would relieve him of his duty to give him time to rest and grab a bite to eat. "If you want to eat, you should get something to eat," Morti yelled above the howling of the winds. The Captain grunted. He was focused on the storm. Morti swore out loud. He knew the Captain wouldn't leave the wheel. Giving a Gaelic shrug at the man’s stubbornness, Morti went to check that everything was secured. The Captain would stay at the helm until the worst was over. He trusted no one to handle his precious Jezebel through rough seas. No need for everyone to be wet and miserable. A change of crew at every bell would be effective. If the Captain wanted more men above deck he would no doubt send one of the sailors down to fetch warm dry victuals out into the wet cold.

Morti was sitting in the scullery, relaxing as much as anyone could in this storm; minutes seemed like hours to him in this continual rocking. A rum would go down nicely at this time but anyone caught drinking on board during a storm would find themselves tossed overboard. The Captain did not keep men who put others in danger on his ship. Dear old Jezebel was lurching up and down, and a man with a weaker stomach would have emptied it long ago.

Morti had a small chuckle to himself at the thought of a land lubber out on these seas. Hell, he had a wary kind of alertness, ready for action; but a person not made for the seas would be on his knees praying for deliverance in between bringing up last night's dinner. Morti respected the sea; it had a power beyond his ken. Sometimes he chose to bring beloved sailors to her watery depths, to stay with her there until she washed their bones up on a distant shore, and other times she let them glide across her freely.

Loud thunder rumbled above, and then a deafening crack that shook the ship. The timbers groaned and creaked. Morti was up and running, shouting through the narrow companionways. “Everyone on deck!”

The sea slowly pervaded the dry wooden floors below. “Get some tar!” Morti yelled at some men. “Fix those leaks!” Stumbling and running, Morti was thrown forwards towards the hatchway that led to the outside chaos. The fore mast, the only one with its sail hoisted, had been struck by lightning. On its downward journey it had knocked the boom on the middle mast causing it to spear a hole in the railings. The weight of the middle mast and its reefed sails crashed it to the helm. The grinding wood tore up the deck as it crashed towards the helm. Men were trying to put up a jury mast, but Jezebel was now pounding up and down in the swell making it a dangerous task.

Morti heard himself yelling the Captain's name although he knew he would never be heard over the roar of the seas. A fear rushed though him, a fear that he would lose something that could not be replaced. Frantically Morti ran to the splintered helm, the place where he had left the Captain. There crushed beneath the wheel and part of the collapsed masts he found him.

Sailors were pushing and pulling at the heavy object desperately. It was all in vain; the Captain was far beyond their mortal means. He would be visiting the briny depths soon enough. The Captain was still alive, barely. He was trying to say something: Morti leant over him placing his ear over the Captain's
mouth. "Get the papers." The Captain was struggling to breathe with the blood he was coughing up. "Key...Safe."

Grabbing the keys at the Captain's belt, Mori ran to the Captain's room to get those papers. Tucking them in his shirt against his skin, Mori felt cracking vibrations beneath his feet. He had to get out. Jezbel, sensing the passing of her lover, moaned her distress and in turn gave herself up to the sea. The waves sensed the sapped strength out of the ship and began to pull her apart.

Rats appeared above deck. Mori knew that if anyone was to survive they would have to take their chances in one of the life boats. The sailors raced to the boats and began readying them to be dropped in the ocean. Mori put himself in the second life boat with Pete and Old Blue, leaving their departure from Jezbel to the last minute in case there was someone else to join them in a game of chance with the sea. Once in the sea they were quickly whisked away from the ship. Mori's last glimpse of her he would always remember. Jezbel rose up from the sea and swan-dived into the foamy depths carrying her beloved Captain with her.

Their last journey together.

Fifty-seven
Yaritji Green

Slipping from shadow to shadow he crept along the footpath. Footsteps and panting echoed in the night air, someone walking their dog. Stopping, Silent, Invisible. He waited, and watched. The woman and the dog passed him. The dog looked at him curiously, but the woman was oblivious, walking to the beat of her walkman. The footsteps faded. The night once again was his alone.

Fifty-seven, fifty-seven, fifty-seven: he chanted the number softly under his breath. Fifty-seven was the number tonight. Fifty-seven was chosen. He had watched fifty-seven for a long time and now it was time. Time to show how lucky fifty-seven was.

He was here. Focus on the house. He climbed over the tall fence and jumped to a crouch position on the freshly cut grass below. Quickly he rolled into the shadow of a tree and flattened his body against the trunk. His senses were alert, his mind working overtime calculating all possibilities. Fate was a fickle lady and he was wary of her.

The house before him was asleep, as all good citizens should be at this time of night. Adrenalin pumped through his body. "Go quickly," it urged him. Logic told him to work to the system, follow the plan, only divert if the circumstance required it. He edged his way around the back. At one with the shadows.

Getting in the back door was easy. Picking locks was child's play. He walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. What did they have for dinner? Roast lamb and vegetables. Hmm, apple pie, whipped cream. Delicious. He walked silently across the tiled floor. The party was going to be on the first floor and he was not going to miss it for anything. He pranced up the carpeted staircase, one step two step tickle under there. He laughed silently, be careful. He was getting delirious. He must remember his duty. Fifty-seven, fifty-seven, fifty-seven. He must not let his excitement take control. Stick to the plan.

He stood on the stairs frozen. Calm down, he told himself, and when his heart beat was at a more acceptable rate he continued onwards. At the top of the stairs he turned left across the landing to the door at the end. Party time.

Slowly opening the door, he peered around it. The room was a creamy white, edged and tasselled with gold here and there, a feminine touch. A slow smile crossed his face as he saw the naked sleeping couple on the bed. He eased himself into the room. Everything turned into slow motion. He pulled out his knife.

Stab! Stab! Quick stab below the collar bones, between the upper rib bones to puncture a hole in the lungs. A slash to the man's stomach. The man's hoarse cry woke the female. Reaching with his knifeless hand into the man's stomach wound he grabbed the slippery intestines and yanked them out. The man screamed. Pink froth foamed from his mouth. The mutilated body jerked and thrashed.

"I am invincible." The words roared forth uncontained. This was the killer's domain and the people here were under his power. Their lives were in his bloodied hands. He was a God, ruler over life and death. The blood, the pain. It released the pent up forces to soar the earth and the heavens. The female
screamed at the grisly scene displayed in her bed, “Warren!” Her dying lover’s name.

Rolling out of bed she half crawled, half ran to the door. Ignoring Warren the killer pivoted, and gave chase, all senses focused. He lunged. He grabbed her long pale silvery blonde hair, viciously jack-knifed her body off the floor. Threw her screaming to the ground. Kicked her in the ribs. She grunted at the impact.

He felt her ribs crack satisfyingly beneath his feet. He leaned over her struggling writhing body and knocked her unconscious. Pleasure filled him, the plan had been kept true. He brushed the hair from the woman’s face. She had the beginnings of a bruise. It marred her white delicate skin. Women’s skin always bruised too easily. Their flesh was so tender.

“Leave her,” a faint voice gasped. He felt no need to speak to the dead man, who was struggling against death’s pull, in an attempt to save the female. He could see him straining for breath, his face turning bluish. With a lover’s caress, he put his hand on the man’s chest over his heart. He was holding life in his hands. The heart was pumping, but life’s beat was faint. He gently touched the gaping wound in the stomach, the wet intestines sticky to touch as the blood began to congeal. The man’s body shook beneath his hands. The fury, the loss in the man’s eyes slowly faded into the blank stare of nothingness.

The coppery smell of blood permeated the air. He inhaled it readily. Let it drug his senses. He turned away from the man towards the unconscious woman. She was coming with him. Lucky fifty-seven.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writers’ Award

Treaty Train

Veronica Johns

Climb aboard and take a ride on the Treaty Train. All destinations lead to the “establishment of an agreement or treaty process to negotiate the unresolved issues of reconciliation.” Once you step up your journey will begin.

In recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first peoples of Australia the Treaty Train has designated seats reserved for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander passengers.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will be our guides throughout this journey. They ask that in climbing aboard the Treaty Train you accept that there will be difficult rivers to cross and mountains to climb. At significant points it may be necessary to change tracks.

The success of this journey is dependent on all travelling passengers accepting and acknowledging some responsibility towards meeting and addressing the challenges and obstacles along the way. As this journey will take some time and we have a number of tight corners to negotiate we’d appreciate you keeping an open mind as you share your thoughts and opinions.

A coordinated approach will benefit all Australians.

Please respect, and acknowledge that your contribution and the contribution of others are very important to this process. We will see the light at the end of the tunnel if we share our skills, listen to others and make decisions together.

Through cooperation and joining together we can share the responsibility and ensure the Treaty Train reaches its destination.

LET’S GET IT RIGHT
Dymocks NT Literary Award: Final results
Arafura Short Story Award

Winner
Dragonsfly Season, by Jennifer White

Highly Commended
Power Points, by Kim Caraher (not included in this volume)
Student Protest, by Jennifer Haydon

Commeded
The Wild Lime Tree, by Marian Devitt
Charlie and the Mermaids, by Jeremy John Hall

Honourable Mentions
Hunting with Daisy and Dora, by Toni Tapp Coutts
The Lure, by David Jaggar
Sorry Business, by Barbara Eather
Coming Home up the Stuart Highway, by Jo Dutton
Moonshine, by Kathleen Donald

Red Earth Poetry Award

Winner
Train Times, by Judith Steele

Highly commended
(1st) Day at the Office Suite, December '96, Darwin, by Marian Devitt
(2nd) One Thing, by Alan Whykes

Commeded
The Butcher of Lohye, by Carmel Williams

Northern Territory University Essay Award

Winner
Smoke gets in my Alice, by Alan Whykes

Highly commended
(1st) Rewriting Australian History using "the Tools of the Conqueror", by Jennifer Haydon (not included)

Commeded
(1st) We never had any proper food, by Kaye Aldenhoven
(2nd) Keeping Time, by Michael Whitting
(3rd) Revisiting the Green Centre, by Tarla Kramer
(4th) The Land of Opportunity, by Anne-Marie Hayman

Kath Manzie Youth Literary Award

Winner
On Murulax and saving the world, by Briohny Doyle

Honourable mentions
Let Sleeping Crocs Stand, by Briohny Doyle
Fishing with the ferals, by Lorna Roberts
A Scary Boat Ride, by Jake Hanlon

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writers’ Award

Winner
Fifty Seven, by Yaritji Green

Highly commended
The Lying Jesabel, by Yaritji Green

Commeded
Mixed Relations, by Des Rogers

Honourable mentions
Treaty Train, by Veronica Johns
Suppression, by John Bodey

About the contributors

Kaye Aldenhoven moved to Groote Eylandt in 1971, promising her mother she'd stay only two years in Territory. Recently she published In My Husband's Country, a collection of poems.

John Bodey is of Aboriginal descent. Among his awards for writing are the David Unaipon Award in 1997. He teaches Horticulture in Kalano (Katherine) and other Aboriginal Communities.

L. F. S. Browne is a retired Fisheries officer and amateur historian who has been resident in the NT for some thirty years.

Toni Tapp Coutts was born in the NT and grew up in the VRD. A member of Katherine Region of Writers & Arts, she is currently editing a biography and coordinating a book of stories and poetry to commemorate the Year of Outback.

Marian Devitt has lived in the NT since 1988. She currently lives and works in Arnhem Land. She writes poetry, prose and for performance.

Kathleen Donald was born in USA. She married and moved to Australia in 1996, and is now working and living in aboriginal communities as coordinator.

Briohny Doyle, at 19, has already published work in anthologies and magazines nationwide. She is currently editing "Creatwirr" a fiction and poetry website for young people, and is trying to publish her first novel.
Jo Dutton was raised in the Solomon Islands and has spent her adult life in Central Australia, where she manages a busy family, working and living in a vibrant and active community.

Barbara Ether is a Chartered Accountant and amateur musician. She believes that a woman can never have too many cats.

Yaritji Green writes: “My mother is YunkunyaJnla and my father is Djaru. I moved to Alice Springs to be close to my mother’s family. Currently I am attending a creative writing course at Batchelor Institute.”

Jeremy John Hall describes himself as male, disabled, and over sixty. However, there’s much more to him than that.

Jake Hanlon is a Year 10 student of Batchelor Area School, where he is a House Captain. He is 15 years old and lives in the Gulf of Carpentaria on North Island. His main interests are fishing and Rugby League.

Jennifer Haydon is a celebrated Darwin Identity who enjoys writing in her spare time. This week she managed a half an hour on Tuesday evening.

Anne-Marie Hayman was born in the UK, and has lived in Katherine for ten years. She is a mother, she works full-time for the government, and she helps with a herd of 65 cattle.

David Jagger is a journalist and anthropologist currently managing the Anthropology Section at the Central Land Council, Alice Springs, where he lives with his partner and two children.

Veronica Johns is a writer who lives in Humpty Doo.

Terla Kramer was originally from Adelaide and came to Alice Springs in October 1998. She has been writing since June 1992 and is currently working on a backpacker’s cookbook.

Lorna Roberts is 14 and lives in Adelaide River. She likes writing either sad or funny stories in my spare time. She likes going fishing, hanging with my mates, and playing guitar.

Des Rogers was born in Alice Springs he is recognised as Southern Aranda. He has been in private enterprise for eight years. He graduated from Batchelor College (Alice Springs) in 2001 with a Certificate III in Creative Writing.

Judith Steele is a Darwin resident. She co-authored a book of poetry with Moira McNeil. Her poetry has been published in several journals, and she was the winner of Red Earth Poetry Award 2001.

Jennifer White has had work published nationally and internationally. She was the recipient in 1998 of a grant from Australia Council, and in 2000 she was awarded a mentorship by the NT Writers’ Centre.

Michael Whitting is a Numeracy Officer with the Dept. of Employment, Education & Training. Originally from South Australia, he has lived in Katherine since 1998, having returned from Papua New Guinea.

Alan Whykes is a Territory writer who lives in Wagaman.

Carmel Williams is a poet who has had several poems published in literary journals, on radio and most recently in the NT’s Poetry Anthology Landmark.