This publication is a collection of poems, short stories and essays written by the finalists and winners of the 2011 Northern Territory Literary Awards.

Phone: 1800 019 155
or (08) 8999 7177
Email: ntl.info@nt.gov.au
Fax: (08) 8999 6927
Web: www.ntl.nt.gov.au
Post: PO Box 42, Darwin NT 0801
Location: Parliament House, Darwin
Northern Territory
Literary Awards
2011

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

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

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

Entry Forms are available from the Northern Territory Library and online at www.ntl.nt.gov.au
Northern Territory Literary Awards 2011

All inquiries should be directed to:
Northern Territory Library
GPO Box 42
Darwin NT 0801
Phone: 08 8999 7177

Copyright in the individual items remains with the authors
This collection © Northern Territory Library

ISSN 1449-9886

Published by the Northern Territory Government
## Contents

### Dymocks Arakura Short Story Award

**Winner**
- Sophie Constable – *Khmoc*  
1

**Finalists**
- Melinda Barlow – *The Fish and The Hiccup*  
- Barbara Eather – *This Poultry Business*  
- Stephen Francis – *Turtle Eggs*  
- Michael Giacometti – *Blind to [all but] The Unnameable*  
- Blair McFarland – *The Professor Brocklebank-Jeavons Memorial Biology Lecture on the early history of the FAT*  
- Bronwyn Mehan – *Photographing Toast*  
- Natalie Sprite – *Everything is Different Now*  

### Dymocks Red Earth Poetry Award

**Winner**
- Bronwyn Mehan – *under attack*  
47

**Finalists**
- Kaye Aldenhoven – *Afghan Grave, outskirts of Wyndham, NW Australia*  
- Kaye Aldenhoven – *Ngarratj Warde Djobkeng*  
- Karina Brabham – *Storming*  
- Penny Drysdale – *Fallen*  
- Kathleen Epelde – *Colonial Inscriptions*  
- Jennifer Mills – *Fry Priestess*  

### Charles Darwin University Bookshop Travel Short Story Award

**Winner**
- Christine Wilson – *The Streets of France*  
63

**Finalists**
- Michael Giacometti – *Death in the Andes*  
- Miranda Tetlow – *Road Trip Through Timor*  

### Charles Darwin University Essay Award

**Winner**
- Kate Smith – *Imagining Darwin*  
77

**Finalists**
- Adelle Barry – *A ‘Place’ for Reconciliation in Indigenous Writing*  
- Adelle Barry – *It’s Not Black and White*  
- Jane Leonard – *A Change of Heart*  

DYMOCKS ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WRITERS' AWARD

Winner  John Bodey – Wadjita
Finalists  Joey Flynn – Poor Phella Countryman We Mob
           Nicole Gardiner – Visiting the Loved One of my Past

KATH MANZIE YOUTH LITERARY AWARD

Winner  Kierra-Jay Power – With Stars in His Eyes
Finalists  Laila Bennet – Darkness
           Stevie Cosentino – A Letter for Peace
           Shannon Nendick – The Side Effects of Love
           Sophie Philip – The Very Last Picture Show
           Kierra-Jay Power – Her Fingernails are Claws
           Kierra-Jay Power – I Cannot Have a Lion as a Pet
           Kierra-Jay Power – New Perspective

Due to copyright restrictions, scripts and screenplays cannot be included in this publication.

DARWIN FESTIVAL SCRIPT AWARD

Winner  Alex Ben-Mayor – C (299 792 458)

BIRCH CARROLL AND COYLE SCREENWRITING AWARD

Winner  Philip Denson – Lucid
Phnom Penh today is like any busy South-East Asian city. Almost. Around the crumbling French mansions and washing-laden tenements, the sounds of construction vie with the melodies of hawkers, the growl of motos, the shouts of pedestrians. But its traffic doesn’t have the frantic breakneck press of Hanoi; it lacks the towering high rises of Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur. Ghosts of loss fill the empty spaces between taxis and four-wheel drives, between the not quite crowded sidewalks. Something is missing. Someone. Many someones.

The city’s people have now risen to two-thirds of the population in 1975. In those days, 2.5 million people crowded the markets. A year later, it was a ghost town: a skeleton crew of 20,000 lived on. Empty buildings with hollow eyes grew masks of moss and lichen. Grasses grew long and weeds choked the gardens. The streets lay barren. It was not a place to live. It was a place you came to die. You, who come to Cambodia, you know the story backwards. You know the end first; you don’t how it was in the beginning, when Pol Pot was just another name, and the Khmer Rouge just another group fighting for freedom. When Tuol Sleng was just a high school, and no one had heard of genocide. Can you look at the rice fields now, at the butterflies spiralling through forest glades, at the prancing cocks captured under chicken mesh domes, and see what it was like before? Can you hear the whine of the bombers overhead? No? Ah.

History is an intricate web of stories. It’s hard to see them all at once. Let’s start with one thread. You come now to Tuol Sleng to learn. You learn not about maths and elephants and Khmer script. You learn about suffering. You make your way through the rooms that unfurl wave after wave of cruelty, earning higher and higher degrees at the school of suffering. You walk through the classrooms converted into prison cells, past the instruments of torture, the boards of photos, faces without name. You come to the room where the skull sits in its special case, glass crowned, slatted wooden bier. Following the proper traditions, the gaps between the wooden slats let the spirits come and go. Did you feel the shiver in the air? I came. I went.
Yes, that’s me, that skull you look at. My empty sockets gaze a little past yours. No, you say, that can’t be right. Khmer spirits are reincarnated. There should be nothing left to haunt this place.

How knowledgeable you are. Your logic tries to destroy me through my own beliefs. But here I am. You see, I died an unnatural death. No family cremated my body and said prayers for me: Father had long since disappeared into the Angkar machine and Mother died soon after we were brought here. Soldiers dumped my skin and bones in a mass grave, researchers dug me up again and put me here. There is no way to know who I am, if any of my wider family survived to do their duty to their dead. So I cannot rest. I cannot leave. I am trapped within my mortal remains.

Do I haunt you? Do I infect you with my caged restlessness? That is my eternal task, after all. Abandoned spirits will always haunt the living.

Ah, perhaps Pol Pot was right. I am a bad influence. To keep us was no benefit. To destroy us was no loss.

I knew once the taste of coconut sticky rice, of fresh mango, of frying chicken, of steaming spicy fish. We watch, mouths wet, us spirits, us trapped ones, as the families lay down their offerings in the pagodas. Jasmine laces the darkness, incense dances in languorous curls as saffron monks read the list of names. We wait, but our names are never read. There is no one to remember us. We cannot be fed. We cannot be freed.

Kind-hearted people roll sesame seed rice balls into the darkest shadows, gestures that we are not entirely forgotten. They remember us to ward away our misfortune, to keep it from trailing after them. There, you see, what has changed? We have merely been transformed from bad influences to beisac, bad spirits, bringing bad luck for the people who live on. Already you can see the bitterness flowing from me. The liquid-eyed young khmer girl has all but disappeared; the empty-eyed khmoc lives on forever. But I was a ghost long before I died.

More rice balls roll into the darkness. We trapped ones swarm and pounce. The nutty essence of sesame, the heart-warming texture of rice, fill our empty mouths. Rice is something we remember very well.

When the Khmer Rouge became Angkar and ruled our country, we had everything. Everything a good worker could want. When the Khmer Rouge ruled our country, we had rice. Not much, not enough to fill our bellies or run the nation. Of course, Angkar had to sell most of the harvest to supply the peasants.
with the goods we could not make. To free Kampuchea from the tyranny of foreign economies, we had to be self reliant. We had to have everything we needed, right here. We had nothing. No banks, no currency, no connections with the outside world. No vehicles, no machines, no factories, no books, no medicines. No monks, no monasteries, no universities, no hospitals, no teachers. Angkar destroyed all of that. They took away the little ones too: all the children in the village vanished one day, to be trained away from the soiled influence of their parents. Mothers had no sons, daughters had no fathers. Every family gaped with loss. One in five people were dead.

But all of this was just the wasteful trappings of illusory bourgeois lives. Angkar gave us everything we really needed. Work in the fields. Sleep when there was not enough light to work anymore. Belief in a greater power: Angkar.

Angkar took my father from my heart as well as from my side. They told us we had no need of parents, because Angkar was our mother and our father. When he was arrested, they read out his charges. Father stood there, silent, barefoot, rubbing at his glasses with his threadbare shirt. The village stood around and listened too. A cartload of shame weighted the air that I struggled to breathe in. I couldn’t believe that he had done those things – betrayed my mother with multiple lovers, plotted against the government. I was staring at a man I did not know.

I read his confession, a year later when they sent it out. He denied nothing. He had been in prison, I think, during that time. Or on trial. We didn’t know where he was: he was not our father. Angkar was.

As luck would have it, later we came to know where he had been, because we were taken there ourselves. Tuol Sleng. Our crime was the stain of association with the father that was no longer ours. We discovered the real crime he had been arrested for: he wore glasses. A sign of education. If reason had seemed precarious before, it disappeared entirely now.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. The world has declared it so, but I saw no reason or conscience, in those that held us prisoner.

Who can call themselves human, that forbids crying under torture?

Who can claim a conscience, who kills children for the crimes of their fathers?

We all lost our humanity, there. Not even animals were treated as poorly as we were, so we knew we were less than animals. I remember the nights of endless
darkness, the screams of the tortured smearing through the walls as we waited our turn. I remember the mesh that covered the walkways so that no one could jump and end things before their turn. I remember the dawn coming, easing a gray light onto caged windows, concrete floors, stained walls, empty faces. The light did not bring relief. At dawn, a new shift of interrogators replaced the old. There was no rest for those being worked on.

It is history now.

It is past, and my death put an end to my pain. Over four hundred people died here a month, every month, for three years. Tuol Sleng was only one of hundreds of such centres connected in an intricate web of death reaching over every Cambodian district. Who was I to think that I might survive? I was destroyed, along with millions of others. To keep us was no benefit. To destroy us: no loss.

But injustice does not rest with the death of the victim. Death does not put right the suffering of the past. The weight of injustice lives on in those who survive, those who have borne witness, and in the ghosts that cannot find peace. Sometimes they are one and the same.

Spirits living and dead remain disturbed by the past. Forgetting seems like the surest road to attaining a peaceful inner spirit, a face glimmering with the serenity of a Buddha in the candle light. After all, we are not your family. We are no one to you. How easy it would be to forget us.

We can not forget.

The streets of Phnom Penh are peaceful now. The traffic has calmed, the streetlights glow. The sticky heat of the day is released; the cool shades of night spread. A growling moto weaves through the suburbs, stitching together scraps of lives in a patchwork city.

The city has not forgotten. Here and there from the darkest corners where the neon shop lights don’t reach, the spirits ease from the shadows. They trail the pavements eternally: the spirits of the past cannot be exorcised. They flow through the streets in streams of ten, hundreds, thousands, millions. They will never leave; they remain forever to warn the living. The moto wades knee-deep through an eternal flood of souls.

Remember us. Remember the dead. Only in remembering can we guard the future, together. When the dead are remembered, our burden is shared. Then all our spirits can lift free of the horrors of the past.

* * *
Some words:

*Khmer:* the people of Cambodia

*Khmoc:* Khmer word for ghost

*Khmer Rouge:* name given to the followers of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, who ruled Cambodia in the late 1970s

*Angkar:* Khmer word for ‘the organisation’: the name the Khmer Rouge called themselves.

“To keep you is no benefit. To destroy you is no loss.” Popular saying of Angkar.

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” UN Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1
The Fish and The Hiccup

Melinda Barlow

The boy carried a fish in a tea cup in the palm of his hand. The girl had a hiccup in a silk purse in her pocket. The clouds skidded across the sky and the damp grass squelched and squeaked beneath their feet. The girl sat to rest on a park bench under a jacaranda tree by the creek. The boy sat by her side, and placed the tea cup with the fish carefully on the ground beneath them. As he did this the girl quickly opened her purse, pulled out the hiccup and swallowed it. She was worried the boy might try to kiss her. They sat together and felt the breeze become wind on their faces. The girl wondered if it would rain. The boy wondered if they would kiss.

The fish splashed around and around in the tea cup. The hiccup took up its own rhythm. The girl leant forward. She filled her lungs with a huge gulp of air and held her breath.

“You could try to drink some water upside down,” said the boy. The girl looked down at the tea cup.

“What’s your fish called?” she asked, then hiccupped.

“Sunny,” said the boy, “but it’s not my fish”. The girl was quiet for a few seconds, and then hiccupped again.

The trees around them swished and roared, like only gum trees in the wind can do. The boy held out his left hand to show her.

“I have a boat in the palm of my hand,” he said. “See? It’s here … and here … and there is the mast and the sail.” She looked at his hand, at the lines in the soft skin of his palm and really could see the boat. She felt she could step right into it. Him and her and the fish in the tea cup. She hiccupped.

“Whose fish is it?” she asked.

“Oh, well … it’s my brother’s fish.” He looked down to check on it and as he did, leant his pinky ever so gently against hers on the bench. It was the slightest touch and she did not pull away. A big fat raindrop fell from high and plopped down with a splash on her shoulder. Another did the same on his knee. They both looked up at the sky but neither of them made a move to leave.
“I think he’s okay but since my brother left, he doesn’t like to be alone.” The girl leant forward. She picked up the tea cup and watched the fish for a while. It didn’t really swim, but it didn’t float either. It was alive, but she could see what the boy meant.

“Does he always live in the tea cup?” she asked.

“No – I scoop him out of the tank with it whenever I leave the house.”

“Do you always take him with you?” she asked.

“Yes, always,” said the boy.

“How do you know he doesn’t like to be alone? Maybe it’s something else,” said the girl.

He was glad she was interested. He was dreadfully worried about Sunny and had been since the day his brother left for uni, and he found him, doing laps of his bowl, lying completely flat on his side. His parents just laughed it off. Something was wrong, he knew, but he didn’t know exactly what.

He looked at the girl and watched her hiccup again. She was the nicest thing he’d seen.

“Do you get hiccups very much?” he asked her. She wondered if he guessed they were because of him.

“No, not really,” she answered. Once, before her ballet exam, she had hiccups for three days straight. Her mum bought her the silk purse to put them in. Sometimes they would go back into the purse and sometimes they just wouldn’t.

“I had a fish once and it used to swim around and around in its bowl sideways,” the girl told him.

“Sideways,” he said. “What do you mean?”

“Well, he would lie on his side and sort of half float, half swim, but on his side.” The boy stared at her.

“That’s what Sunny does.” He pressed his finger against hers just a little bit more and she hiccupped very loudly. She swallowed hard and took a big gulp of air. She didn’t want him to know about the purse. She held the air in her lungs. Held it, held it, then burst and gasped – then hiccupped.
“It’s his swim bladder,” she said. “You need to feed him peas.” He looked at her and felt warm and soft inside. “Cook them a bit, squish them out of their skin, then feed them to him, one pea at a time. Just feed him a pea or two every day for a few days, nothing else. Then he’ll swim the right way up again.”

He thought about what she said. It sounded so crazy but he believed her. He would try anything really to get Sunny the right way up again.

“Fresh peas or frozen peas?” he asked. She looked at him curiously.

“Well it doesn’t really matter … just soft skinless peas.” He felt foolish but he was glad he would have another reason to talk to her after today.

“Do you know any magic?” she asked the boy. He thought for a while. He knew some, but no tricks that actually worked. “My dad taught me some once but I forget how it goes.”

“Oh, that’s ok,” she said.

“Do you?” he asked. She thought about the one trick she knew.

“No, not really,” she said.

“Show me,” he said.

“Well … it’s not really a trick,” she said. The boy didn’t care. He just wanted to look at her and listen to her and always be near her.

“Give me your hand,” she said. He offered his hand to her. She laid her finger across the boat on his palm and curled his hand around it.

“Now, in this trick, you need to squeeze my hand as hard as you can until I say stop.” He liked this trick. It meant they could touch and he could impress her with his strength. She looked at him and hiccupped. “Okay … ready … GO!” He squeezed hard.

“Harder,” she said. He lengthened his fingers and tightened his grip. “Don’t let go until I say,” she told him. He squeezed harder. He looked at her; she looked at their two hands. She watched his knuckles go white. “You can use two hands if you want,” she told him.

“No, I’m just doing it soft so I won’t hurt you,” the boy said.
“You won’t hurt me,” she said. “Just squeeze it really as hard as you possibly can.” He squeezed with all his strength. The fish splashed around, the girl shifted in her seat, the rain continued to hover and the dark sky swirled around them.

He concentrated hard on his hand; she looked up at how his hair fell in front of one eye. He glanced at her knee, and then at the fish. She looked at his shoulder, and across to the lines of his mouth. He looked at her ear and the soft wave of eyelash curved toward her cheek. He leant in closer; she was looking at his fist curled around her finger. He wanted her to look up at him, to part her lips and let him press his mouth against them.

He squeezed some more. “How much longer?” he asked.

“Just twenty seconds left …” she said. She counted off in her head, “… but when time’s up, you must not let go fast. When time’s up, just loosen your grip. Open your fingers just enough … okay … TIME!” He relaxed his grip. “Now, open your fingers just enough to let me take my finger out.” He did this and her hot pink finger slipped away out of its tunnel. She shook her hand then lent forward and pursed her lips towards his knuckles. His face felt weird like he might have a spasm. She blew gently across his fist, and caressed the top of his hand with her fingers. “Okay, now open … very, very slowly …” she said. “… slowly … slowly … can you feel it yet…?” His fist felt like it had been glued shut. His fingers had no feeling. As he tried to uncurl them, it was like invisible strings drew them closed into a tight ball.

“Ha ha, that’s great,” he said. “I can’t feel my fingers!”

“I know,” she said. “Isn’t it weird?” He used more force and his fingers opened, tingling and heavy as lead. His hand started to feel light and she clapped with glee that it had worked.

The rain released itself. Big fat drops splattering down on them. He bent down and grabbed the fish; she placed her hand over the rim of the tea cup. They ran together to shelter under the trees. They pressed their backs against the trunk to keep close under the canopy of leaves above. They huddled together, he with the cup in the palm of his hand and she forming the lid to keep the fish in. She gently raised her hand and they looked in at Sunny. He floated softly on the surface, one goggly eye peering up at them.

“Is he dead?” asked the boy. The girl reached a finger in and poked at him. He flinched and righted himself, then wriggled a little and made a strange backwards motion, like he was trying to swim but couldn’t.
“No – not dead,” said the girl. There was a second or two, the rain continued, time caught up with them. They realized how close they were to each other.

“Hey your hiccups have stopped,” he said.

“Huh – so they have,” said she. Their sides were flush against each other, they shared each other’s body warmth and there was a feeling in the air of awkward mixed with possibility. She glanced across at him. He was looking into the distance. She looked down at the fish, as the boy shifted his gaze towards her. This was the moment. This was when.

“Hey, Lucy,” he said softly. “Thanks for telling me about the peas and the fish.”
I am a dog. I don’t have a vote, but that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t have a voice. My name is Annie. I am a Border Collie. I have another name, but it is long and complicated and is only used when I am taken to beauty contests. My mother is called Kanga. She is old. My father’s name was Biggles. He died when I was only a few months old. I don’t remember much about him except that he was very kind to me unless I went near his food bowl. My mother says that he was a fast and deadly lover.

We live with a woman. She prefers hardware emporiums to jewellery stores. She was nonplussed by my arrival and now knows that my father was a fast and deadly lover. She says that she owns us. The cat tells us that this is a ludicrous idea, but, unlike her, we are comfortable with concepts of ownership, loyalty, devotion, integrity and commitment. Our owner also says that she loves us. In her negligent way she probably does, but she could exercise us more often and be more vigilant in respect of the control of our internal and external parasites. Pleasant as she is, she has a few idiosyncrasies. I don’t understand why she lets the cat shred the sofa, sit on her pillow, wipe its bum on the kitchen bench and scatter fur throughout the linen cupboard when, if I dare to poke my nose inside the front door, she carries on as though I’ve just slaughtered the neighbour’s chooks.

We live on a two-acre block. Our nearest neighbours include Zac from across the road. He is a black Labrador. I think he fancies me. Cromwell, a King Charles Cavalier Spaniel, lives further up the street. His owner walks him using a retractable lead that no self-respecting dog would be seen dead on. Our owner says that she doesn’t believe in leads, except near roads. If we meet other dogs out on walks, she refuses to put us back on lead and tells us to look after ourselves and not to pick fights. She seems to think Cromwell is something special. At last week’s chance meeting this is the drivel I had to listen to:

‘Is Cromwell enjoying his morning constitutional? Would Cromwell like a pat? Is it true that many King Charles Cavalier Spaniels are born by Caesarean because their heads are so big? Annie was born by Caesarean.’

I don’t seem to have a right to privacy.
The Rottweilers from around the corner are always good for a challenge through the fence. We don’t know their names, they don’t know our names and we would like to keep it that way.

Sally and Bella are our next-door neighbours. Sally is a fat dog of unknown pedigree. She pretends to be savage, but I’m not worried by her. I like to stir her up. At speed she resembles an out-of-control freight train. Bella is an Italian Sheepdog. She falls over her own feet – so much for European style. She replaced the blue heeler that died just after we moved in. Kanga says that one day we will all be replaced. I don’t believe her. The cat says that Kanga is right.

Sally and Bella have poultry in their yard – chooks, ducks and guinea fowl. Kanga and I stare at them and think thoughts that should not be disclosed to municipal authorities. The guinea fowl have squatters’ rights in one of our trees. Our owner calls it a hangman’s tree. She says that if she ever wants to hang herself it will come in handy. As I said before – idiosyncrasies! At dawn and as the sky darkens each evening, the guinea fowl fly over the fence and roost in our tree. There, silhouetted like gargoyles, they screech. My inner-wolf unleashes.

Daily we sit underneath the hangman’s tree. Sometimes the guinea fowl poo on us. I’ve had a poo stuck on my head for days. Hopefully Kanga will chew it off. She likes eating guinea fowl poo. Our owner says that it is not her responsibility to remove it, nor does she approve of the eating of poo off one’s head. You can’t win.

Fortunately, for my inner-wolf, a guinea fowl fell out of the tree one morning. Before I know what was happening its legs were in my mouth. Its head bounced and wobbled – upside down, banging on the ground. I pranced. I could have pranced all day! All pure instinct. Not my fault. Not my fault either that I enjoyed the heady combination of blood-lust and adrenaline – but not for long! She Whom We Protect With Our Lives flew out of the house faster than a garbage truck bearing down on a Chihuahua. I’ve been screamed at before, but never by someone clad only in underwear.

‘Look at those pubes,’ said the cat. ‘She could have waxed!’

So shocked was I at the mayhem I had unleashed that I opened my mouth. The guinea fowl cartwheeled away – all flying feathers and bad manners. Kanga barrelled into me: ‘You’ve got to hang on and shake. Remind me never to take you to the Serengeti.’

Since the guinea fowl incident I’ve spent many days skulking in the heliconias, ashamed, but still conscious of my inner-wolf. Kanga told me to snap out of it. And
I’ve tried to. This morning we had an outrageous experience together. I almost go into spasms thinking about it. One of the neighbour’s ducks flew into our yard. It was a big duck with glossy, dark green feathers. Kanga says that they are quite beautiful, but I prefer the texture of guinea fowl feathers myself.

Are we dogs not descended from the wolf? Are we not born for this very eventuality? Are we not fast and deadly? Are we not fleet of foot and silent like the moon? Would we fight on the beaches? Would every dog, like us, not do its duty? Would we never surrender?

Kanga had told me that we needed to hunt like a pair of scissors, one of us hanging back on the left flank and the other slicing in on the right, silent but deadly. At first I was afraid, but as soon as I knew I had a certain kill lined up, something took over, something primeval, something very David Attenborough. In the moments following the slaughter, my mind was filled with a white light and I can’t remember much, but later I savoured the tantalising moments of warm flesh, loose feathers, severed legs, a lifeless head, torn entrails and a bloodied cavernous torso. But afterwards, as we lay amongst feathers strewn under the red currawong tree, fear settled upon me. I confided in Kanga.

‘We’re going to be in trouble when she finds out. I know she’ll go on about this being the sort of neighbourly embarrassment she can do without. Or her other favourite – ‘the truth is in the bloodstains’. If we were all black it wouldn’t be so obvious, but these white legs and chests of ours, they might look smart in the show-ring, but they’re a liability if you want to lie yourself out of trouble. And whatever are we going to do with all these feathers? She’ll never believe that they are leaves.’

The cat, who sneers at anyone’s right to reflection, called me gutless.

‘Killing,’ she hissed, ‘is not something you should harbour guilt about.’

Kanga told me to chill out.

‘It was self-defence. The duck was a trespasser. It attacked us. We were only doing what was expected of us.’

‘I don’t think she’ll believe us. The duck didn’t have teeth.’

‘Trust me. She knows the legend of Gelert.’

‘Gelert who?’
‘Gelert was a dog, the faithful hound of Llywelyn the Great, Prince of Gwynedd. That’s in Wales, near where our ancestors came from. One day, Llywelyn comes home from hunting and finds that his baby is missing. Gelert is there, with blood on his face. The prince thinks Gelert has killed his baby and smotes him, smotes him dead, with his sword. Gelert’s dying yelp startles the baby, lying unharmed under its cot, next to a dead wolf that had been killed by Gelert when it came to attack the baby. She who’ll be home soon with our lamb off-cuts told me about this before you were born. As a child she’d been traumatised by the story. It was in her school reader. Back then curriculum development moved slowly and for fifty years every ten year old enrolled with the Primary Correspondence School read about the legend of Gelert and how the Prince never smiled again and where in the village of Beddgelert there is a sacred site, Gelert’s grave, with words written on stone, telling everyone what happened. Someone copied the words down and put them in a book. That’s why she’s a bit soft in the head when it comes to dogs and why she’ll swallow the self-defence story – her vulnerability – our lucky day! But listen, there’s more. Some days what we are and what we do are all she has when the black dog lurks.’

‘What black dog? At the gate? Behind the mussaendas? I’ve been vigilant. I ain’t seen no black dog lurking.’

‘No, not any ordinary dog, Churchill’s black dog.’

‘Churchill? Is that the bloke from number eight?’

Kanga snarled at me, raised lip, canine tooth exposed, standard intimidation that I’m used to.

‘I give up! I was going to explain it all to you, why some days she lies on the sofa and watches back-to-back episodes of Mr Bean and why I’m glad that the hangman’s tree is riddled with termites. I’m going to have to wait until the hair wears off your elbows and if I get run over by a truck before you get wise then you’re going to have to figure it out for yourself. You just carry on up-ending possums in the middle of the night, shaking hands with visitors and slaying the odd omnivorous duck. Let the management of her soul be my maggoty bone.’

Kanga knows more than me. I am stronger, but she is top-dog. She makes it sound as though there is nothing I can do, other than the normal stuff I’m already doing. I’m worried about our owner having that black dog hanging around her. Today when she gets home, I’ll be at the gate to greet her. I’ll bounce and I’ll leap at her and slap my tongue across her face. She calls it a special kiss. I want her to know that she can’t live without us. I’m worried also about this poultry business. Despite
what Kanga says about Gelert and Churchill, I don’t think we should push our luck. The cat says that because of what we have done the cat door will never be enlarged to dog size. The cat tells me that dogs that like too much the red of heart-pumped blood end up having a green dream. I don’t trust the cat, but I believe her.
I like hanging from the fence at the airport. Sometimes I grab the fence up high and just hang like a monkey and my feet don’t touch the ground. This feels good and I like how my back stretches but I have to hold on tight and the tips of my fingers turn white. For a few seconds I have white fellah’s fingers. White fellah fingers on a black fellah. Other times I spread my arms and legs wide and I cling to the fence like a big black spider same like the ones Aunty squashes in the kitchen. That’s me for a minute, a big black spider in footy shorts clinging to the airport fence like it’s my own steel spiders’ web.

I wonder what them white fellahs getting off the planes think when they see me hanging and clinging. Maybe before they get close enough to get a good look at me they think I really am a monkey hanging there or a black spider in footy shorts clinging to steel web but I’m not a monkey or a spider, I’m a rabbit. That’s my name. That’s what everyone calls me – Rabbit. Aunty told me that I couldn’t speak my real name when I was a little fellah. My real name is Robert but I could only say Rabbit. Uncle says I am called Rabbit because I have big ears. I don’t know if my ears really are big like uncle says but I know I have big hands and big feet, bigger then the other fellahs who play footy and the footy boss on the Island told me I am tall for a black fellah. He said I am a ‘freak’ and even though I think this may not be a word that is always a good word I feel happy that I am a freak cause the Island footy boss promised me it means I am a good footy player. That’s why I play footy with the older fellahs, because I’m so tall that I’m a freak. I am twelve now but in three months I will be thirteen and even though I can say Robert real easy not like when I was a little fellah, I am still called Rabbit.

I come to the airport every day because I like to watch the planes. There are two types of planes that come to our airport. Small planes that sound like mozzies when they are far away and a big plane that howls like a pack of camp dogs when it stops. This is my favourite plane and I like to look real close at the Sheila who opens the door of this plane. She is what uncle would call a red hot Sheila and if I stare long enough I get that feeling in my footy shorts. This feeling makes me feel shame but I like this feeling. I got this feeling once in school because the teacher had a face I liked. I am sort of glad this teacher didn’t stay long in the school as I got too much shame from that feeling in my footy shorts. We have a lot of teachers come and go from our school and sometimes even the big boss teacher doesn’t
stay long. Uncle says that the teachers just come to our Island for the money and that the school can stick their teachers up their arse. This sounds stupid to me as our school doesn’t have an arse. I don’t say this to uncle though as this is would be cheek and big fellahs don’t like cheek.

Uncle makes me go to school. He says if I don’t go I will end up an idiot like my dad. I hate when uncle says this but even when I shout that my Dad isn’t an idiot uncle just says I wouldn’t know as I have never seen my Dad. This makes me angry not because I have never seen my Dad but because maybe uncle is right. Maybe my Dad is an idiot but I don’t know, I’ve never seen my Dad. Even though I can have any desk I want in the classroom ‘cause not many blackfellahs come to school I always sit at the same desk. There is a piece of sun that comes in the window on to this desk and I like to leave my muesli bar where this piece of sun can find it. This makes the bar soft and I like eating it soft. I don’t like my milk to get any of the sun that comes in the window ‘cause I like my milk cold so I keep my milk under the desk.

All the planes bring lots of white fellahs in orange jackets to work on the mine. The white fellahs sometimes have lots of hair or no hair but they always have a beard. Maybe in their country all the fellahs have beards and it would be bad not to have one. I want to ask one of the white fellahs but I am worried this would be cheek. Uncle once told me that ‘cause there’s no Sheilas on the mine the white fellahs do the sex thing with each other in their dongas. Aunty told uncle to shut up and told him he’s a daft old bastard who knows nothing about anything. Aunty tells this to uncle almost every day and night. Some of these white fellahs play footy against us black fellahs but they are too old and fat. We run quickly and they can’t catch us but if they do catch us they smash us into the dust real hard. Uncle says this is because they playa different footy called rugby where all the fellahs just smash each other. Uncle says the white fellahs can stick their rugby up their arse. But we don’t mind when these white fellahs from the mine smash us into the dust ‘cause after the game they always cook us snags and give us cold Coke from a box called an esky. The big boss white fellah on the mine gave the Island footy boss money to buy us new footy jumpers so us black fellahs are happy with the white fellahs from the mine.

Sometimes when the plane lands there is a white fellah with a dog. This dog sniffs all the bags looking for gunja. Uncle says the dog should stick to sniffing other dogs arseholes as there is enough gunja on the Island to make Bob Marley turn in his grave. Uncle told me that Bob Marley was the best black fellah singer but now he is dead. I want to ask uncle did he get the sadness from smoking too much
gunja and make himself die. This is what happened to one of the mob from the big house behind the hospital. He smoked lots of gunja and got the sadness. He got the sadness so bad he made himself dead. I don’t ask uncle about Bob Marley or the sadness or fellahs making themselves dead cause uncle doesn’t talk about this business.

One time I got some sadness and didn’t want to play footy. I had shame but the Island footy boss is real smart and he knew I had some sadness because I didn’t want to play any footy. He took me to his house. His house is not like my house. His house is clean and not smashed up. The Island footy boss has a wife who is from another country called France. She grabbed my face and gave me a kiss on each cheek. These were good kisses, not bad kisses. Bad kisses are what cousin gave my sister. The Island footy boss wife is a good Sheila. Her name is Fleur and in her language that means flower. She made me a cup of hot chocolate and told me that in her country they drink hot chocolate for breakfast from a bowl. When she reached up to get the tin of hot chocolate I saw that she had hair under her arms like older fellahs from footy. She works for the council helping black fellahs get jobs.

When I told uncle about their house he told me that Fleur is a do-gooder and she should piss off back to her own country. Uncle told me that in her country they eat frogs’ legs. Sometimes uncle kills frogs when they make noise in the wet and keep him awake. Maybe next time I will bring a dead frog to Fleur so she can have its legs. I don’t think I would eat frogs’ legs though.

Today I am at the airport for a special reason. Today the big footy man from down south is coming to watch me play footy. I know this because the Island footy boss told me last week. The Island footy boss is waiting in his troopy while I am hanging from the fence watching for the big footy man from down south. Uncle says he doesn’t trust the footy man from down south. He said he is a pervert ‘cause he likes to watch young boys play footy. I don’t know this word but when I told the Island footy boss what uncle said he just laughed and said uncle is a daft old bugger. Uncle isn’t happy because the footy man from down south is from the Bombers. Uncle hates the Bombers. He told me that the mob from Jabiru and Tiwi shouldn’t call their team the Bombers because during the war some slant-eyed yellow mob dropped bombs on our country. He told me these slant-eyed yellow mob are called japs. There is a slant-eyed yellow fellah who owns the takeaway where we get food but uncle says he isn’t a jap, he is a china man, but that they are same, same but different. I don’t know if I understand how something is same, same but different but I don’t say this to uncle because this might be cheek. Aunty tells uncle she wishes the japs would come back and bomb the casino where uncle goes so that
he can't give the royalty to the casino. The royalty is the money the mine fellahs
give to uncle for digging up his country. I never hear uncle say that the white fellah
should stick the royalty up his arse. Uncle hates the Bombers but in our house
there is a picture of a black fellah who was a Bomber. This fellahs name in Michael
Long and uncle says he was the best black fellah ever to play footy. Uncle says that
one day when he finished footy this Michael Long walked for days and days to
humbug the big big boss of all the white fellahs and tell him to be good to all of
us black fellahs. Uncle hates the Bombers but he loves this Michael Long fellah.

Uncle was the best footy player on the Island when he was a young fellah and
even went to Darwin to play for a big footy team. Uncle won a grand final for
this big team but he can never show me a photo of him holding a cup because
one Christmas some crazy sheila named Tracy smashed up the whole town. Uncle
said that Tracy smashed every house in the town and the house with all the footy
pictures was smashed the worst. I don’t know what made this sheila Tracy so crazy
but uncle curses Tracy a lot because she smashed everything up and even made
some people dead.

I let go of the fence so that the footy man from down south doesn’t think I am
a monkey or a spider in footy shorts. I can see him now walking from the plane.
I know it is him because he has a bag that’s like a net. In this bag that’s like a net
are some shiny new footballs. They look like turtle eggs. I know these balls are
for me to kick and hand ball. The Island footy boss is out of the troopy now and
shakes hands with the big footy boss from down south then points at me. The big
footy boss from down south walks over and gives me a big hug. I don’t know
many white fellahs that give hugs but this is a good hug. This is a hug like I get
when I score a goal. This is not a bad hug like cousin gave my sister. The big footy
boss from down south tells me I am tall for a black fellah and gives me a cap. It’s a
Bombers cap and I like the colours. I am happy as uncle won’t take this cap from
me as he hates the Bombers. He also gives me the bag like a net with the shiny
new footballs to carry. Now I have to take care of the net full of turtle eggs.

I sit in the back of the troopy and look at my new cap. This is a real good cap and
I can make it any size I want by moving a strap at the back. The Island footy boss
and the big footy boss from down south are talking in the front of the troopy.
When we drive past the Centrelink place where aunty goes to get the card she
uses at the store, the footy boss from down south says that it must be the busiest
place on the Island. They both laugh but I am not sure if it is a laugh I like. I want
to ask the footy boss from down south how he knows it is a busy place because it
is Saturday and the Centrelink place is closed. I don’t ask though as I am worried
this might be cheek and the Island footy boss told me not to speak too much, just let my footy do the talking.

The big footy boss down south talks to me a lot but I don’t say a word. He tells me to stay away from the grog, the gunja, and the cards and to eat the right foods. He tells me that the best footy players don’t eat fried chicken and drink Coke, they eat what he calls a balanced diet. I am not sure I understand the words balanced diet so I want to ask if the best footy players only have one takeaway and a store to buy food from but I don’t ask this as I know in my heart that this would be cheek.

When the troopy pulls into the oval the big footy boss asks more questions, hard questions about my house, school, uncle and aunty and these questions give me shame job. He says that if I do the right things then next year I can go down south and play footy with all the other black fellahs who are good at footy.

I can’t tell him about the sadness, about the coppers taking cousin away ‘cause of the wrong hugs he gave to my sister or how the things in my head I want to talk about can’t ever be talked about because we don’t talk about any of that business. I start to feel bad inside.

The net full of footies is in my hand and I tip the footies out carefully, one by one as if they really are turtle eggs. The big footy boss from down south walks down the oval away from me and shouts at me to kick the footies to him and now I feel good again. I know if I kick well and the big footy man from down south is happy I can become a real famous footy player on the TV. I wonder will the white fellahs who talk the games on TV call me Rabbit?
Blind to [all but] The Unnameable

Michael Giacometti

Before man all was
formless; shadows roamed:
opaque, nameless.

Once man [spirit-men, our ancestors] has named
all the creatures, the creatures
rename … [untranslatable].

[ … ]

[When] Koomanjay in white
sends cloaking clouds south,
nothing can be seen

All is Koomanjay:
unseen, unknown, un-named;
All is Koomanjay

from the recently unearthed – and poorly translated, unpublished (Ed.) – Tablet of Koomanjay

Sir, a bony finger tapped in Morse on the back of his hand. Sir, harder this time, insistent, we are approaching … Creek. Sir, tap–tap–tap, tap–tap, tap–taaap–tap. The translator, M, sat up without registering the bright torch being shone directly in his face, or the darkness enclosing the hand, the man, the room and corridor behind it; he smelt the man’s minted breath, tasted the hint of garlic that the mint was sucked to hide; he savoured the superstitious fear that still oozed like cheap perfume from his glands, and the rhythmic rallentando clack–clack over the stapled joins of track.

M bounced south along the corridor. Viewed from outside the train, someone standing stationary would have seen a man as if he was walking determinedly on a treadmill in a well-lit corridor, not advancing despite his regular stride, many windows and carriages moving past him like an old-time movie set. The two could reach out and shake hands, the moving one and the stationary one, without difficulty, and the train set would pass and be replaced by a scrubby plain. Inside the corridor, M felt like a ball in a pinball machine, bouncing with Newtonian
regularity from one wall to the other with the lurching progress of the train, his woollen jacket rasping like sandpaper on the rendered walls.

At a geriatric pace the train passed through the station. The train never stopped here, never picked anything or anyone up; there was no raised platform to step out onto, just rammed earth and a single flickering light on a low pole, the only luminous presence for hundreds of miles along this stretch of line.

The guard who woke M stood beside him in the open doorway, his arm extended, barring the exit. With his other arm he pulled a lever and a rubber object fell from below the door into the night. With a whoosh and crackle of expanding rubber, the slide inflated. The guard placed a hand on M’s nearest shoulder and gave a firm push downwards. M sat. What time is it, M asked. We are a little early, replied the guard after consulting his watch, it is just after 4.

The guard placed M’s leather satchel in his hands and pushed him down the slide, like a caring father or over-attentive ‘uncle’. As his feet touched earth, M compressed his body into a spring and placed his third leg, his ‘looking’ leg, in front and stood.

How far to town from here? he called over his shoulder. The answer was ready on the guard’s lips. At one step per foot, M computed, three to the yard … 16,500 paces.

Turn left twenty degrees and follow the road all the way; you can’t miss it, the guard added. And, God be with you, he murmured to himself as M turned and tapped forward out of the scant light and was soon lost to the enclosing dark.

The local mayor sat on the bonnet of his battered, red-dirt splattered Toyota beside the defaced sign that used to say Welcome to … Creek, looking south. Out of the glooming, along the dead straight highway, a dark speck grew in size. The mayor looked away and squeezed his eyes tight closed, opened them zombie-wide and rapidly moved his eyeballs from side to side and back again. After closing and opening them again, he renewed his southerly gaze. The speck had grown like a tumour, had consolidated into a lone man. Minutes later, the walking metronome, rhythmically tap-tapping bitumen–gravel, bitumen–gravel, came to a sudden halt one yard from the truck. To the mayor, the sudden silence was shocking. After a long pause he said, Welcome, as he slid from the truck, his practised hand easily finding M’s for a brief, but softly-held, affirmation.

M had known he was approaching the town limit. The low hum of the deserted highway gave way suddenly, almost without him recognising the exact moment
of when the comforting brrr was replaced by the harsh buzz of electric fields, the 
whining drone of air-conditioners, the keening of constant death, and something 
else, something that to his rigorous mind was, as yet, un-describable. Even at this 
time, with the encroaching dawn, almost everyone still dead to the world and the 
streets empty of life, to his acute senses the town positively screamed.

Hop in, the mayor said, opening the passenger door for M, I’ll show you around.

M felt his way up into the cab, buckled his seatbelt and placed an elbow on the 
open window sill. The truck spat gravel as it took off and fishtailed the turn back 
north. The mayor spoke at length, but it was mostly small talk, stuff to a-ha and 
nod your head to, nothing more. M listened as much as simple courtesy demanded 
but … A typical south-easterly was rising with the sun, and on it was carried 
the undertones of decay, campfire and rotten flesh. Faint traces of the remains 
of the abandoned outer camp lingered, long after the remaining residents had 
moved upwind of town to keep well away from the Pangkarlangu that haunted the 
scattered camps in lee of the town.

Pangkarlangu? said M. A devil-devil, the mayor replied, it disguises itself as trees or 
birds or family and sings and calls to people, then kills and eats them. Its breath is 
foul. Dogs cower, won’t go near it.

By this time they had passed the outer camps and scattered houses and industrial 
zone and medium-density residential and reached the shopping strip. The local 
mayor had lobbied hard for the train line to pass through town, to run parallel to 
Main Street, the Track beside which many houses of retail were built and sold and 
sold again and were now mostly boarded up. The economic boom that the whole 
town had banked on with the railway had bust them again. Only the bottle shop 
and grocery store did any trade. (The undertaker was flat out but few could pay, 
so he had excavated a communal pit west of town that looked like an open-cut 
mine, and for twenty bucks per, he dumped the dead in hessian sacks and covered 
them with a smattering of soil; he was on to his second pit.) The buildings they 
drove slowly past, as if in review, were decrepit. Paint peeled from faded signs, 
broken windows boarded and ripped open again, cairns of excrement erected 
with difficulty on the floor—imagine standing over the fetid pile, trousers around 
your ankles, thrusting your arse out over the pinnacle, holding on to your friends 
or family, trusting them to hold you up as your equilibrium is ready to topple you 
onto the filth, and you pucker and push and they laugh as you add your black 
pudding or pebbles to the summit of croquembouche, a la kuna. With a foresight 
not previously evinced from the planners and engineers, the line speared directly 
for the town before turning abruptly and climbing a small steep rise without one
pick blade of cutting – a double bane of the railway, which for efficiency and expediency required straight and level tracks – to effectively skirt the town to the windward, coming no closer than 250 chains.

* * *

Inside one of the town’s eight pubs a familiar scene was being enacted.

You got ID? What’s your name?

Koomanjay, he said, barely audible.

Koomanjay ... She said it loudly, as if to make the whisperer speak louder. Easily distracted drinkers’ heads rose to look.

Yuwa.

Koomanjay what?

West.

The clicking of keys and a final, forceful enter. I’m sorry but there is no Koomanjay West in the system. There is ... Adam, a Bobby, Franklin, Kane ... and Tennant and Theophanus and ...

The man quickly covered his ears and forced his eyes closed. He stumbled backwards as if being man-handled by bouncers from the drunken pub. The teller continued to call out a litany of (dead) Wests, an incantation that caused sores to erupt spontaneously on his face and the exposed skin of his arms. As his mouth finally opened he fell through the glass and stumbled onto the street from between two parked cars just as the mayor drove by.

Fuck, not again, said the mayor, hitting the steering wheel with a forceful expiration and dropping his head imperceptibly. Fucken’ Koomanjay, fucken’ curse, he said, pulling over in front of the newsagent to inspect the latest dint. He did not check the fallen man. He was already marked by death.

Well, said the mayor, at least it’s quicker and cleaner than being drunk-bashed with fists, with rocks, with sticks or bricks, with anything close to hand.

As the words slapped M, a low keening wail, rising and falling in pitch and intensity, approached. From out of the laneway beside the hotel a procession of downcast white-faced people appeared and crossed the road to the dead West. How did they know already? It was as if the string of his life pulled taught had alerted the family, like a strand being pulled on a spider’s web. The wailing was primal and incessant.
All the Jangalas and Nangalas, their uncles and aunties, fathers and mothers and children mobbed together, sheltering in the communal howl, plastered in kaolin-white clay all over: in their hair, on their faces and arms, their exposed chests and backs, their bare feet; and over their belted jeans. The cleansing smoke of eucalypt drifted from flour drums converted into priestly censers carried by the managers, those that listen to the story for this one. The white ones, invisible to malignant evil, lifted the dead West and the procession of mourning slowly walked him to the endless sorry camp to the north-east of town.

The town is cursed, said the mayor, plain and simple. There’s so many people dying, someone, mobs dying, every day. No one can work. The town has turned into a never-ending sorry camp. The Town & Place Names have gazetted the new name, Koomanjay Creek, and are considering dropping the ‘Creek’ because someone here will know some poor bastard called Craig who must surely die sometime soon. The mayor shook his head. Shit, fucken’ Koomanjay. Look at this shit, he said tossing the paper at M, you can’t read the fucken’ paper anymore, all the bloody koomanjay-koomanjay which they’ve shortened to kumnji. The town is getting lost in all this. And these guys here, he pointed to the mob taking the dead West north-east, they run the cult.

The nameless abomination, killing that within us that cannot be named, M quoted. The mayor looked at him sitting like a penitent, facing forward, the paper resting on his hands in his lap. He turned and spat and got out of the truck. His boots squelched on the already melting bitumen of morning.

The record of history, said M, unsure and not caring if the mayor could hear, that which was not reported did not occur, and what is unnamed never existed. He picked up the newspaper and flattened it in his lap as if smoothing out creases in bed sheets. His fingers automatically moved to the top of the page to read the modern stone tablet, not in Braille, but by feel. As his fingers moved across the page, the shape of the inked letters was absorbed into his fingertips. The letters of the incomprehensible headline formed on his lips: KUMNJI-SLATOR KUMNJI-KUMNJI KUMNJI KUMNJI-KUMNJI. The occasional plain-English word amid the destruction of a language afforded some context. With deftness and an intimate knowledge of birth names he settled on the following translation: TRAN-SLATOR DES-LUCIFER KOOMANJAY TABATHA-LES. M said the phrase aloud. The mayor looked up. What did you say? M continued reading, his fingers moving excitedly across the sheet and returning, smudging the inky letters until at the end of the page the sharp edge cut him. A drop of inky blood fell and spread and rapidly turned the page crimson.
The cut stung. The wailing rose in waves again. Another death nearby, said M, another nobody for that place … the one, you know … that, um … pit. M began to forget the names for things. That part of him began to blur and became indistinct when looked at or concentrated upon; muffled and poorly heard. The named were becoming un-, un-placed, purged. In the emerging but not-unpleasant dimness a song grew in intensity. He recognised snippets as those he had heard approaching the town this morning. This was the unnameable song, the song of the town. It was no aria; it had gone beyond dirge and sailed through the strait of the eye-scratching sirens; it was the eternal chorus of those trapped in flaming tombs of the deep pit, six circles below.

As the life slowly bled out of M into the blotting paper he determinedly held, he started to form the words he thought he heard, the unnameable names, but koomanjay koomanjay he koomanjay koomanjay? Koomanjay who koomanjay koomanjay-d out … koomanjay koomanjay?
The Professor Brocklebank-Jeavons Memorial Biology Lecture on the early biohistory of the FAT

Blair McFarland

Greetings, students and Kowabunga! Welcome to this annual lecture commemorating the work of Hugh Brocklebank-Jeavons, the famous surfing biologist.

As can be gleaned from the set reading for this lecture, the biohistory of the Free Aboriginal Territory (FAT) is interwoven with its general history. It will be surprising for those who have not made a study of the early colonial history of the FAT that once vast amounts of the land were seriously degraded and incapable of supporting life. Extinctions of native biota were common. This was due to the imposition of inappropriate cultural practices by the colonists, such as farming and the running of cattle and other livestock that was not adapted for the environment. At that moment in history it seemed the Australian indigenous fauna was going to become extinct and would be lost forever. Wouldn’t that have been a bummer during the global warming period – losing biology adapted to arid and low water climatic extremes. What would our ancestors have eaten during the desert era without bush tucker and kangaroo? However, this potentially catastrophic loss of arid zone biodiversity was not the case, as can be seen from a visit to any part of the FAT. You can’t walk anywhere without disturbing a host of different marsupials; wallabies and possums and so on, darting away as you walk through the grasslands and mulga forests. The thriving wildlife evident there is due to a definite policy decision taken by the custodians of the FAT once it had seceded from the NT in 2017.

To back up somewhat, the FAT was in those early 21st century days a neglected wasteland of failed cattle and farming projects. It was administered by the city/state Darwinopolis, which is to say, systematically neglected, plundered and eventually leased out as a depository for nuclear waste from all around the globe. Ironically, this was to be its salvation. The breakthrough in the mid 21st century in thorium reactor technology meant that discarded nuclear waste could be recycled to produce clean energy, with the only by-product harmless carbon. Suddenly, the
world was bidding for the waste they had so carefully distanced themselves from in a previous generation.

But what bid could tempt the people of the FAT, who had given up on money and were happily living a modified hunter/gatherer lifestyle? The custodians of the FAT met and discussed the situation. According to the Khan Chronicle, the elders laughed for a solid week, and further discussions over the next few weeks were punctuated with outbreaks of giggling. The male custodians requested that, in exchange for the nuclear waste, they wanted extinct local fauna cloned from remaining museum specimens and released back into the wild. The female custodians requested a similar program aimed at reintroducing bush tucker into the wild.

Over the next hundred years, the local vegetation and wildlife were returned, much to the joy of the hunters of the region. Now they had a range of meat options, from wallaby to kangaroo rat to selected megafauna, such as the 100 kilogram possum and diprotodonts. Hunting enough meat for a family’s food was taking a party of men about four hours per week. This was about how long it had taken before the time when the Whitefellas messed up the environment. In the end, the Days of the Whitefella were a short period in the geological timeframe of Indigenous people of Australia, but around the campfire at night, parents still frightened their children with the stories from that time.

The permaculture plantings of local food plants had taken place in parallel to the cloning. After a century of reintroduction of local flora from seed stock, there was a wide range of natural foods within an easy walk from anywhere in the FAT. It was taking parties of women about eight hours a week to gather enough food to feed the families. It would have taken less time except that the kids trailing along tended to consume almost as much as they collected, and anyway, what’s the rush? It’s not like they had any cleaning or washing or shopping to do. And it’s great to be out with the women and kids, walking around together a couple of times per week. Again, this was the same as pre-Whitefella times.

The model of nomadic society that the FAT represented, and the clearly enjoyable lifestyle seen in the FAT, had a profound influence on the rest of the world. The FAT demonstrated that it was possible to live in Eden. The average citizen of the FAT lived a healthy, stress-free and active life, full of other people and an unspoiled natural landscape, and with all the time in the world to enjoy it. Without the low quality Whitefella food and alcohol, previously endemic chronic diseases disappeared from the populations of the FAT. Once the impediments of civilisation were removed, the genes of Aboriginal people demonstrated the advantages that
arise from 100,000 years of survival of the fittest. All over the world, Aboriginal DNA became a sought after commodity for IVF. Cute black babies were born across an increasingly hot world where hardy nomadic traits were an advantage to survival. As you know, the environment has been stabilised now, but the consequences of the eugenics of the late 21st century means there are very few pureblood Whitefellas left any more.

The custodians of the FAT ensured their youth could maintain access to selected useful technologies, but most people had better things to do and didn’t worry about it.

The environmental crises at the end of the Oil Age had made the population of the globe receptive to looking at lifestyles that were not so consumer oriented, as it had become clear that the planet could not sustain such lifestyles. It was fortunate indeed for the future of the human race that Indigenous culture in Australia had been so resilient, surviving the madness of the agricultural and machine age with the kernel of their nomadic hunter/gatherer lifestyle intact. This kernel became the DNA of the global society, as the planet shifted over a few generations into the endlessly sustainable and very enjoyable lifestyle we all now enjoy.

But I digress. That’s enough ancient history for today. Students will read up on the next lecture topic: mining the dump – how plastic in landfill produced the oil needed for the transitional era at the start of the Green Age.

See you next week. Hey, does anyone fancy going after some kangaroo rats for a BBQ? We could make some spears with those saplings over there. I know where some bush tomatoes are ripe. Or will we go surfing first?
Photographing Toast
Bronwyn Mehan

Ryl can smell the burning toast as she climbs the steps. There is always this smell in housing commission flats. Often there will be three-minute noodles or bacon or chips frying, too. But it seems to Ryl that there will always be someone, somewhere, making toast. Convenient, versatile and dead easy – toast is the queen of comfort food.

When she raps on the aluminium panel there is no answer. She looks for the guy’s name on the coloured tab of the file her supervisor had given her, then calls through the screen door.

‘Mr Bagshaw. Are you there? It’s Ryl from SAINTS.’

She presses her face against the screen door. Pale blue smoke hangs suspended in the lounge room like a trapped rain cloud. Ryl thinks of Ashok, her supervisor, driving off just now on a suddenly-remembered errand and she feels ambushed by panic. For so long she’d wanted to be free of scrutiny and yet, it seems, the moment the guard abandons his post, there is danger.

‘Mr Bagshaw,’ she calls again, this time louder, her hands cupping her mouth. ‘Are you in there?’

Ryl’s first week at SAINTS, Supported Accommodation Inc. Northern Territory, began well enough. She rode along with Ashok in the white Hi-Ace van as he called on his clients to find out what groceries they needed or what errands they wanted done. On Monday she met Irene, a wheelchair-bound woman in her seventies who is very particular about her grocery order. On Tuesday there was Tobias, a wiry Aboriginal guy who dresses like a cowboy and who has just had both eyes operated on. During the trips to and from the shopping centre, Ashok would give Ryl some background information about these SAINTS clients.

‘Tony Bagshaw’s ABI,’ Ashok had told her earlier this morning as they drove along the highway. ‘It’s all in there.’

Ryl’s eyes scanned the file. There it was, typed below Tony Bagshaw’s age (42) and address in Nightcliff. Acquired Brain Injury. She thought, acquired was a weird word to use outside of food. Ryl had acquired a taste for olives, for instance. It had taken time, but eventually the flavour stopped being disgusting. Not just
smothered in cheese on pizzas, but actually on their own. So, she understood that.
But she didn’t see how anyone could acquire a taste for brain damage. She guessed
it meant the guy hadn’t been born with brain damage.

‘Car accident,’ Ashok said. ‘No seat belts, of course. We’re still trying to work out
the basics with Tony. But we’re getting there. When he first came to us he couldn’t
remember what a microwave was for, let alone how it worked. The fridge, washing
machine, vacuum cleaner – he didn’t have a clue. Can you imagine what that
would be like?’

This made Ryl think about Darren, her ex. He was as good as married to his beer
fridge, but any other household appliance was pretty much a mystery to him, too.
And his brain was fully functioning. It was his heart that had been damaged. AHI
– Acquired Heart Injury. She had a bit of that herself.

‘All the inventions of the past century, that we take for granted,’ Ashok was saying,
‘Tony was seeing, as if for the very first time. Just think about a fridge for a minute.
You open this metal cupboard and abracadabra – a light goes on and you’re
standing in cold weather. Must seem like magic.’

‘Wow.’ Ryl had pushed the image of her ex aside and was thinking about the
wonder of modem inventions. In her head, a voice with an American accent said:
‘The Magic of Television’ and she remembered that when she was a kid she used to
think tiny people lived in the back of the TV. Was this how Tony Bagshaw saw the
world? ‘He’s got a bit of a weight problem,’ said Ashok, pointing to the file. ‘That’s
partly the meds he’s on and partly boredom. But it’s also the memory thing, too.’

‘Memory?’ Ryl said.

She knew from watching her mum how people can stack on the weight when
they are on heavy-duty drugs. And as for over-eating and boredom, that was a no-
brainer. But she didn’t understand how memory could cause someone to put on
weight. Or maybe his problem was that he forgot to eat.

‘Very little short-term memory, has our Tony.’

‘Oh,’ said Ryl, still puzzling over what that meant. Was her client fat or skinny?

‘Everyday life is fairly challenging for him.’

Ryl turned to Ashok with a smile. ‘So he won’t remember who I am from one
week to the next, then?’
She started to laugh at her own joke, but stopped when she saw that Ashok’s grip on the steering wheel had tightened.

‘That’s right,’ he said, his mouth pulled into a straight line. ‘So you should try to use your name as much as possible, as a natural part of the conversation. His therapist has taught him to look for cues like that.’

Ryl had lots more to ask Ashok. What was a natural way of saying her own name in conversation? It was all sounding too hard – this fat/skinny guy with no memory.

Ashok drove into a service station. Ryl stayed in the van as he filled the tank. She felt embarrassed over her stupid joke and annoyed with Ashok for not playing along, for not just humouring her. She caught her reflection in the side mirror. This is how it will be, she thought. Nobody is going to cut you any slack.

‘You’re on your own, Ryl, baby,’ she said out loud, looking at her own straight mouth in the mirror.

Ryl presses her face into the mesh, trying to see further into Tony Bagshaw’s flat. And just as she is thinking she might leave a permanent face-shaped bulge in the flyscreen, a sound comes from deep inside the flat. It is the creak a toaster makes as its carriage is lowered and locked in place. Then she sees a shadow on the hallway wall and finally, she hears a voice.

‘Coming.’

Finally, one of Ryl’s questions about her client is answered. Dressed in a large tropical shirt and dark green track pants, a man lumbers towards her. This man, she thinks, does not forget to eat. He doesn’t walk so much as grapple his way across the smoke-filled room, like a horizontal mountaineer. Slowly he makes his way towards Ryl, using first the wall unit, then puce-coloured lounge and (unwisely, she thinks) the lamp stand as grapple points. When he reaches the screen door he is panting and sighing from the effort.

‘Mr Bagshaw?’

He stands with his head to one side. He has a big, soft cartoon-dog face and, with his tongue flicking in and out of his mouth, he looks at Ryl through the flyscreen as if she were a larger-than-usual gecko.

‘Hi, I’m Ryl,’ she says, pointing to the SAINT logo on her t-shirt. ‘I’m here to take your grocery order.’
He slides the screen door and she steps into the room, still smiling and pointing at the logo. Tony stares at her breasts, with his tongue working overtime. She is staring back at him, trying to work out whether he is aroused or illiterate, when a piercing sound fills her head. A plume of dark grey smoke appears in the hallway and she runs into the kitchen expecting to find a small bushfire. What she finds is a smoking silver toaster on the bench directly below the distressed alarm.

‘Where’s a broom?’ she asks.

But Tony is standing in the doorway, rocking, his hands over his ears and his eyes squeezed shut. She casts around the small galley and, when no broom appears, she grabs a wooden spoon from a ceramic jar labelled Utensils. She hoiks herself onto the benchtop and, by leaning out and jabbing at the reset button with the spoon, she manages to shut off the smoke alarm.

But that doesn’t stop all the noise. Beneath the high-pitched siren, Tony has laid his own track of baritone creening.

‘Hey, shh,’ Ryl shouts. ‘Open your eyes, Tony. It’s stopped now.’

At the end of the day, Ashok drops Ryl off at the hostel. She’d prefer to go straight to her room but food is served at 5.30 and people are expected to eat at the communal tables. She sits in the outdoor area under a huge awning. The poles holding up the awning have metal containers shaped like empty mortar shells for people to use as ashtrays. There is a television set mounted high on the brick wall and beneath it is a small shelf. Someone has drawn an arrow pointing to the shelf: HOME FOR THE REMOTE. Ryl thinks it makes a good name for the hostel.

There is a middle-eastern man sitting at one of outdoor tables. He is writing in a spiral-bound notebook stuffed with cut-out newsprint. Next to him is a bone-thin man in a navy singlet. His deeply-tanned skin has a grimy sheen and his long, grey hair hangs in strings. His habit is to sit very close to people and stare at them menacingly. The writing man doesn’t seem to mind. His face moves as he writes as if the words have a sour taste.

Behind her, Ryl hears the fizz of a cigarette being stubbed out.

‘He’s a poet,’ says the smoker, her face so close that Ryl could be sharing the last drawback. ‘He’s from I-ran.’

‘That so?’ says Ryl. She drains her coffee cup and pushes her chair back. She wants to cut off any further conversation. She’ll go back to her room even though it will be a long time before she can sleep. But to stay would mean talking to this woman.
Ryl isn’t interested in forming any friendships in this place. On the television, a young couple is sitting with a bank manager. In the next scene the young couple are in their new house surrounded by ladders and paint-spattered sheets. She hands him a fan of paint swatches. They smile and hug as if choosing the right shade of colour was the most exciting thing they have ever done.

The ad gives Ryl an idea about Tony Bagshaw’s burnt toast. She could help him toast all his favourites (thick white bread, fruit bagels, crumpets, muffins, etc) to the exact shade of brown that he likes. She’d note down the correct setting for each type of toast. Then she would photograph them and, once they were developed she could label them with the corresponding number on the toaster dial. The photographs would be like paint swatches, blu-tacked to the kitchen wall for whenever he wanted to use the toaster.

The next morning, she stands across the road from the hostel to wait for Ashok to pick her up. She tells herself it is easier for him if she is on this side of the road. But in truth, with its cyclone fence and long grass, the hostel reminds her of the detention centre and makes her think that she is back on day release.

While she waits, she thinks about her first day in this new job. She was helping Ashok load his van with grocery bags. It was hot work and they stopped for a break, sitting in the shade beside the loading dock. He told her he’d been a taxi driver in Melbourne before moving to Darwin and getting into social work.

‘Half the people up here come from somewhere else,’ he said. ‘What about you, Ryl? What brings you up here?’

Ryl drained her Coke and squashed the can into a figure eight. She was stalling for time as she formulated a short answer to that inevitable question.

‘I dunno,’ she finally said. ‘Felt like a change of scenery.’

She could hear how lame it sounded and she’d busied herself stowing the last of the bags into the van until Ashok left her in peace. Once she is inside the SAINTS van, she tells Ashok her idea about photographing Mr Bagshaw’s toast.

‘So,’ she says, ‘do you know where I can borrow a camera?’

‘I dunno, Ryl.’ He shifts down a gear as he pulls into morning traffic. ‘It’s a good idea. But I’ll have to run it by his caseworker.’ He looks at Ryl, but she is staring straight ahead.
‘You know how it is with bureaucracy. They’ll have to do a risk assessment and fill out some forms. Six months time,’ he says, shaking his head, ‘and maybe, just maybe, someone will be sent out to Tony’s to photograph his toast for him.’

Ryl looks at Ashok. He has a shaved head, wears a singlet and sarong and has rings in his eyebrows. She’s guessing he was born with a name like Alan or Ashley. She can’t bring herself to call him Ashok like the other people in the office. It would be okay if he were Indian, she thinks. But he’s not and whenever she hears the name she thinks A Shock and after that she thinks A Surprise. So it’s hard for her to take his name, or him, seriously.

‘Doesn’t have to be a fancy camera,’ she says. ‘Even one that’s on a mobile phone would do.’ She looks at his phone sitting in its holder on the dashboard. ‘What about this one? Does it have a camera?’ ‘Nah. Well, yes. But I don’t have the cable to download them onto a computer.’

‘Don’t need them on a computer,’ Ryl says. ‘Just need regular photos. Those Kodak Instamatics would be perfect. Print them straight from the camera.’ ‘Instamatics! Christ, Ryl,’ he says, shaking his head, ‘where have you been?’

Their white van with the stick-figure saint decal climbs up towards the town centre. On one side of the road, Ryl sees magpie geese landing on the golf course and on the other she sees the casino. She wishes she could slip inside the big white shiny building like a two-dollar coin sliding into a slot. She wants to see the flashing red button: Press Me. She wants to hear the familiar games room soundtrack of submarines forever descending and the same three bars of fairground music caught in a soothing loop. She’d watch the spinning reels, her destiny a blur of possibilities. Her pulse would quicken, waiting for the sudden arrest. What will it be – lemons, cherries, a joker or, auspiciously, a double dollar sign? No pay: play again. Down go the submarines, on and off go the coloured lights. It’s not a query but a direction. Here’s what you do: pay and play, win and play, lose and play. Life in here is simple. You just keep going until there’s nothing left.

Once she’s organised (third machine from the wall, stool at the correct height, handbag between her ankles) she can sit for hours. If she doesn’t drink, she doesn’t have to go to the loo. She knows gambling is an addiction, a kind of illness. But as addictions go, it isn’t that bad. There’s no risk of an overdose. There’s no black market or gangs. No one in the gaming room packs a gun and small children aren’t used as runners. And unlike drug addicts, poker machine addicts don’t break into people’s houses and steal their DVD players. Ryl closes her eyes and clears her throat. At the end of this line of thinking sit the cheques she messed with.
They pull up outside a weatherboard building sitting on stilts and as they climb
the steps into the palm fronds, Ashok tells her they will be spending the day at the
office. ‘Got some paperwork to be getting on with,’ he says.

At his desk, he drags a pile of files and papers towards him and Ryl sees that on the
top is a letter with the name of the Victorian detention centre she left only four
weeks before. Other people in the office are busy at their computers or talking into
their phones. There is nowhere to sit, apart from on the old cane lounge, which is
for clients or visitors. The cushions are lumpy and she can imagine Terry Bagshaw
sitting there, his eyes glazed and his tongue lolling. She understands now that she’s
been taken off the shopping program.

If Ashok would only let her, she could file for him, type up letters. But it takes time
and effort to think up such productive tasks. She remembers when she used to
have high school work experience students to look after each year. She would set
aside tasks for them so they wouldn’t get bored and so she could write meaningful
reports for their careers advisers about the time they had spent with her. Hers was
only a small office, a site shed really, in a small construction company. But she loved
it. The beauty of the admin secretary’s job, she would always tell her students, is
that she controls it all. Correspondence, cheque accounts. Everything. She stands
beside Ashok’s desk, looking at the rows of louvred windows. They are so dirty
they block out the bright, tropical sunlight and keep the rooms in a permanent
state of overcast.

‘What about I give these louvres a clean?’

‘Knock yourself out,’ Ashok says.

He opens a drawer, takes out a metal cashbox, key still in its lock. He starts looking
through a scattering of keys. ‘One of these is for the cleaner’s storeroom,’ he says.
He sorts the labelled keys with one hand. His other rests on the cashbox.

Ryl finds a bucket and detergent in the storeroom. She washes each glass panel
with soapy water then, using paper towels, wipes vigorously at the smears. She
works her way from top to bottom then slides the bucket of grey water along with
her foot. She tries not to think about a flashing red button.
Everything is Different Now

Natalie Sprite

That first day, unfurling clothes in Cate’s bedroom, there is a moment when we are both naked and I look up to find her standing at the end of the bed, watching me with her red bathers in one hand. She crosses the room in two steps and puts her hand on my belly, bending so her face is at my waist and then, with her fingers spread wide across my abdomen, she looks up, into my face, and I see her eyes are the palest blue and then she grins, ‘Who’d have thought, hey?’

The ceiling fan moves in heartbeat rotations behind her. I stand silent and naked on the beige carpet of her bedroom floor, fluttering under her touch.

The room I am in will be her baby’s room. There is a futon on the floor with clean sheets tucked in. Beside the bed sits a white cane bassinet and a bag of very tiny clothes.

Later, when Cate and Dave are sleeping, I lie wide awake under the thin sheet looking at the bassinet and the bag of tiny clothes. There is flamenco music playing thinly on a radio next door. I listen to the quick picked guitar notes and roll onto my side and light the candle on the floor beside me. The light shimmies up the walls and across the bed.

I sit up and unpack my new goggles. They are blue and recommended by Dawn Fraser, with a picture of her face on the packet.

I put them on, tighten the rubber strap till it presses a line around the back of my skull.

The room is blue. I pick up a book and read black words on a blue page.

I am twelve weeks pregnant and my baby has a spine and a heartbeat.

The house is quiet. And warm. Next door, the radio crackles and then goes silent. I put the book down and take my goggles off. The room floods again with colour.

When I wake, Dave is at work. Cate is in the kitchen with her hands fanned across her back, her belly huge before her. ‘Have you thought about what you’ll do?’ She sees my face, steps towards me. ‘Sorry. It’ll be okay. He’ll come good.’

‘I know.’ I turn and look out the window at the palm tree. Slow moving fronds bounce in the breeze. The day is already hot.
Every day we go to the river, dark and green, at the end of the street. We lie on our backs and let the current pull us, past curious fishermen, down towards the sea. Spinning slowly with our arms and legs stretched out, our bodies like stars in the water.

It’s at the river I meet Dee and her baby, Sebastian, who is eight weeks old and wrapped in white like a Vietnamese spring roll.

The riverbank is full of prams and babies and mothers. Dee sits down beside us, unclips her bra and slips out the round white disk of a breast pad.

‘I leak all the time,’ she says. ‘If I don’t wear these I’m like a sprinkler system.’ I have never seen a breast pad before and it’s hard not to stare. It is like a thin menstrual pad except round. A bit smaller than a drink coaster.

Suddenly her breast is there, shockingly in the air between us, milk beading on the end of her dark red nipple, three separate drops swelling.

She takes Sebastian’s head in one hand and her breast in the other and brings them deftly together, her body bowed around her child. He makes small clicking noises as he drinks and his jaw moves. The bones underneath the skin, unbelievably fine.

Cate leans against a tree with her legs stretched out on the grass. ‘Dee?’

‘Hmm?’ looking up from Sebastian, blinking into the sun.

‘What’s labour like?’

‘Really, really painful.’

We look at her, alarmed, and she laughs, says, ‘But you get a baby, you know. It’s worth it.’

I am unconvinced. But I don’t say anything. When the baby finishes feeding, Dee sits up on her knees so she is leaning towards me. She is dappled with shadow and her eyes are glass green. ‘Here,’ she says, and rolls the baby into my amateur arms.

My first emotion is panic. He is so frail and I am so clumsy. I can feel him breathing through the blanket, the smallest press of each exhalation against my belly. I watch the rise and fall of his chest and think of the tiny pink lungs inside. Smaller than a chicken’s egg.

I wait for him to cry. Or scream. But nothing happens. His small, fat fist curls around my finger. His mouth opening and closing on the air. A breast pad beside us like a pikelet on the picnic rug.
When we get back to the house there’s a message on my phone.

Cate in the kitchen pulls a wedge of watermelon from the fridge, looks up to see me holding the phone. ‘Is it Richard?’

‘No. Elka.’

I listen to the message again. The last time I saw Elka was in Sydney just over a year ago. She rang from a hotel room in Surrey Hills. ‘This view,’ she said.

‘What about it?’

‘It is not very beautiful.’

‘What can you see?’

‘A brick wall.’

‘No,’ I laughed. ‘That’s not very beautiful.’

Then she told me about the meeting she’d been flown down for and how they paid for her hotel and her flight and how she sat there for four hours and didn’t say a word. ‘Maybe I should have said something. I was shy and my English is not so good and there were so many other people talking.’

‘That’s not so bad,’ I told her. ‘It’s good to have listeners too, in these meetings.’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘But that is not all. I had diarrhoea. I had to keep getting up to go to the toilet and my chair was at the far end of the room and there were floorboards and I had on my high shoes with the wooden heels and every time I went, my shoes went clunk-clunk-clunk and everybody stopped talking and looked. And it didn’t just happen once. It was a long meeting. I had to go a lot.’

‘How much is a lot?’

‘Maybe six times.’

‘Oh.’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘They will remember me only as The Woman Who Went To The Toilet.’

We met that afternoon in the foyer of her hotel and walked with our arms linked down Crown Street. People stared, men and women, as they always do when I am with her. She has that kind of beauty. Dark hair and large velvety eyes. Grace in the way she carries herself on her long, strong legs. We ate sushi and drank saki
and coffee. We had facials and haircuts together and took photos of each other to remember the day.

‘You can use our phone to ring her, if you want,’ says Cate.

‘Thanks.’ But I don’t. I go to my room at the back of the house and lie like a starfish underneath the clunking ceiling fan. I lift one leg at a time. Hot air rolls down. Light comes through the yellow curtains. On the floor beside me, a white wooden bassinet for a baby not yet born.

On Dave’s day off we make pancakes for breakfast and then go up to the river. Dave walks between us, six foot two and like a bull across the neck. He has a large, square head and animal thighs but his face is as smooth and uncomplicated as an apple.

We are nearly at the end of the street when he slings one large arm around my shoulders and squeezes until I feel the bones compact. He kisses the side of my forehead with wet lips. ‘How you going, gorgeous?’

‘I’m good.’

‘You want me to bash him up?’

I laugh. He squeezes me into the side of his body and I can smell sweat and dope and mangos.

He says, ‘I can, you know. I wouldn’t mind. I’m quite good at that sort of thing. God knows the fucken’ prick deserves it.’

I am suddenly hot in the face and chest and then we walk under the cicada tree and the sound is loud and all around us and then Cate says, ‘Leave her alone, hon.’ But then we’re at the river and he releases me and I watch him stride towards the water, pulling his T-shirt up over this head as he walks, dropping it on the narrow strip of sand.

‘He didn’t mean anything.’

‘I know.’

I take my goggles and we walk together into the water until the river is at our hips. The cool of it is lovely. Silky mud squishing underfoot.

A hibiscus bloom falls pinkly into the river. I follow its trajectory and catch it by its green stem, hold it to the light to see the veins that run along the petal.
When I turn around, they are together in the water. He is holding her afloat, one arm around her back, the other under her knees. Her arms are around his neck and then they are kissing. Full, wet, river kisses with their eyes closed.

I put the hibiscus back onto the surface of the water and watch it float past me and down towards the sea. The river is scratched white with sunlight.

It is a quiet brick house but the windows are all open and the insect heat is ticking outside. I come out into the lounge room where it is dark and ring Elka. Her phone goes through to voicemail. I hang up and sit in the dark.

And then I ring Richard.

‘Hello?’ His low voice pulls at the muscles in my belly.

‘Hi. It’s me.’

‘What’s happening?’

‘I just wanted to say hello, see how you’re going.’

He doesn’t say anything. I can hear him breathing, two exhalations, the second louder than the first. Then the sound of him walking. A rustle of clothing as he stands, and then his feet on floorboards, the bang of the screen door.

‘You outside?’

‘Yeah.’

‘How are you?’

‘Okay.’

‘What have you been doing.’

‘Nothing much.’

‘Is that good?’

‘S’pose.’

I am sitting on the dark blue couch. I turn the small lamp on and suddenly my reflection is there in the window opposite, hunching over the phone.

I straighten my spine, hold the underside of my belly. ‘Do you feel any clearer about what you want to do?’

‘Not really.’
'Do you not want to talk.'

'I don’t care. If you want.'

I stroke my belly with my left hand in slow downward strokes. ‘What’s been happening?’

‘Nothing much.’

‘You okay?’

‘Yep.’

Through the receiver I hear the crack of a match struck, then the hiss of smoke drawn in between his lips, dogs barking far in the background.

We sit like that, neither of us speaking, for a long time.

I listen to the sound of him smoke the cigarette to its filter and then the shift of his breath and clothes as he leans forward to stub it into the ashtray. And then I say, ‘Do you want to say anything.’

‘Not really.’

‘I might go then.’

‘Okay.’

‘Bye.’ I put the phone down.

On the table beside the handset are photos Dave took the day I arrived. Cate and I pressing our pregnant bellies together. Laughing, I look through these photos, slowly, bringing them under the pool of lamplight to see our faces and the looseness in our bodies and after a while I start to cry and then I can’t see the pictures anymore, so I put them back on the table and I turn the light off and I lay down on the couch on my side with my knees drawn up and both hands on my belly.

On Thursday we visit Dee who lives in a new house on the Gold Coast. The house is square and white and built on the edge of an artificial river where last week a shark killed a man who had been swimming at night. She tells us this as she pulls glasses and pineapple juice from the fridge.

We take our drinks and sit on the concrete terrace and look at the blue glittering water. I hold my pineapple juice and the glass is cold and I think about the man eaten by a shark.
‘We were going to name him Harrison,’ she says.

‘I like that,’ says Cate,

‘Except that his surname’s Barry.’ She leans in, folds a corner of cotton blanket, straightens up. ‘Harry Barry,’ she says, ‘you can’t do that to a kid.’

‘No.’

We are standing in a line beside the cot when we have this conversation. The baby is sleeping, his lips are juicy and full and his face squashed into the mattress on one side, his thighs are dimpling and I see the way she cannot stop looking at him.

We are quiet for a moment and I think, ‘I’m going to have a baby,’ and I look and look and beside me Cate has gone still and the three of us are completely quiet, our bodies bent towards the baby.

Later, sitting together on the terrace, Dee says, ‘He’ll come around. When the baby is born, he’ll come around. It’s different for men.’ I blink and look at the water where the man was eaten by a shark and drink my pineapple juice except it’s all gone. Ice cubes fall cold against my upper lip, pineapply water drops. Dee stands up. ‘Do you want another one?’

I look at the empty glass. But I don’t say anything, I just look and then she squats down beside me so her face is close to mine and she says, ‘And if he doesn’t, you’ll be okay.’ She is so completely certain, looking right into my face with her sharp blue eyes. Then she stands and gets me another pineapple juice and the baby wakes and we go together to sit on the fat white couches in the lounge room and Cate and I watch, fascinated, as she puts a dark red nipple into the wet open mouth of her son.

I ring Elka.

It is dark and the house is quiet.

The first thing she says after hello is: ‘My baby was born dead.’

I didn’t know she was pregnant.

‘Twenty-three weeks,’ she says. She doesn’t cry. Her voice is low and clear and flat. She says she bled all the way across the Nullarbor. She drove with Matt in an orange Kombi and she bled the whole way.

She says four different doctors gave her ultrasounds and they all said there was nothing to worry about but when they got to Geraldton, she haemorrhaged.
‘Clots as big as plums came out of me,’ she says.

They flew her to Perth. She was twenty-two weeks pregnant and they wanted to induce. It meant the baby would die, but if they didn’t, if they waited, Elka might die. She would lose too much blood. And the baby wasn’t likely to live anyway. That’s what they said.

She says, ‘I wouldn’t let them. I hung on. I nearly made it too. I got to twenty-three weeks and six days. But then the contractions started. I couldn’t stop the contractions.’

She was in labour for twelve hours. She says the doctors monitored the baby’s heartbeat.

‘The whole time, they kept saying, Your baby’s alive Elka. You’re doing great. Your baby’s fine. But looking back now, I think they went quiet at the end. They stopped saying, Your baby’s fine.

‘He must have died then. They don’t tell you, because you still have to give birth and if they tell you, you’ll stop pushing. But that must have been when he died.

‘They took him out of the room when he was born. I wanted to see him. I kept saying, I want to see my baby. I just needed to see him.

‘They brought him back in and then they left. It was nice, he was warm. He was so perfect. He was small, but perfect. I put him on my chest, I looked at his fingernails and the creases on the insides of his hand, and his tiny face. He had brown hair. He looked like he was sleeping. His eyes were closed. He was all curled up on my belly. I held him until he went cold. Then it was horrible. I started to scream. They took him away then.’

‘Oh Elka. I’m so sorry.’

‘I have to leave. I can’t be here anymore.’

‘No.’ We are both quiet then and I can hear the sprinkler next door. ‘Will Matt go with you?’

‘I don’t know. Everything is different now.’

At the airport, I am looking at the magazines on the revolving metal stand and there is Cate Blanchett on the cover of New Weekly, pregnant in a red velvet ballgown, her belly like a dark melon. A male voice is saying, ‘Would passengers for flight QF104 to Sydney please proceed to Gate 16. Your aircraft is now ready for boarding.’
And suddenly it’s time and I’m not ready and when I turn to Cate, she is looking at me with her arms by her sides and her eyes welling. I step into her body and feel the press of her belly, our babies together under skin, and then we are just still. The skin of her back – bare in a halter neck top – warm under the palms of my hands, the echoey noises of the Gold Coast airport and Dave, standing beside us with his hands in the pockets of his shorts.
under attack
Bronwyn Mehan

i.m. EN Wallis

i

birdwatching

that first grey metal bird, he would always remember.
swooping across the foreshore, it came
like a red-eyed oriole glossing the morning sky.

the trowel dropped from his hand. he was just a boy
standing there, watching as Japanese pilots
zeroed in on Darwin wharf.

these same grey birds hit Pearl Harbour, he would learn
the leader’s name – like a drunken cuss
from the Nightcliff pub – Mitsuo Fuchido!

that first wave picked off hospital ships,
sitting ducks on the Arafura pond. shrapnel stung
like pig-iron rain …

… cutting down stenographers,
dispatching mail-sorters, while post office bunkers gaped
empty as wounds.

Those long-gone dogfights rumble on, strafing his dreams
until, rolling from bed, he hunkers with a book
to sit out his phantom war in pyjamas.

ii

aftermath, 1974

there was no one in the suburb.
empty houses. empty streets.

petrol pumps stood armless,
the cars had all turned up their toes.
the grandstand was blown to fiddlesticks,
and monsters bloated in backyard pools.

the casuarinas all left town,
the jetty was a toothless grin.
his beer fridge had crossed the road,
and their mailbox was a toilet seat.

iii

forgetting

he remembers palm trees pigrooting
across the horizon bent
horse shoes that Tracy rode

how life used to be, forget it

his thoughts cyclonic:
the kids had pet cockatoos (Gertie & Gertie Two)

or was that his wife? in the end she could only drink
flat lemonade
they flew her to Adelaide
she never came back

that’s what happens
who didn’t screw the top back on?
you’re all alone
who left the cage door wide open?

into town each day socks sandals
government job bri-nylon shirt
inkstain pocket like a bullet hole
at lunchtime he buys cigarettes
from a shopkeeper with joss stick hair
watches hippies camp in banyan trees

...
cleans his hands white-sticky
from the jackfruit knife, prayerful
under the tap, dirty nails and nicks
from palm fronds that cut like scissors

kids in bed, he waters, patrols his front yard
the narrow macadam, the foreshore park
alert for casuarina nuts and pineapple mines.

iv

minding the park

his mind was a park,
see-sawing thoughts in a vacant lot
Run, kids, run from Old Man Wallis.

Memories scattered
bleached and lightweight like woodchips:
    there’s a daughter, gone to work for some paper
and two lads down South. there’s little ones too
far away to remember. no-one visits.
the Greeks hounded him to sell, hardworkers
from windswept fishing villages, building’s
in their blood money: how could he leave
his park to lolly papers, fish scales, beer cans
and humbuggers that think they own the place.

from the park in his mind,
he looked out,
past the bedpans to a nylon sea
shore-lined with meal trays,
at one more unbeatable sunset.
Afghan Grave, outskirts of Wyndham, NW Australia

Kaye Aldenhoven

Black stone juts into sky.
Set in wind-smoothed sand
this marker works its mnemonic,
and I see my grandfather
leaving Beltana, leading
a nose-peg string of delicate-footed camels.

My grandfather – foreigner with a beautiful name –
strode in the light, loose clothes flapping.
He guided his camels across endless seif dunes,
skirted salt pans, suffered the taunts of spinifex.
Blinded by sand storm,
then blinded by sandy blight,

he threaded through ankle-breaking gibbers.
He read this country, but
from whom did he learn the signs?
Steeled from the war against the British
My grandfather forged tracks through iron land.

He fathered my Warlpiri mother,
and returned to visit Nungarai,
in rhythm with the seasons of drought
that forced us into the mission,
its handouts and hand-me-downs.

My grandfather’s daughters dug witchetty grubs,
fat in the roots of Acacia aneura.
He did not eat our food,
only halal he prepared himself.
Watching, my grandmother
learned to make flat bread,
that I cook for his great-grandchildren.
Once I saw a photograph in a book
a French woman, in Oodnadatta.
Her Afghan daughters were veiled in cloths.
Nungarai did not wear clothes like that.

Did his memories waiver in the heat mirages of Australia,
and the solitary distances of this southern continent and time?
His prayer rug unrolled between campfires, towards Mecca.
Scourged by Adelaide’s xenophobia,
grandfather maintained a supply line:
flour and sugar, iron nails, essential oils, letters,
dingo traps, patent medicines, German newspapers.

Warlpiri families know lonelier graves,
marked by unscripted slabs of stone,
but we don’t know grandfather’s grave.
Absence was his death notice.

My old grandfather won’t fret.
He lives in the names of our children,
the intelligence of our beautiful granddaughters.
His legacy is sweet as wild dates.
Ngarraitj Warde Djobkeng

Kaye Aldenhoven

You follow the creek up into the stone country
Thread through weeping red-flowered bloodwood.

At the comer of the outlier
fit your toes and fingers into well-worn niches.

You climb hand over foot, up into the living space,
ceiling blackened by cooking fires.

Goanna scuttles: python rustles leaf litter,
ghost bats frenzy.

Mosquito Man, proboscis poised, watches you,
and a line of snuffling echidnas, sketched in red ochre.

The sand floor is swept, the hearth clean.
Grindstones wait in their hollows.

The women who harvested wild rice and
the painters carrying blood-ochre pigment
will never return.

_Ngarraitj Warde Jobkeng – where sulphur-crested cockatoo split the rock_
thirteen is unlucky like me stuck 
between wall to wall flyscreens for 
the outside to come in only 
dad comes in because the air con’s shot 
at work. 
him and mum watch the cricket while 
my brother Johnnie plays trucks on the lounge room floor 
he likes to make engine noises and mum is yelling 
at me to turn my music down and he is a fire truck. 
when rain comes down the volume goes up on the tv and 
i go nowhere without a confiscated cd player. 
my brother is a police car but my mother is the law 
my dad is on the bom site. 
the sky is dark with Severe Weather Warning 
the trees are restless 
i’m so full 
i could be Tracy.
Fallen

Penny Drysdale

1
Out here we say What? to each other
more than any other
word

Sorry—I-didn’t-hear-you? seems
too grandiloquent to repeat
every
time

Rubbing each other’s noses in some
deficit

When we are already
spent

One of us
back turned
walking ahead, walking away
talking from the next
room

One making sound so barely
fans are droning on
above us and ahead
they relentlessly
turn

We wonder if it’s the desert or the
years

2
There’s an old cactus in our
driveway
He’s been there a long time
longer than you and I

He is over four metres tall with perhaps
a hundred arms
sprawling up
from a centre
shared

Some single, some
forked

Each arm ending abruptly, without a hand
on the
end

Each arm ribbed with pores
and at each pore a crown
of spikes, lay open
brutal

Amongst the spikes
green spears grow like
thick asparagus
clenched
shut

In the
heat

Waiting for conditions to
improve

3
Yesterday a third of him
came crashing
down

In our driveway
our entry, our
exit
Our vehicles
parked in the street until
we work out what to do
with a thing
of this
size

The severed arms still crisp inside
with woody flesh of white
that soon will brown and grey and
rot

The spikes remain

We cannot wrap our arms around
his fallen arms
to drag him
clear

We just stand and watch his
demise

All those tight spears
wasted

4
You may think it not
much of a
loss

But in the cool
of dawn those throngs
of spears remaining
will unfold
into a tissue-white flower
plush as a water lily
a broad face
humming with
bees in the half
dark
Bees nuzzling into inner yellow threads

The pleasure won’t last long

The flowers close and wither
dangle like a blackened match
held too long over a candle

All these tiny black endings

5
You are resting inside by the air conditioner
a strong body stilled by summer and a mind turning every last page
in the house over

I have set myself up on a low chair in the shade, a fan out here in the garden, on a concrete slab to watch and write and make too much of this

You come out to offer me cold water

Not from the tap which is undrinkable

My eyes scratched etched
Dymocks Red Earth Poetry Award

All those dry linings
unquenchable

And the day just gets hotter
Colonial Inscriptions

Kathleen Epelde

No one said much
As we sped down the road past a blur of banana trees and huts with thatched roofs.
We were on our way to Tegucigalpa,
Peace Corps mission statements tucked into shiny briefcases that lie next to us in the cool, quiet car.

Every now and then Brad lowers his hand to press on the horn
He leaves it there for long, imperious seconds
Scattering people and chickens before us
Like God
Like a gringo.

I’m staring out the side window when, suddenly, into the frame,
a ball comes
bouncing
toward us,
then a girl
running after it,
her yellow dress fluttering, her skinny brown arm reaching, her laughing eyes
seeing only
the ball
bouncing
inexorably
toward us.

I brace for the sickening soft thud as flesh meets metal,
And the mirror carves into the delicate curve of cheekbone.

‘Dios mio!’ says Brad.
It sounds like something he heard in a movie.
As we get out, Maria says to me,
‘Don’t leave your bag in the car.’
A crumpled heap of yellow lies in the middle of the road, so small and still now. Then a scream pierces the air and a woman comes running, falls to her knees and sobs

mi hija, mi hija
As she cradles her daughter’s mangled face, bloodied flesh hanging from shattered bone.

A crowd gathers, looks from the girl to us, and their murmuring grows louder. ‘Go with Elena,’ Maria whispers to me in a low, urgent voice. ‘It will be better if there are not so many foreigners when the police arrive.’

We bump along in silence on the crowded bus. ‘At least El Cuerpo de Paz will pay for the hospital,’ Elena offers. ‘In this, the family is lucky.’

El Cuerpo de Paz. The body of peace.
We do not speak of the scar the girl will wear for the rest of her life.
It hangs in the air,
Reflecting the distance between us.
the morning after
speedway
the noise leaves tracks
and litter pickings

ten times the crows
executive cut-throats
spin hard wheelies
speculating

one orphan hawk
a commentary box
piping dismay over
wired birth islands

the broken grounds
a lit dump
of golden carcasses
and pyrotechnic stench
waiting for the watertrucks
ablutions

in no race
have the birds won
this elevated ossuary
of trinkle pipe
old fridges
and painted names
gutted for beating

in the settled pall
lie postulants
gallon drums
and chicken boxes
waiting
for a fry priestess
spent tokens
in a game she made
and tired of,
and backed away
The Streets of France

Christine Wilson

We read, study, research, listen to and Google a plethora of information on France in readiness for our trip. We go with our preconceived ideas, our anticipation, and our guarded suspicions that some of the negative things we’ve heard might be real. And we go with an open mind, to soak up as much as we can, to immerse ourselves in all things French and to have a damn good time. But, while preparation is a good thing and it serves us well, we find the real experience is something else altogether.

We expect the streets of Paris to be covered in dogs’ droppings – all the travel books have warned us to beware. So we are pleasantly surprised to find that this isn’t the case. Sure, there are one or two offending items here and there, but nothing like the wall to wall merde we’ve read about. We see lots of baguettes though – in people’s arms, shop windows, bicycle baskets, shopping bags, on café tables served in abundance with every meal. A very elderly gentleman shuffles along clutching a baguette that’s nearly as tall as him. It’s one of those images that etches itself into our memory. There are lots of buskers too, piano accordion in hand, playing chansons with great gusto. On bridges, street corners, outside metro stations, the sound is a reminder that we are actually in France. An older couple sit at the foot of Sacré Coeur, lively tunes flowing from her accordion and his violin. They smile and nod appreciatively as a few coins clink into their basket. It’s not unusual to find an accordion player has jumped into our carriage on the metro and after a couple of songs a cup is passed around in the hope that one or two euro will be dropped in. Mostly, this request is ignored but the mood is lightened and an otherwise dull train ride feels a little festive.

Baguettes and buskers give satisfying substance to long-held stereotypes but there are less pleasant elements on the streets of Paris. Beggars, many of them young people, sometimes with a dog as a sympathy-evoking accessory, spend their day sitting, seeking a handout – the art of looking forlorn well-practised – while gypsies stride up and down the footpaths, accosting anyone who chances a glance in their direction. Disturbingly, they make a lifestyle of cajoling, deceiving, stealing. We quickly learn not to make eye contact, and, if approached, to respond with a definitive ‘No, I don’t speak English’ or ‘No, I didn’t drop that ring.’

At kilomètre zéro, on an island in the middle of the Seine in Paris, sits the daunting, inspiring Notre Dame. From here, the distance to everywhere else in France is
measured, such is the importance of and reverence for this cathedral. The streets around Notre Dame are covered with souvenir shops, a magnet for tourists wanting to take away a small piece of Paris. But Notre Dame herself stands so solidly, dependably, quietly, amidst the hustle and bustle of tourism. From the top, the gargoyles watch over the city, over everything, year after year. What stories they would tell if only they could! We get the feeling that Quasimodo is there too; after all, it’s his story that saved the cathedral from demolition decades ago. Inside, the huge pipe-organ fills one end of the top level and its sound fills the whole space, echoing off the stone walls, sweeping up to the belfry and falling in deep-toned drops to the floor.

The Champs Elysées is probably the most well-known street in Paris, if not France. Tree-lined and stretching west from one crazy roundabout at the Concorde to another at the Arc de Triomphe, it is the venue for many a parade, festival, party, demonstration – anything that needs a quintessentially French backdrop. This spectacular boulevard is a showcase in itself and the importance of any event held along it is heightened, giving the impression that whatever it is that takes place must absolutely be held there as there is nowhere else that would do it justice. As we stroll the length of the Champs Elysées, we revel in the character, soak up the ambience – the very fact that we are there is enough – this is Paris, this is France!

There is something refreshingly different about the arrangement of the chairs on the café sidewalks. It invites people to sit and watch the world go by. It implies that that’s what people want to do, enjoy doing, are expected to do. And it suggests that the passers-by want to be watched and that the watchers want to be seen watching, relaxing, drinking their café noir. There’s no rush involved in this ‘see and be seen’. We could sit all morning if you wanted – once we have our chairs, it’s ours for as long as we like. And there are some great spots to do this sitting and watching. On a busy corner in Montmartre, where three roads meet, a café juts out into the intersection and we sit there looking down the tree-lined boulevards, observing the shoppers, the flâneurs, the residents, buses, motorcycles, scooters, cars and cyclists, all jostling for position. Any time of the day or into the night will do – there’s always plenty to see.

Winding up the staircases to the top of the hill to the Place du Tertre, we find a square of streets filled with artists, all practising and plying their skills with impressive precision. Finely drawn images and paintings of Paris, portraits and caricatures done expertly on the spot, silhouettes cut from black paper by deft hands, continue a trade begun by the masters all those years ago. Picasso himself used to frequent these streets, as he did the little cabaret on a side street round the corner. There, at Au Lapin Agile, the old French songs are still sung with energy and pride every evening, as they have been for nearly 200 years.
The dazzlingly white basilica, Sacré Coeur, sits on the highest point, the butte, of Montmartre, overlooking all the streets of Paris. From here, if we can avoid the crowds, the beggars and the hawkers (selling bottled water, they miraculously produce a bundle of umbrellas when rain starts to fall), the view is amazing, and the basilica itself, beautiful.

The streets are a place to let our hair down. In Old Nice, on Music Festival Night, there’s a band on every corner, DJs and canned music in every alleyway, magicians, live statues and other entertainers in whatever space is left. There’s a good crowd too; the restaurants are full and overflowing so that musicians and audience are part of each other. The night is balmy and there’s a palpable relaxed ambience. It’s a night to enjoy wandering, observing, soaking up the music. Rue Mouffetard, on the Seine’s Left Bank, comes alive on July 14th as Bastille Day celebrations spill onto the pavement. After the military parade down the Champs Elysées and the fly-over of the jets trailing red, white and blue, people gather to share a meal, play some music, dance in the street. Equally important is the demonstration on the streets of Avignon – a ‘manifestation’ to let the government know there is great unhappiness over their intention to raise the retirement age. It’s not a festive occasion but it has the same sense of urgency as the July 14th celebrations and the night in Nice – something has to be communicated and on the streets is the place to do it.

We hire a car in Avignon and head out for the day, nowhere in particular – we just want to see some of the countryside and hopefully some of those little hill-top villages you see from the air during the TV coverage of the Tour de France. We follow the street signs pointing to ‘Other Directions’ out of Avignon. We’re soon rewarded when we stumble across Carpentras. It’s a Friday and on Fridays every street in Carpentras is part of the village market. The whole town is the market and it’s the biggest, most interesting market we’ve ever seen. Long, long tables display olives – not just green and black olives, but every sort of olive you could imagine and many we didn’t know existed; cheeses follow – a multitude of different shades of yellow shapes, so many varieties it would take all morning to try them all; on a corner a man stands stirring two enormous shallow woks of paella; breads, pastries, croissants, fruit, fish, poultry, sausages and other meats – in such abundance and freshness and never-seen-before-ness – stretch from table to table along the streets of Carpentras. In the town square, crisp, cool, white, linen shirts, trousers, jackets and skirts beckon us to dress as one does in Provence and we accept the invitation and feel just a little bit French as we walk away with our purchase.

The streets of the Loire Valley are dotted with castles. Many, many castles. Enormous,
bared-in castles. Chambord, for instance, with its 440 rooms, 80 staircases including a double helix said to have been designed by Da Vinci and its highly decorated towers — dozens of them perched ridiculously, albeit endearingly, all over the vast roof, was built for Francis I as his country retreat yet he spent only 100 days of his entire life there. Crawling with tourists, it’s hard to find a quiet spot to reflect on the castle’s past life, so much of it spent alone, silent, empty. Chenonceau, sitting cleverly on the water, has a more animated history, full of life and action. We wander round its two great halls which span the width of the river and wonder at the ermine squatting in small groups on the grass. Cheverny, with its 150 hunting dogs and live-in family, could tell many a tale of wild chases through the adjacent woods. Its history trickles into the present — it is still a working castle, generously open to the public who explore its vast grounds and relive many an episode of Tintin cartooning his way through mystery after mystery, the castle and surrounds as his backdrop.

The troglodytes of the Loire tell a different story — these fascinating dwellings, carved into the hills, a single window and door indicating their presence, defied the tax imposed by the government of the day by not having any measurable roof area. If we were to be taxed on the size of your roof, wouldn’t we also make sure you didn’t have one?

We arrive in Reims just before 10am, and already the main street is a hive of activity. Food vans, merchandise sellers, media trucks and personnel, paparazzi, track officials and spectators busy themselves with preparations for what will be a long but exciting day. The finish line is painted onto the road surface, an arch erected over it. A giant TV screen further down the street shows the progress of the day. Abandoning our plans to wander round the town, we find our spot, decide we’ll have to set up camp and not move if we want to see the final few moments. Chatting to the French couple on our left and the English father and son on our right helps pass the time — we’re all here for the same reason and we don’t mind that it’s hot and noisy and we have a long wait. We protect our little bit of dirt, lean on the barricade to see what’s going on on the big screen, check the time, read the newspaper. When one of us goes to buy a drink or some lunch, the other spreads out a little, tries to take up two people’s space, glares at anyone who tries to slip into the void left by the other.

Mid-afternoon, TV station representatives roller-blade up and down the street, giving away hats, lollies, souvenirs and surprisingly, soap powder, which we find comes in handy a couple of days later. The French lady next to me is determined to get as many freebies as possible! A ute goes by every so often, a bikini-clad, hose-holding girl on the tray. She sprays the crowd with a fine mist of cold, refreshing water — we all laugh and feel a little livelier with the coolness. A little later, a parade begins — decorated floats, sponsors’ cars, advertising on wheels, the teams’ buses, entourages and mascots
inch their way along the street, entertaining the crowd, stirring us up as the final minutes of the day approach.

Several hours have passed now, the sun has moved behind the trees and we are thankfully well-shaded. The mob has grown behind us, our space is diminished, we’re pressed up against the barricade. Not long to go now; we can see them on the screen, 10ks out, 5, 4, 3. Anticipation builds, commentary takes on an urgent, excited tone, cameras are poised and ready. Leaning far forward, we see them take the corner. They’re heading our way and they’re flying! The crowd claps and cheers, bangs on the barricade, urges them on. And here they come, a hundred cyclists, the world’s best, hurtling towards the finish line of this stage of the Tour de France. They’re going so fast as they cross in front of us we can hardly see them and it’s all done in 10 seconds. We cheer and clap and yell ‘Go Cadel!’ But we’re not even sure if we’ve seen him. A few stragglers follow and we cheer them as well, as they achieve the finish line. And suddenly, it’s all over.

The crowd surges towards the presentation podium; we decide to head into town for dinner before catching the train back to Paris. A cursory glance inside the cathedral, where the Kings of France were made, where Joan of Arc was dealt her fate and our day in Reims is complete.

When our trip comes to an end, we leave marvelling at this country’s history, reflected in its buildings, its stories, its attitudes and its people – past and present. We find all our expectations have been exceeded. Every city, town, village, building, statue, has its own unique tale, but they all combine into one incredible story, one amazing, living entity – an experience like no other, on the streets of France.
Death in the Andes

Michael Giacometti

Uno

‘Otra muerte en las montañas’ declared the front page of Mendoza’s daily newspaper Diario Uno. If there was any uncertainty about the meaning of the headline, the full colour photograph of the body, lifeless in a pool of blood on the snow, erased it. Vale Shigeru Kimura of Japan, found dead at 6000 metres above sea level at the base of the rocky and difficult canaleta. He came to Argentina to climb Cerro Aconcagua, 6962 metres, roof of the Americas, second highest of the Seven Summits.

I translate the article as best I can with my beginner Spanish. I may have misread bits, but I got the gist of it: his death was the first for the season, but the god-mountain still needed to be appeased. It was sobering news. The group I had joined in Mendoza would depart tomorrow for our three week attempt on the mountain.

Dos

‘Three years we have been coming here,’ declares guide Brigitte Muir as we near Puente del Inca, a small village in the mountains and the starting point of our three-day walk to base camp, ‘and not once have I been in there.’ Her gaze falls briefly on the village’s small cemetery as we pass by. Her husband and fellow guide, Jon, points out the cairns of several new burials.

As we dismount the bus, Jon receives the latest news from the mountain. A 25-year-old Swiss man pushed himself too hard on the trek to base camp yesterday. During the night he developed pulmonary oedema, coughing up frothy pink spit, and was evacuated by mule to a lower altitude. He died about one kilometre from here. Otra muerte.

Tres

Ten days later, death is far from my mind. Laughter lingers in the base camp dining tent with the fuggy smells of a dozen well-fed men. Tomorrow, soon after sunrise, after four long, grinding, and headache-inducing days of ferrying equipment up the mountain and two days of feasting and recuperating at base, we begin our push for the summit.
The laughter fades; so too the footsteps and ‘goodnights’ of the team shuffling over the moraine to bed. I stay, wanting to know what Jon thinks of our chances.

‘Not everyone will make it.’

I recoil as if slapped.

If Jon had gone to the milk bar and asked for a bag of mixed lollies, he would have been handed us: a white paper bag filled with jubes, mates, strawberry creams, jelly babies and freckles; ordinary working people; not one serious climber. Two had been as high as 6000 metres, but the previous high for most was Mt Kosciuszko, 2228 metres. Our base camp at Aconcagua is at 4200 metres, Camp 1: 5000 metres, Camp 2: 5800 metres!

‘Not everyone will make it,’ I repeat to myself. I feel, in some way, he is referring to me. Does he doubt my ability? My resolve? Do I have the same doubts?

I take the questions with me out into the frozen air. We walk the rocky path to my tent, perform my nightly victuals, snuggle into my warm sleeping bag, and share my nightly 200-gram chocolate bar.

Snug in their tents, cocooned in their insulating down, how many of the others have doubts? Over 5000 people attempt Aconcagua every year, yet less than one-third stand beside the large cross at the top overlooking the distant Pacific Ocean. Will I be among the fortunate? Or join Shigeru Kimura, the Swiss man, and the many others marked by cairns in the valley—three days later, on top of the Andes—so why am I concerning myself with my frailty now? The lack of oxygen at high altitude induces strange thoughts.

After a fitful night, I feel sluggish, heavy in mind and body. Far from feeling strong, I want to remove the heavy plastic boots and crawl back into my warm cocoon.

The ill feeling continues during the slow plod up to Camp 1. We halt and step aside for a group descending the narrow trail. After the plodding ascent that takes five hours or more, groups generally race downhill in less than one hour. But this group hobbles in descent, nursing their aching joints, limbs and bandaged heads. They look like casualties of war returning from the front.

‘Mucha suerte,’ they mutter, wishing us good fortune. They reached the summit three days ago in white-out conditions. Separated on the descent, the last person returned to Camp 2 at midnight after 18 hours and a fall into some rocks. Exhausted and unable to walk the next day, they spent an extra night up high. I feel torn, wanting to assist them down to base.
They finally pass by. We turn and resume the slow climb. I wonder: what sins we will absolve by submitting to this penance?

Climbing the steep scree slope to Camp 2, the horror show resumes. A bloodied man with a fractured skull is assisted down past us. We listen keenly for the grim news: another death. A group of three Argentine climbers were blown off the upper mountain by extreme winds. Roped together, they plunged hundreds of metres down the steep ice, dumping the body of the lead climber at the base of the glacier, close to Camp 2.

Finally we crest the steep scree. There they are one hundred metres away, two black smudges on the snow: a corpse and the pack the living body once wore.

Mas

In 1998, ten climbers perished on the mountain, the most on record for a climbing season. In 1985, the mummy of an Incan boy was discovered at 5300 metres on a ledge of the southwest face. In 1996, an American team rested on their descent and released — with a prayer to the summing wind — the ashes of a loved one.

Y mas

The late afternoon chill descends on Camp 2 with a blast of katabatic wind like a train rushing past. I have another headache. Not as bad as before, but it shows that I am struggling to acclimatise to the altitude. At 5800 metres, the air pressure is less than half that at sea level, causing an increase in the blood's pH level. The resulting signs and symptoms are headaches, nausea, dizziness, fatigue and sleep apnoea, and if left unchecked, pulmonary and cerebral oedema, and death.

In the morning, I rise gingerly. Three circles of yellow snow about an arm’s length from the tent show where I dumped over two litres of warm piss from my pee-bottle during the night. I can’t stomach breakfast. Finishing one brew is difficult.

Like a continuation of last night’s bizarre dreams and howling, tent-shaking gale, the events of the past two weeks swirl around me. I feel low, a little dizzy. My hands are numbingly cold. No placing them in armpits can re-warm them.

The traverse to Camp 3 is like being in a game of Minefield. The deep, soft snow is covered by a thin icy crust. With each step I trust that the crust will support my weight. Sometimes it does. Mostly, just as I transfer my weight, I crash through unexpectedly. I lose balance, almost topple over, then step knee-high up from the soft snow onto the crust, balance, step … crash through the ice-crust again. Jarring, falling. Dislodging
any vestige of reality. The clock stops. I cannot take another step. I stand there, a foolish statue in the snow.

Four days later, the final three climbers of the team return to base camp with Jon. Like many other teams, we were unable to put anyone on the summit. Strong westerly winds continue to push plumes of snow off the peak, showing no sign of abating.

But success stories trickle through. A South African team crawled on hands and knees to the summit in a howling white-out gale. The dog that lives off scraps at Camp Berlin, the last hut at 5800 metres on the north-western approach, has been photographed on the summit at least seven times.

A guide friend of mine is often asked: ‘Is it worth it?’ He has been there many times, is more than willing to return, but after some deliberation he gives the only possible response: ‘No.’

I believed I would get to the top but fell well short. I should be disappointed like some others in the team. But I’m not. All the training and preparation in the world cannot guarantee anyone standing atop a mountain. If anyone wants it enough to die for, then their death is almost predestined: an honourable folly.

_Y mucho mas_

As we depart base camp for the comforts of civilisation, two climbers from the local army base begin their march up to Camp 2. They have no interest in the summit. They have come to reclaim.

For more than a week the dead Argentine climber has littered the mountain. His family has arranged for his collection for burial in Buenos Aires. But his spirit has already flown. Food for the god-mountain, scraps for the condor, he will not be the last.
Road Trip Through Timor

Miranda Tetlow

I’ve hitch-hiked in China, been skydiving in New Zealand and eaten dog in Tonga, but it’s in Timor-Leste that I really decide to take my life in my hands.

We've decided to hire a car.

It seems like a fairly natural thing to do on a holiday, but the roads in Timor are notoriously bad, or nonexistent. Not surprisingly, decades of occupation and tragedy have done little for infrastructure. The country has about 30 kilometres of good road to rub together. Even in Dili, the pot holes are craterous; some the size of a small car. The roads are so bad that although Baucau – the country’s second largest centre – is just over 120 kilometres away, it will take us six hours to drive there.

But we have heard of spectacular beaches and snorkelling to the east. I want to get there.

The microlets, or local buses, are lively but slowed by loads of rice, mattresses and chickens in hand-fashioned cages, not to mention the passengers who hang out the door. I spy one heading out of the airport: “God Only Knows” is scrawled on the windscreen next to a lewd cartoon of a green woman in a bikini. All promises of an interesting journey, but no guarantees on the destination.

And for all my early bravado, I am too scared to get on a motorbike.

So we get off the plane, and head straight to the country’s only hire car outlet. They know the roads are bad too, and the chance of having an accident is high. No one will insure us, but it seems a deal can be cut to reduce your liability, in the likely event that something goes wrong. We hand over a good portion of extra money, and agree to go halves if we total the car.

They talk us into a three-door Pajero. It has that new car smell, but the tyres look old. None of the other vehicles look more promising. Fingers crossed, we back out of the rental premises and drive onto one of Dili’s many one-way streets, the wrong way.

After looping the back streets, we begin the climb up the mountain through folds of rainforest, and road-side stalls selling coconuts and bedraggled green vegetables.

Eventually, we start to hug the coastline. I’m bemused by pineapple-shaped pandanus baskets on tables, one corner after another. We stop. A smiling mother and her four
unsmiling children untie the pineapple package to reveal two kilos of sea salt. The road winds on, and the blue ocean to our left is almost blinding. Around one corner, we spy the husk of a troop carrier bearing the UN insignia, roof crushed and windows smashed. It’s only just hanging onto the cliff.

But the most immediate threat is running over someone’s prized chook. With a radio of limited means, the soundtrack to our journey is the horn, beeping as we attempt to shepherd goats, pigs and chickens away from the wheels. I’ve been warned that road kill will require significant financial compensation, and can end in fists. I don’t have the will or vocabulary for a fight, so it’s slow and steady driving behind the wheel.

We arrive in Baucau, and the back tyre is looking precariously low. A few false starts lead us to a mechanic whose workshop is decorated with Xanana Gusmao stencils and portraits of Che Guevara. There’s a language barrier. I mime pumping up a tyre to the sudden crowd that has amassed around our vehicle. The Che fan club dissolve into giggles.

Eventually the tyre is pumped, and a container of fuel is strained through muslin and funnelled into our tank. This is the petrol station, apparently.

The road trip continues. It’s as if we’ve passed through Pakistan and into Thailand as a stone-littered steppe turns into green rice paddies with water buffaloes grazing. Ten kilometres on, windswept grey beaches remind me of Scottish picnics on the beach.

But it’s not a world tour; we’re still driving through Timor. Each village has its share of Fretilin flags and graffiti. “What we gonna do about peace?” cries one school wall.

We decide to make for Tutuala and Jaco Island, renowned for pristine white beaches and the aquamarine waters that sell postcards. It’s Timor’s Far East, and the road progressively becomes more bumpy and, soon, indiscernible. We pass through crumbling ruins of old Timorese houses, raised on stilts, and decorated with swathes of shells and horse skulls. I buy some eggs and salad vegetables from a rare road stall. Forget about restaurants with byo alcohol; we’ll need to bring our own food.

As the light turns purple and the trees become more windswept, we pull up to Tutuala, and drive up a rubble-strewn hill to the village’s only accommodation. It’s a pousada that remembers better times. A gang of children gather at our feet, and then turn fallen columns into slides. They frolic on the faded tables, under painted concrete umbrellas.

The caretaker arrives, and for five US dollars a night, this can be our home. It’s musty, and has the air of a forgotten Swiss ski lodge. There are old maps on the wall, and spider webs around the beds. No running water, just litre bottles which have been dutifully carried up by the caretaker for us to flush the toilet. Some of the windows are
smashed; what role did this building play during Indonesian occupation? We beg some hot water, eat two-minute noodles and watch the light fade over the cliffs.

The next day, after stiff Timorese coffee and bread rolls, it’s the treacherous 4WD crawl down to the beach. Two locals are quick to jump in our spare seats, and as we descend down a road which runs almost vertical, I understand why they didn’t want to walk. I’ve mentally emptied my bank account, certain the car is not for this world much longer, when we reach the beach, a fleet of outrigger canoes and a jumble of beach shacks.

For a small price, the fishermen persuade us that there are no crocodiles and drop us at Jaco Island, to rub noses with the angel fish and meditate amongst the coral. They land their canoe down the beach half an hour later, with a barracuda and Spanish mackerel tied to the helm. The fish will become our dinner. The fishermen disappear, and then rain clouds gather above. It’s the rumble of an unexpected dry season storm, and soon the ocean is fluorescent against the sky. Our fishermen soon appear in the distance, and ferry us back to land before the waves take over.

A few days later, when food supplies run only to bananas and rice, our car manages to cling to the scrabble of rocks on the track, back up to Tutuala. We stop once more in Baucau. There’s a swimming pool which is filled every three days with pure spring water from the mountain side, then drained again. It’s electric blue, and with cement banana lounges, it looks like a resort for the ancients. A get-away for Socrates, a few laps between classes and opining to the village square. I feel like I’m swimming in Evian.

We overnight at the Pousada Baucau, a bright pink guest house with the best round steak in town. I spend an hour on the porch with the hotel’s receptionist, a sparky woman named Gabriella. She trained to be a nun, but decided to leave the church. She doesn’t elaborate. Her parents were both Fretilin fighters, and sheltered in the mountains out of town. At night they would creep down to siphon water from buffalo drinking holes, filled with the blood of the disappeared, shot dead. Later, an ex-pat friend tells me that our pink Pousada too was an interrogation and torture chamber during the occupation.

It’s a slow drive back to Dili, passing once more through Scotland, Thailand and Pakistan. The dusty capital – home to one million people, many more livestock and a giant statue of Jesus – is a welcome sight.

And unbelievably, the car is unscathed.
The country has bigger problems than nervous tourists in hire cars, but it’s still with a sigh of relief that I hand over the keys and relinquish the little 4WD that could. We flag down a taxi driver with a cracked windscreen and just one broken door, and climb in.

I let him worry about the potholes and suicidal chickens. I watch the road, the occasional cluster of graves, and the acres of frustrated graffiti splashed across Dili as we drive to the airport.
Providing ‘a theatre and source of images’ for Australian writers, the Northern Territory is a ‘metaphorical construct’ in Australian writing, a place expressing the European fascination with, and fear of, Australian landscape. Presented as ‘adventure-loving, violent, impatient with rules and bureaucracy, casual, and frequently excessive,’ the Northern Territory is a place where ‘values are inverted,’ the innocent are found guilty, and the ‘godless are spiritual’. Moreover, characters frequently experience shifts in personality after exposure to the Northern Territory landscape, which bears the power to shape and ‘reveal true personalities’. Equally ridiculed and relished for its sensationalism, the Northern Territory News encapsulates these themes through daily headlines warning of the ever-present threat of crocodiles, cyclones and criminal behaviour. Arguably, the dominant metaphors and imagery applied to the Northern Territory reflect people’s conflicting desires for the security of standardization, and thrill of exotica in Darwin’s urban landscape.

While the earliest twentieth century Northern Territory writing attempted to assure readers of ‘civilization’ being ‘transplanted’ to the northern frontier, later writers began to focus on the culture itself. In 1915, Elise Masson wrote An Untamed Territory: The Northern Territory of Australia, and described travelling to the Northern Territory as a ‘strange’ experience and a shift in both ‘time and space’. While Knut Dahl found the landscape ‘incomprehensible’ and ‘a different world’, Masson related her travels into an ‘old Australia’ no longer existent in the south, but one that ‘still lingers’ in the ‘wild, intractable Northern Territory’. The theme of intrigue is continued in Carl Warburton’s White Poppies, which suggests the landscape bears ‘supernatural possibilities’. Further literary themes include individual freedom, and the economic potential of the vast, unexploited land.

Non-Aboriginal inhabitants are often depicted as transient, which possibly reflects a ‘deeper insecurity’ about residing in the Northern Territory, resulting from the struggle to engage in a familiar discourse with the environment. For the first few decades of the twentieth century, many considered the Northern Territory a ‘white elephant’, and a liability for the rest of Australia. Pursuing this theme, in 1938 Henry Hall wrote Our Backyard: How to Make Northern Australia an asset instead of a Liability. An account of his travels throughout the Northern Territory, Hall further contributed to the mythology of exotica, danger and adventure apparent in other popular titles like, Hard Liberty, Across Unknown Australia, and Camel Pads. Geographical remoteness also
fuels narratives emphasizing the quest and the importance of the journey as characters move outside the security of southern Australian cities.

Despite significant development, the visceral realities of Darwin’s tropical location ensure the continuation of these themes. Even within the confines of urban Darwin, the NT News has no shortage of material. While the wet season delivers humidity averaging over 70%, monsoonal rains and cyclone warnings; deadly box jellyfish and salt water crocodiles are potential hazards in Darwin Harbour and local beaches for most of the year. Unlike southern Australian cities, in Darwin there is no need to venture outside the city limits to experience remoteness and engage with nature. Whether you live in an elevated tropical house or a high rise apartment, during a cyclone you are at the mercy of fallen trees and power lines, blackouts, sewage problems and flooding. Tropical weather renders the environment both dangerous and fragile, which is presented by Northern Territory writers as both menacing and enticing. Indeed, Susanne Falkiner suggests landscape is a formative concept in the Australian metaphysical dialogue, and if there is a ‘soul’ to the Australian people, it is one ‘shaped by landscape’. Subsequently, the land is presented as something raw and powerful, under threat by ‘insensitive newcomers’ who ‘destroy’ the landscape as a consequence of their ‘inability to perceive it’.

Presenting a similar sentiment, Nicolas Rothwell addresses Darwin’s ‘loss of innocence’, and nostalgically reflects on the ‘aimlessness’ and ‘abrupt energies’ of the ‘old city’. Citing the 1999 demolition of the ‘city emblem’, the ‘down-at-heel’ Darwin Hotel, he wistfully acknowledges things ‘have moved on’. While Old Admiralty House has been ‘gutted’ and replaced with a restaurant displaying ‘tacky advertising pennants’, the Mitchell Centre resembles a ‘toilet cistern’. Echoing Falkiner’s correlation between the Australian landscape and metaphysical dialogue, Rothwell surmises that the ‘secret charms’ and ‘half-formed ghosts’ of ‘old’ Darwin are being erased and ‘a new order is being born’. Rothwell’s metaphorical constructs are also reminiscent of Xavier Herbert’s Poor Fellow My Country, which depicts the European ‘at war with the landscape’. Seemingly, Rothwell resists change by celebrating the disorder of ‘old’ Darwin and rejecting the ‘new order’ of high rise apartments and fine dining. However, unlike Northern Territory writers who attempt to understand the environment through landscape, Rothwell contends Darwin’s uniqueness is embedded in its built environment.

Conversely, Darwin’s creative practitioners believe seasonal rhythms, risk of cyclones, and outdoor markets are fundamental to local creativity. Seeking to establish Darwin’s position as a ‘creative city’, Tess Lea et al, authors of Creative Tropical City: Mapping Darwin’s Creative Industries, interviewed people in Darwin’s creative arts sector. Especially valued are Darwin’s differences from the southern states, including the
‘distinctive environment’, proximity to ‘stunning natural spaces’, and being able to ‘chill out’ and escape from the ‘hustle and bustle’ of larger cities. Unlike Rothwell, the interviewees cited landscape and the tropical climate as fundamental to Darwin’s uniqueness. Although Darwin has lost historically significant buildings due to war, cyclones and development, Tes Lea et al suggest people value Darwin’s tropical outdoor lifestyle far more than its heritage buildings. Indeed, Darwin’s tropical climate and remoteness is what places it outside familiar imagery and metaphor applied to European and southern Australian cities.

Although heritage buildings are part of a city’s story and generate an awareness of history, a city’s charm rests in the way its citizens inhabit given spaces. As Michael de Certeau contends, ‘space and place’ require activation by the ‘rhetorical practices’ of a city’s inhabitants. The walkers ‘selection, rejection, manipulation’ of the spaces they move through, described by de Certeau as the ‘chorus of idle footsteps’, enables ‘space’ to be altered into ‘place’. As with reading a text, the individual moves through Darwin city and suburbs interpreting and creating their own meaning from the images and events they experience. Walking enables an urban community to be ‘woven’ together into a ‘complex fabric’ of places, resulting in a ‘text’ of ‘anonymous laws’ governing the urban space. De Certeau perceives these unspoken realities and ‘poetic geographies’ created through the ‘rhetoric of walking’, as the foundation and inherent worth of a city. ‘Cities are imagined as much as they actually exist’, and for de Certeau these imaginings and resistances ensure city spaces remain inclusive of people conducting their everyday lives. Indeed, walking through Darwin city in the wet season requires people to negotiate intense humidity, monsoonal rains and sheltered areas being utilized by homeless people and professionals alike.

Also drawing on the inherent power dynamics and unspoken negotiations underpinning shared spaces, Zygmunt Bauman contends ‘newcomers are strangers to the city’; nothing in the city is ‘natural’ or taken for granted by them and they are the ‘born and sworn’ enemies of ‘tranquility and self-congratulation’. Indeed, Dewar’s exploration of twentieth century Northern Territory writing suggests non-Aboriginal ‘newcomers’ to Darwin are incapable of simply accepting the tropical weather and landscape. Subsequently, they feel compelled to translate it into a language they understand, often by overtly embracing, or rejecting, exotic mythology. Bauman asserts development of the city is reflected in ‘apparently contradictory desires’ and expectations of residents. One potential outcome of this conflict is the ‘insistent and consistent MacDonaldization’ of urban environments, with its ‘overwhelming’ leaning toward standardization and the ensuing ‘uniformity’ of urban habitat. For residents in a city where routines are routinely broken, where there are there are no familiar
landmarks protected from change, MacDonald’s restaurants and their many imitators deliver the ‘comfort, predictability and orderliness’ people crave.29

In this environment, people can feel secure in familiarity and be certain to receive what they want and expect. MacDonaldization meets tourists’ need to ‘relax and disarm’.30 Consistent with this paradigm, Darwin is impelled to ‘constantly negotiate a paradox of place’, of attracting people by its ‘otherness’ and tempting them to stay by matching lifestyle expectations of larger cities.31 Indeed, the dynamics of tourism consumption and promotion have required Darwin to conceptually re-invent itself for the tourist gaze, which entails sidelining value drawn from its history and projecting commercially appropriate systems of meaning. In this context, the city is reproduced as a simulacrum of other tourist towns, characterized by the ‘postindustrial juxtaposition’ of modernist apartment blocks with ‘coastal vistas’.32

Resting in the heart of Darwin, and the predominant location of café’s, bars, eateries and the centre of Darwin’s nightlife, Mitchell Street is the city’s offering of an internationally recognizable signifier of MacDonaldization. Despite tourism campaigns like ‘Share our Story’, alluding to the Northern Territory being a place of ‘tall stories’, the cultural vacuum on Mitchell Street suggests a limited appetite for intrigue. Amongst its offerings, Mitchell Street sports a string of almost indistinguishable bars, two Irish pubs, a nightclub, a strip club, a Hog’s Breath and The Coffee Club. Aside from a handful of reputable restaurants, Mitchell Street venues are largely impersonalized and attempt to lure customers with the reassurance of complete, unpretentious sterility. Like a food court or a hospital cafeteria, Mitchell Street offers something unintimidating and internationally recognizable. Any suggestions of distinctiveness, or the unique, are denied in place of homogenized appeal, apparent in the bars only playing music currently in the American or Australian music charts, and live music only performed by cover bands committed to a set-list of established hits.

The sparse interiors, and exteriors, suggest practicality over ambience. Free of characterizing detail, the patron is left with little indication of being in a bar on Mitchell Street, Jalan Legian or Khao San Road. Far from the mystical offerings suggested in the promotional slogan ‘Share our Story’, Mitchell Street’s drinking venues seem designed to deny the patron any sense of place or meaning beyond the generic tourist strip. Arguably, these barren spaces, fitted with only essential weather-proof furnishings, are designed to cater for those seeking an escape from sharing ‘our Story’. On the NT Tourism website, Darwin is promoted as ‘a gateway to explore the best natural and cultural attractions the Northern Territory and Australia has to offer’.33 Indeed, although NT Tourism provides information on ‘Darwin and Surrounds’, the more enticing attractions are, of course, the surrounds. Darwin is a ‘vibrant’ city with a ‘relaxed personality’, however, it clearly plays second fiddle to ‘world heritage listed’
Kakadu National Park, Arnhem Land, and the Tiwi Islands. Perhaps, like Khao San Road and Jalan Legian, Mitchell Street is a necessary offering to tourists wanting to ‘relax and disarm’ after venturing into the unfamiliar.

The distinction between tourist and resident in Darwin is hazy, which may be why the decrease in historical buildings has resulted in an increase in characterless bars. If, as Lucy Lippard argues, ‘space combined with memory defines place’, the absence of memory in Darwin has followed Bauman’s theory of residents ‘contradictory’ desires resulting in the MacDonaldization of urban space. Exploring why people move to certain cities, Richard Florida suggests people look for openness to diversity and the opportunity to ‘validate their identities’. Florida’s interviewees defined authenticity as the opposite of generic, they associate authentic with being ‘real’ in terms of a city containing ‘real buildings, real history, real people’ and also offering ‘unique and original’ experiences. Indeed, many of the attributes Florida’s interviewees listed as their criteria for living in a particular city resonate with the perspectives of the Creative Tropical City respondents. Subsequently, chain restaurants, chain stores, and nightclubs represent an indistinct, generic experience available almost anywhere. Seemingly, Darwin’s long term residents accept the climate and landscape, whereas tourists and short-term residents seek reprieve in tempered exotica.

Although Darwin, like all other cities, is both ‘real and unreal’ it also inhabits a ‘complex, imaginary place’ in an ‘unforgiving and intrusive’ environment. James Donald asserts ‘the city’ is an ‘abstraction,’ which claims to identify what is common to all cities. He suggests people’s experiences of the city are largely built from imagination; a collection of images and ideas drawn from novels, pictures, ‘half remembered films’ and strolling through the capital cities of Europe. Cities embody the fused ‘perspectives, narratives, imagery’ journeying through urban culture and interacting with ‘techniques for acting on the city’. The types of city-narratives Donald alludes to are rarely, if ever, remote and tropical, which results in Darwin existing outside predominant imagery and ideals surrounding ‘the city’. Social memory also plays a formative role in shaping a city’s identity, and high population turnover rates in Darwin inevitably impact on the sense of place. James Fentress and Chris Wickam contend social memory is an ‘essential ingredient’ in a place’s identity, and is based on a shared rather than individual memory. Moreover, social memory ‘defines a group’, gives it a sense of its past and defines ambitions for the future. It is also essential for the creation of an ‘enduring’ and shared sense of place, and makes places seem inviting to potential long-term residents.

Landry contends a significant aspect of the city is the ‘sensory landscape’, which generates ‘strong feelings’ in response to urban life. ‘Smell is ‘extremely evocative’, leads to heady feelings and generates emotions; smell affects our mood and gives us a sense
of place and location. Indeed, ‘smellscape’ is very distinct in Darwin, with the several stages of the wet season bringing increasingly wet, cloying air, the smell of fresh rain, wet grass, and the rich scent of plant life coming into bloom and producing fruit. The dry season also delivers distinct smells, with increasing dry winds and dropping temperatures the air is fresher and imbued with sweet-smelling smoke from controlled burning of savannah outside Darwin. Unlike most city environments, Darwin’s relatively small population and remoteness means the usual smell distinctions between urban and rural areas are decreased. During the wet season, the force of rainfall kicks tiny spores into the air where the moisture after rain acts as an air freshener. The rains impact also stirs up aromatic material, which is carried in the moist air.

Unlike larger cities throughout the world, the Darwin city centre is free of the sensory disorientation of department stores, with their blasts of cosmetics and perfumes, cacophony of soundtracks and windowless artifice. However, the absence of adequate shade and shelter means the city centre offers little reprieve from intense heat and rain. Subsequently, the inescapable reality and visceral physicality of tropical living is evidenced in people’s exposure of ample flesh and profuse sweating. As Tess Lea articulates, in Darwin the heat ‘melts our brains, enervates our bodies’ and brings everyone who lives here to a ‘visceral, physical, shared reality’.

The intensity of the Top End’s monsoonal rain and relentless heat; uncontrollable and uncontainable flora and fauna, intermeshed with the unnervingly vast expanse and still silence of the desert provokes both fear and fascination. In response, Northern Territory writing attempts to translate the environment into something tangible. Demonstrating a pastiche of popular Northern Territory writing, the NT Tourism website portrays an exotic, adventuress location with a somewhat offbeat yet friendly demeanour: ‘With its quirky characters, authentic Aboriginal experiences and awe-inspiring natural beauty, the Northern Territory has a wealth of travel stories to tell’. As a city, and once removed from the adventures of the outback, containing Darwin in a specific image or story proves more difficult.

Since settlement, Northern Territory writing simultaneously accepts and rejects the landscape and environmental realities. The same language continues today as people either dismiss Darwin as a hick town, cultureless, or as merely a stopover on the way to greater things; or celebrate the environment and remoteness as something inspiring and idiosyncratic. Both perspectives reflect a continuum in Northern Territory writing, whereby people try to temper the landscape through essentialism. Searching for the ultimate blend of security and adventure, people embrace the Northern Territory on the proviso of certain conditions and ideals being maintained.
Endnotes

1. Dewar, M.S; (1993); *In Search of the ‘Never Never’: The Northern Territory Metaphor in Australian Writing 1837-1992*; Northern Territory University; Darwin.
5. Masson, E; (1915); *An Untamed Territory; The Northern Territory of Australia*; MacMillan; London.
7. Warburton, C; (1937); *White Poppies*; Angus and Robertson; Sydney.
18. Herbert, X; (1975); *Poor Fellow My Country*; Collins; Sydney.
20. Lea, T et al; (2009); *Creative Tropical City: Mapping Darwin’s Creative Industries*; Charles Darwin University; Darwin.
21. Morris, B; (2004); ‘What we talk about when we talk about ‘Walking in the City’; *Cultural Studies*; Vol. 18; #5.
24. De Certeau, M; (1988); ‘Walking in the City’ in *The Practice of Everyday Life*; University of Minnesota Press; Minneapolis.
33. Tourism NT; ‘About the NT: The many cultures of the Northern Territory,’ retrieved on 16 May 2010; http://en.travelnt.com/about-nt/share-our-story.asp
34. Tourism NT; Op.Cit.
36. Florida, R; (2002); *The Rise of the Creative Class*; Basic Books; New York
39. Donald, J; (1990); *Imagining the Modern City*; University of Minnesota Press; Minneapolis.
42. Donald, J; Op.Cit.
43. Fentress, J & Wickam, C; (1992); *Social Memory: new perspectives on the past*; Blackwell; Oxford.
45. Landry, C; (2006); *The Art of City Making*; EarthScan; London.

References
Bauman, Z; (2003); City of Fear, City of Hope; University of London, New Cross.
D’ath, J; (1989); The Initiate; Collins; Sydney.
De Certeau, M; (1988); ‘Walking in the City’ in The Practice of Everyday Life; University of Minnesota Press; Minneapolis.
Dewar, M.S; (1993); In Search of the ‘Never Never’: The Northern Territory Metaphor in Australian Writing 1837-1992; Northern Territory University; Darwin.
Donald, J; (1990); Imagining the Modern City; University of Minnesota Press; Minneapolis.
Fentress, J & Wickam, C; (1992); Social Memory: new perspectives on the past; Blackwell; Oxford.
Florida, R; (2002); The Rise of the Creative Class; Basic Books; New York.
Guillaume, M; (1986); ‘Metamorphosis of epidermia’ in Feher, M & Kwinter, S(eds.); Zone 1/2: The Contemporary City; MIT Press; New York.
Hannigan, J; (1998); Fantasy City: The Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis; Routledge; London.
Herbert, X; (1975); Poor Fellow My Country; Collins; Sydney.
Kahn, B.M; (2002); Cosmopolitan Culture; Simon & Schuster; New York.
Landry, C; (2006); The Art of City Making; EarthScan; London.
Lea, T et al; (2009); Creative Tropical City: Mapping Darwin’s Creative Industries; Charles Darwin University; Darwin.
Masson, E; (1915); Untamed Territory; The Northern Territory of Australia; MacMillan; London.
Olwig, K.R.; (2006); ‘Place contra space in a morally just landscape’; Norwegian Journal of Geography; Vol.60; # 24-31.
Roberts, J & Young, M; (2008); ‘Transience, memory and induced amnesia: the re-imagining of Darwin’; Journal of Australian Studies; Vol.32; #1.
Sheldrake, P; (2007); ‘Placing the Sacred: Transcendence and the City’; Literature and Theology; Vol. 21; #3.
Soja, E.W; (2000); PostMetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions; Blackwell Publishers; Oxford.
Tourism NT; ‘About the NT: The many cultures of the Northern Territory,’ retrieved on 16 May 2010; http://en.travelnt.com/about-nt/share-our-story.aspx
Warburton, C; (1937); White Poppies; Angus and Robertson; Sydney.
A ‘Place’ for Reconciliation in Indigenous Writing

Adelle Barry

A loved being or thing or idea is held by us, held in our arms, in our imagination; our love casts a glow around it. But a loved place holds us, even if it exists only in memory; it causes everything within it, including ourselves, to glow. A loved place is not encompassed by our love; we are encompassed, loved, breathed into life, by it.

(Freya Matthews ‘Rehabilitating Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture’)

Our ability to make peace depends on there being people and places with whom we can make peace.

(Deborah Bird Rose ‘Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation’)

The Northern Territory is often remarked for its rich cultures and unique landscape. It is home to many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and the overall population quickly growing. The city of Palmerston (approximately 21 kilometres from Darwin) is expanding at such a significant rate that a number of new suburbs (such as Bellamack) are being especially designed with consultation from residents about the construction of ‘place’. The Northern Territory, however, is not only a topic for infrastructure: Academic discourses such as Art, History and Literature often use metaphors of the Territory’s ‘inland’ to explore ideological frameworks of nationhood and reconciliation. This essay will explore representations of the Northern Territory in a preferred literary or critical frame rather than a historical or conventional one by analysing Territory Indigenous writer, Kim Mahood’s text, Craft for a Dry Lake (2000). Mahood’s work has made considerable contributions to the reconciliation debates vis a vis developing a literary (home)land for Australian readers by using specific symbolism from Central Australia in the N.T. She writes how the ‘Centre’ is a special part of the Australian landscape, and as literary motif, able to create a metaphysical space where reconciliation may be apparent for readers.1 This ‘place’ is ideological but seen and represented in nature. The power of the land in our everyday lives, as Mahood imagines it, is comparable with Bird Rose’s theory that ‘Nature’ is alive and participates in social organisation – that it has a ‘living and active presence, it reaches out to people’; it organises itself and ‘seeks to organise those within its ambit as well’.2 How ‘place’ is envisioned has an overarching effect on the relationships between people who share it – as they reach common understandings and a love for the home they live (in) rather than seeing a place visited somewhere (out) there – belonging to others.
Reconciliation is an idea relating to the forgiveness of historical and imperial wrongs, including the acquisition and clearing of the Australian landscape since colonisation. Mahood’s work suggests that the land can be restored, at least conceptually, and it can offer us a source for healing if we value and acknowledge its presence in Indigenous writing.

The ideas presented at the beginning of this chapter by Matthews and Bird Rose suggest that the land is ‘alive’ and has a physical presence that, if we are open to it, can interject in our lives and organise us. Just as the land has organised Indigenous people since the beginning of the Dreamtime, and through the passing down of significant stories, the land has given them totems, kinship and laws of which to identify and live with in communities. Yet, what would it mean if an internal sense of place could be realised for all Australians by exploring the ‘language of the country’ – a language without words but translatable through the creative work and articulation of postcolonial writers? How might a postcolonial imagination transform our relationships with place? Would our understanding, knowledge and love for one another reach new levels of interconnectedness through a shared understanding of the land we live in? This is more than simply advocating for the conservation of land. It is about nurturing the land and re-imagining its aesthetic purpose and sublimity, so in turn it will nurture us – change our perspectives about who we are in relation to ‘Others’. Ultimately, if we know and appreciate the place we live in, the returns are relational as well as environmental.

Before the proliferation of Indigenous literature, ‘place’ was known and understood in colonial frameworks which derived mostly from the disciplines of Science, Geography, Visual Arts, Film and Photography. As this essay will explore, earlier writing shows there was little connection or belonging to this land, particularly the central desert, as it was commonly thought of as ‘dead’ or belonging to the ‘(out)back’ of Australia. Place was commonly written about in the limited colonial frameworks of the ‘English’ language, as Walter Veit observes early writing/reading about ‘the bush’ shows ‘we know the country only from without; only very few of us speak its languages, the many old-Australian Aboriginal languages. A growing number of Indigenous publications have emanated from the Top End and are transforming mainstream conceptions of land in our national consciousness. Colonial interpretations and writing about the Australian landscape may have once isolated first settlers from relationship with the land and its Indigenous people. However, texts such as Craft for a Dry Lake show how relations can be repaired if we change the way in which the country we share is imagined.

Postcolonial writing can invigorate Australian places and consequently break up colonial patterns of thought which dictate how the land was once perceived as
worthless, dangerous and to be controlled. For example, a section from a populist book published in 1971 titled, *Australia: This Land – these people* writes of:

a harsh and unforgiving land, baked by summer sun, flooded by swollen rivers, ravaged by fire and worn by the ageless wind. For many it offers a life of hardship, loneliness and trial. It is a familiar cycle; droughts, turn crops and pastures brown, animals starve, forests fall prey to the merciless god of fire; then wet years follow, farms are flooded, and the earth replenishes its natural vegetation, ready once more for the vengeance of drought and flame.⁵

In contrast, Mahood uses language in *Craft for a Dry Lake* to re-imagine the Tanami Desert in the N.T. in an array of vivacious colours which contrast earlier myths and representations of a dry, dreary and lifeless (out)back Australia, such as the one described above. Instead she conjures up the images of:

Red earth and soft wheat-coloured grasses, spindifex and the elegant small desert gums with their white trunks and deep green furry leaves. The giant anthills are the most striking feature of this part of the country. They hulk across the landscape, almost animate, each with an individual weirdness of shape that hints at sentience, as some sort of purposefulness of their design.⁶

In this description the land is welcoming and holds great teleological importance as she observes the ‘purposefulness of (the landscape’s) design’ and how this place fits into nature’s larger interconnected relationships. For Mahood nature has purpose and design – the presence and survival of ‘desert gums’ signify there must be an underground river or water source which allows for the gums to thrive in the desert with minimal rainfall – emblematic of life-affirming qualities in such an ‘inhospitable’ place. She paints the Australian landscape with fresh colours and symbols which work to narrow the conceptual and existential gaps between geography and home; conceiving of a place which is nurturing and life-giving. Mahood’s ‘artwork’ is of bright colours and embodies Matthews’ thesis that a ‘flourishing community is likely to evolve a bright, self affirming cosmology’ whereas, ‘a languishing community is likely to see the world in darker shades’.⁷ Therefore, constructing a culture which is aware of reconciliation may be possible when using a colourful brush to transform the nation’s myths about the Australian landscape. Mahood’s polemics challenge past notions of the ‘bush’ as dull, lifeless or inhospitable and welcomes the ‘re-organisation’ of an imagined Australia which is both vital and genial.

In *Craft for a Dry Lake*, Mahood portrays the Australian landscape as a ‘living’ being which is continually calling her to meet with it anew – with fresh eyes rather than through the old colonial ‘maps’ she carries around with her as she travels, and which impose boundaries to separate her from the land: ‘I see from my map that the plains
have been fenced in. Essentially, maps prohibit her from a corporeal experience with place and are only used to look ‘on’ rather than reflect or dwell within. Reading from conventional maps draws place from above and a ‘haptic’ encounter of the land is minimal. As Paul Carter explains in *A Pattern Made of Holes*, a haptic encounter with place is particularly different to encountering a place from a map, a design or from a plane because it means:

experiencing the place you live in with your body rather than by simply looking at it through a car [or aeroplane] windscreen. Haptic spaces are those that satisfactorily externalise our deep emotional need for community; they create places to embrace and inhabit, places that speak to us. The corollary of this argument is that the inhabitants of environments which lack haptic values are likely to feel physically and emotionally disorientated, literally out of touch.

To know Australia may rely on a literary encounter with places such as Central Australia and a way of accessing its stories. Mapping Australia is an important task that should not be discredited for its practical functions. But it does not dispel all our country’s ‘blank spaces’ and mean we now know and understand ‘place’. To Mahood maps are a way of experiencing place from a colonial rather than postcolonial framework because maps are only a ‘glancing narrative, its structure spatial rather than continuous’. They represent where past explorers have been rather than where a society is going.

Authors share part of themselves with their readers and portray ‘maps’ of the imagination – what could be. These textual maps take readers to a location to connect with, and moreover, represent the ways one can be ‘touched’ at a particular location (even if they cannot touch it themselves). Writers cannot physically transform the land but they can transform the way it is experienced, ideated and shared. As Carter believes, land is not a material structure but a reinvention of social relations, whereby authors have an important role to play:

Before it was known, Australia was named. Before it was seen, it was represented. The operational space of white-settler culture was a mythopoetic invention, product of two forms of place-writing – the map and its repertoire of speculative features, the journal and its inventory of places made after the name…If “Australia” was written into being, it could also be rewritten.

If Carter’s theory is true, and a sense of place is not dependent on ‘maps’ or architectural designs, then concepts of ‘place’ can be rewritten many many times over. Using new and emerging impressions of the Northern Territory’s landscapes and deserts as a metaphor, the land is now being considered a shared place of worth and significance. Mahood negates colonial ‘mythopoetics’ which describe the Tanami Desert as a
barren land conquered and controlled through names, maps and limited geographical descriptions. Quite literally, she renames the places visited in the Tanami Desert, and redraws maps of the area in unique ways. She shares from her private journal how she draws her own unique and personal maps on the surface of Lake Ruth (traditionally named Monkarrupa): ‘The maps must be redrawn daily…adrift somewhere between the memory of a nomadic past and the dream of a transformative future … I write into its surface, as if every particle of dust is a word from the songs’. She is perhaps here listening to the ‘language of the country’ and using her body to feel the landscape and in order to find a new language in which to articulate its encompassing power: a way to ‘explore and engage with life … a way of holding together the thinking process and the unthinking process in a kind of poised tension’.

Kim Mahood attempts to employ language and new signifying systems which translate a haptic or bodily encounter with the living environment of the Tanami Desert. She first becomes familiar with the desert through an artistic journey which is productive in terms of producing artwork and/or a piece of writing: ‘I was going to draw, paint, record, rub, layer, trace’. Her art and journal writing become a way of capturing memory, the changing landscape and the changes within herself as well. She is called to write and paint but to also physically enter into her experience beyond just artistic expression and representation: ‘More and more as I try to make work that deals with the country, I feel the need for this physical encounter, something which cuts through the distance which drawing and painting force’. It seems the earth is drawing her in, both physically and emotionally, as she allows nature to ‘take hold of her very core’ and ‘wring her’ with a need and a desire she cannot properly fathom or ‘assuage’. The land compels her. Her maps become strange, as she traces this place with her body rather than her brush: ‘I want to scrape my flesh against the ragged bark of the boree, draw blood, crawl naked into the blinding stillness of the lake surface’. Her intentions to write and paint the country become far more intimate as she encounters the land through a ‘letting of blood, a taking of the country into oneself, of taking oneself into the country’.

Mahood’s experience of place is transformed from being an artistic representation of the land, to feeling its presence, ownership and oneness with her body. If reconciliation is assumed to represent ‘oneness’ or unity, it is not so much a cultural ‘oneness’ achieved through assimilation; it is oneness with home and place – to be in that place – with those people. What cannot be made to converge in terms of differing and disparate cultures may be possible in an imaginative space where land is painted as an archetype of reconciliation within one’s mind. Reconciliation must find a language which can articulate changing experiences of ‘place’ in a postcolonial reality.
‘discovered’ and colonised by the use of maps, but it can be (re)discovered in the same way by using literature to capture and evoke bodily experiences with place.

Mahood’s journey, as it is represented in her regional writing, describes a progressive and reforming bond with place. Her feelings of ‘belonging’ are developed simply by being aware of nature’s presence as a living organism around her. This living organism has healing powers which assist her while grieving over the death of her father and finding peace with the place where he died. ‘Now, as I look out across the star-illumined landscape, I see the shapes of grief, settled and quiet, in the crouching hummocks of the Pedestal Hills. Hold it for me, I tell them quietly, hold it for me here in this place which he loved.’ For her, the land is a site of redemption and possesses healing qualities. This is not a new phenomenon in Indigenous culture and land is commonly valued, sung and danced for its medicinal qualities and healing purposes. In *Iwenhe Tyerrtye – what it means to be an Aboriginal person* – Margaret Kemarre Turner OAM believes, ‘People can sing for the Land and Ancestors to heal themselves. The Stories and songs, after they’re performed, they come true. They’re singing to make their spirit strong.’ The link between healing and land is explicit: ‘Healing comes from the Land itself. When we’re sick or in mourning we go back to the Land to feel better, and to really relax deeply’. This raises an interesting prospect for the land as a place for reconciliation. A message perhaps dormant in the subtext of Mahood’s writing, yet waiting to be materialised: ‘Maybe in the heart of White Australia is a dried-up salt lake and a dream of redemption, tempered with irony’. Ironically, Australian soil was once the site of a colonial battlefield but may be emerging as a ‘place’ to make peace through altered imaginings of its worth and presence as a healing power.

In conclusion, this essay has argued that a politics of reconciliation is evident in the configuration of polemical representations and re-representations of the Australian landscape, particularly images of the Northern Territory, in modern Australian writing. Since European settlers arrived to Australia, its boundaries were mapped and the conceptual and physical conquest of the land has seen Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations significantly implicated. However, modern writers, such as Kim Mahood have portrayed alternate forms of mapping the country which engage the visceral subconscious and have dreamed of Australia anew. Mahood undergoes a personal journey to read/write herself into this country, and she takes her readers with her on this personal experience through the public space of the novel. Readers’ witness her eminent transformation and new sense of belonging to ‘place’ which can only translate to the radical possibilities of a cultural transformation which will recognise Australia as a ‘place’ for reconciliation. The natural landscape depicted in *Craft for a Dry Lake* does not resemble the dangerous, rugged and unforgiving ‘outback’ desert in the Northern Territory which has long dominated the nation’s consciousness. It is
a life giving source to be experienced haptically, and loved as an authoritative being with potential to heal and organise us in relation to the ‘Other’. If there is a ‘place’ for reconciliation in literature it is in the transforming depictions of the Australian landscape as our (home)land; a place which stirs in us a desire to know, love and understand its potential. For if we love the place we are rooted to from birth, perhaps we can work to mend our relationships from the ground up.

Endnotes
1. Further Australian texts which include the Northern Territory’s landscape as a literary trope to represent ideas about the nation and race relations include Going Inland (1998) by Pat Jacobs and Love like Water (2007) by Meme McDonald.
4. Such as Alex Miller’s Journey to the Stone Country (2002)
5. Fraser, Bryce (ed.) Australia: This Land – these people. The Readers Digest Association Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1971, p.101
13. Ibid. p.241-242
15. Loc cit
16. Ibid. p.194
17. Ibid. p.195
18. Loc cit
19. Ibid. p.254
21. Ibid. p.132
23. Similarly, Carter acknowledges the personal implications of his work as well, and concedes: ‘Looking back, I can see that this thesis [A Pattern Made of Holes] was a way of writing myself into the place’. (Carter Paul. Op cit. p.1) Is this essay a way of perhaps writing oneself into place? Academics impart knowledge and ideas to many others but they are also imbricated in deeply personal ways by what they study.

References
Fraser, Bryce (ed.) Australia: This Land – these people. The Readers Digest Association Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1971.
It’s Not Black and White: Who should be practically and affectively implicated in reconciliation and its textual discourses

Adelle Barry

Fiction writing is a proliferating vocation in the Northern Territory (NT) and the increasing number of publications by Territory authors is testament to the work of The NT Writers’ Centre to encourage, guide and inspire Territorians to imagine and write. The NT Writers’ Festival, ‘Word Storm’, was held by the NT Writers’ Centre in 2010 and proved to be a highly commendable success which attracted renowned authors such as Arnold Zabel, Germaine Greer and Lionel Fogarty to promote literature, critical debate and cultural production through the Arts. According to audience surveys, however, Northern Territory author, Marie Munkara was voted as the most popular guest writer at the festival for her work, *Every Secret Thing* (2009). Munkara’s text won the 2008 David Unaipon Award for an unpublished manuscript by an Indigenous Australian author and won the 2010 Northern Territory Book of the Year award. She has since appeared at writers’ festivals in Sydney and Melbourne, enjoyed international media engagements in Ubud, and conducted a reading for World Peace Day in Berlin which was broadcast across several countries.¹ What is it about Munkara’s work which has captured the attention of many readers from diverse cultures and what makes her work relevant to World Peace Day? What are the critical debates pertaining to ‘peace’ she locates and defines? This essay will analyse examples from Munkara’s text which point to debates about race relations and reconciliation in Australia. Her work is particularly interesting for her inclusion of migrant characters and how they are represented alongside Indigenous people in a post-colonial framework. *Every Secret Thing* draws intelligent comparisons between Indigenous and migrant experiences of colonisation and adumbrates how discourses of reconciliation do not just concern ‘Black’ and ‘White’ but the arguments and perspectives of migrant subjects as well.²

To begin, the cover of this text is rather unique, and shows a large black and white photograph of a White middle-aged man sitting behind the wheel of an overcrowded bush-vehicle. There are probably twenty Indigenous children piled in and on top of the vehicle with their arms waving at the camera. Even though the photo is black and white (to signify the time this story is set during the era of the Stolen Generations)
the reader can still determine that these children have varying shades of ‘Black’ skin and that Aboriginality is complicated by hybrid identities. Along with those on the front cover, bright ‘colours’ have been superimposed on objects and appear as ‘pen scribblings’ over the top of certain images. High-lighted blue, green, pink, orange, white and yellow markings trace over objects such as the church, the wheel and bumper-bar of the car, the grass, and the sun. The reader is perhaps informed by such a design that this story is palimpsestic and ‘scribbles over’ the history of Australia’s outback Christian missions and gives an alternate representation of mission life for Indigenous and Migrant families. This text criticises the deliberate and intended assimilation of Indigenous children, particularly of mixed blood, which was assisted by the Catholic Church during the 1930s to the 1970s when the Child Protection Act allowed the government to remove Indigenous children from their families.3

On opening the novel, one sees a photo of Marie Munkara laughing into the camera—perhaps suggesting that this text should be read with a sense of humour? Underneath her photo is the personal message she has generously scribbled with her own pen at the N.T. Writers’ Festival: ‘happy reading’. Although this text is incredibly funny, it deals with serious themes of rape, molestation, death and suicide. Munkara makes fun of the missionaries’ ignorant belief that they could assimilate Indigenous people of mixed blood into Western culture without the aftermath of suicide and violence deracination implies.

The front cover of Munkara’s text does not, however, bring into focus the migrant’s presence on the Mission or their relationship with Indigenous people, instead inter-racial connections are weaved through the fabric of the narrative between those with an Indigenous mother and European father and those of Spanish or Asian decent as well. Munkara’s inclusion of migrant characters within the text includes, Spaniards, ‘Mingo’ and ‘Gringo’ and Chinese Cook, ‘Wing Wong’. These characters are named by the Mission’s priest, Father Macredie (as the narration is told from his point of view). He labels these men with names that ridicule through rhyme and definition: ‘Gringo’ literally means ‘alien’ or ‘undesirable foreigner’ but is used especially by Latin Americans to refer to White Americans or British. It is the former meaning of ‘Gringo’, however, which Father Macredie intends in his usage of the term, but the latter meaning of the word redirects the joke on to the White Priest who is most likely to be of British ancestry himself. He passes judgement on the migrant men’s sexual relations with Indigenous women, even though the only evidence he has is the pseudo belief that Spanish men have big hooked noses and have passed these genes on to specific children at the mission. However, it is revealed on the next page that Father Macredie comes to realise that ‘Kwarikwaringa’s three-month-old coloured baby girl looked nothing like the two brothers’ and actually a lot like Brother John.4 A critical
mirror is held to the faces of religious men who were to ‘protect’ Indigenous people but have competed for sexual access to particular women. We learn his real reason for wanting to send Mingo and Gringo home – to have the women for himself and the other brothers: ‘And no-one thought to ask those men of the mission who pretended to serve their god but instead were busy helping themselves to the black women what they were going to do about the kids they’d fathered, did they?’ The art of Munkara’s storytelling is her ability to expose the hypocrisy of particular characters in relation to their role as ‘protector’ in a literary world where White power-figures consistently undermine, reject and sabotage Indigenous and migrant relations.

The practice of ‘naming’ has continually been used as a form of colonising the ‘Other’. Like ‘Mingo’ and ‘Gringo’, the naming of the Chinese cook, ‘Wing Wong’ is a name (like Gringo) which allows the missionaries to denigrate the Chinese man and carries racist connotations within the subtext. For example, the use of alliteration implies reference to a practical joke once played over the telephone: a person may dial a random phone number and after a stranger picks up the phone they put on a Chinese accent and ask if a Mr Wing is there. On answering no, they proceed to ask if a Mr Wong is there. If again the answer is no they quickly reply before hanging up: “Sorry I must have Wing the Wong number”. This practical joke makes fun of the Asian migrant’s accent and assumed limited grasp of the English language. Munkara’s text shows the way White characters sought to exclude the Chinese from mainstream society, particularly from family life. For example, readers learn that Juta had ‘an arrangement’ with both Harold and Wing Wong because she did not want to disappoint either of them. Yet Harold is certain when he looks into the face of Tapalinga that ‘she was definitely his child; she was too white to be that damned Chinaman’s’. The tone of his remark displays his ethnocentric belief in the superiority of White skin colour and his ‘white colonial anxiety’ to continue the dominance of White skin colour through reproduction.

Before the publication of this text, few Australian authors have placed migrant and Indigenous characters alongside each other to share similar textual realities of oppression and discrimination. The absence of such dynamic characters in Australian literature has led to an ontological homelessness caused by the continual denial of inter-racial relations and a cultural ignorance that connections between migrants and Indigenous people exist. In The Outsiders Within, Peta Stephenson gives reason for this and argues that the need to underpin restrictions on Asian/Indigenous labour and sexual unions was the result of ‘white colonial anxiety about an ability to maintain sole possession of the country and its resources’. Indigenous and migrant subjects have been kept separate in society, yet ideologically, neither are considered White and thus both stereotyped as Black.
In the White imagination, migrants and Indigenous people have together been labelled as representing the unwanted ‘Other’. Migrants have been characterised as swamping the land, while Indigenous people seen as taking it over via land claims. As an effect, the twinning of these groups has led to what Stephenson recognises as an ‘alliance’, and this alliance she argues, is now beginning to be represented in art and literature. For example, Joseph Johnson’s painting, *A Game of Euchre* shows three men sitting at a table playing a game of cards. At one end of the table is a Chinese man with a long plaited pigtail. On the opposite end of the table is an Aboriginal man. And at the widest part of the table (which appears to be the top of a triangle) is a European. Stephenson uses the imagery of this painting to purport her own ideas about Australian race-relations and reconciliation. The three angled seating positions of the Indigenous, migrant and White Australian point to the fundamental dynamics of inter-racial dialectics and advocates that discussions about nation and who we are in relation to each other should never be told from a position of Black and White but incorporate what Stephenson terms ‘the triangular view’ which includes the migrant Australians’ voice in such discussions as well. Although Stephenson’s paradigm is not altogether new, and is based on only men as its example, it is still very useful when discussing the place of migrant Australians in the reconciliation debates. Inter-racial perspectives should be part of normalised definitions and frameworks of reconciliation and consider how migrant Australians are implicated in a history they have bequeathed by citizenship, but how they too, have had a similar history of oppression and colonisation in Australia which could strengthen their resistance to colonisation and work towards a new world order. Stephenson argues that institutional racism embedded in laws and governance, has been used in Australia to control and restrict both migrants and Indigenous people, and moreover, to ideologically construct their identity as well. The Australian government’s restrictions on Indigenous people voting up until 1967, was a way of keeping the ‘Black Other’ outside of dominant White culture, just as the White Australia Policy was a way of keeping migrants at bay from Australia’s life and borders. Thus, a shared history of exclusion and being kept ‘outside’ white society has ultimately led to both groups being identified as: ‘the outsiders within’ (the title of Stephenson’s book).

Relations between Indigenous people and those from other lands have not always been restricted and challenged. During the late 17th or early 18th century Indigenous Australians in the north experienced annual visits from fisherman and traders from Makassar. Stephenson argues that ‘the starting point of Australia’s white settler history belongs to a continuum of visits and is neither foundational nor final. Rather than preceding an Asian presence here, the British arrived years after Asians had negotiated economic and social relationships with Indigenous communities.’ These long-standing relationships were sadly overlooked and denied in 1906 when Makassan visits
were made illegal by the Australian government. Stephenson argues that the Aboriginal communities in contact with Makassans were not informed by the government of these new laws and were instead left wondering why the Wet season of 1906–07 came and went without an Indonesian boat to be seen. Thus reconciliation must mean recognising the long standing history between Indigenous people and neighbouring communities which existed long before European settlement. It is not only a two-way discussion between Black and White, there are multiple seats at the table to inform reconciliation and positive relationships. Does reconciliation acknowledge the breakdown of Asian and Indigenous relationships and thus the significant damage done to the welfare and identities of these communities? As an Indigenous elder from Elcho Island once said in relation to the outlawing of Makassan visits to Australia’s Northern shores in an interview with Stephenson in 2004: when ‘the business has been stopped … that was the biggest impact in Yolngu society … because they were making families’.

In *Every Secret Thing* the history of Indigenous and Makassan relations is kept alive and we see characters defy the restrictions placed upon them by those in charge at the mission. In the chapter ‘The Immaculate Misconception’ Puntaninga is born to an Aboriginal mother and Indonesian father. We read that while her mother, Wuninga, is washing herself free from baby vomit in the sea, her husband is ‘busily harvesting trepang a few hundred miles further down the coast at a place known to him and his crew as Mani Mani’. This is perhaps a place that is not ‘mapped’ under this name but is known only to the men who are familiar with the history of fishing in this area and the Indigenous people they share it with. We come to understand how their history has become a ‘misconception’ to White Australians and Munkara works to explain to her readers how:

“A Macarresse prau [Indonesian boat] owner and captain from Barrang Lompo [a village on the island of Celebes in Indonesia], Bapa Upa [luck] had paid many visits to the shores of the bush mob, although the mission mob would have you believe otherwise. No the Maccassans have never been here, they’d say, apart from the bush mob we were the first. (p.37-8)”

The missionaries had no idea who fathered Puntaninga because her skin was dark just like the other ‘bush kids’. Even though Asian and Indigenous subjects were separated by laws in Australia, here at the Mission they are placed together. Both racial groups are discriminated against in similar ways and experience isolation from mainstream culture which has kept them as ‘outsiders within’. Rather than turning against each other in order to win status and power within mainstream society, Stephenson argues that enforced separation was instead a ‘vehicle for the revitalisation of their [Asian
and Indigenous] connection and, perhaps most importantly, to be agents of their own identities'.

Northern Territory writer, Marie Munkara portrays the ways in which Indigenous, White and Migrant views and relationships overlap, and inform the reconciliation debates – what should be reconciled and who should be involved in the process. This text reveals the ways in which forced separation was a measure to control relations and ensure White control and dominance. Yet despite the removal of children with mixed blood, Indigenous and migrant relationships have survived in Munkara’s realm, and the formation of culture and identity allowed them to live together in their world. What this critical essay has shown is that literary authors belong at the table of inter-racial discussion – writers such as Munkara are instrumental in a process of reconciliation which is not just political, but proves to have polemical and poetic functions as well. There is a place for the migrant Australian in the debates on reconciliation, although their place will likely shift and change as the construction of reality and our relations with all those who share it (not just Black and White) will inevitably shift and change as well. Fiction writing from the Top End is clearly influential in an ideological movement, such as reconciliation and establishes that what can be done, must first be imagined.

Endnotes
1. *Write Turn* A publication of the NT Writers’ Centre. December 2010/January 2011, p.1
2. Unfortunately the scope of this essay is limited to discussing only few migrant groups and their place in reconciliation, yet I acknowledge there are many others that deserve consideration and a voice when negotiating power structures and the politics of reconciliation. I also acknowledge that particular Asian groups are singled out and discussed in relation to Indigenous issues as one large group, even though they are clearly not an homogeneous people. This generalisation is not to over-simplify the arguments but to cover more examples of how reconciliation can include larger numbers of people from diverse cultural backgrounds.
3. Reconciliation is a discourse of bringing people ‘together’ but is it in danger of reinvesting in the culture of ‘protection’ which the missionaries were once emblematic? ‘Protection’ laws such as the Child Protection Act allowed for the Stolen Generations to occur on the ethnocentric belief that Indigenous people are irresponsible, dependent, and at risk of their own failure and demise. Again and again we see governments take action and respond to Indigenous issues on the premises that a community which is seen to be ‘out of control’ is perhaps easier to ‘control’ from without. For instance the Howard Government’s intervention (or ‘blitzkrieg’ as it has been termed by Raimond Gaita) into Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory in 2007 revoked the Racial Discrimination Act and allowed the Army into remote communities without a ‘permit’ under the justification of the Little Children are Sacred Report because it was believed that Indigenous people had lost control of alcohol, drugs, pornography and the ability to keep their children safe from paedophiles. Many people were angry that the government had not consulted the Indigenous leaders of these communities before acting in the way they did, and under the government’s ‘protection’, race relations once again became confused and reconciliation was shifted from focus.
5. Ibid, p.79
6. Ibid, p.86
7. The first was perhaps British-born Australian novelist, Alex Miller’s *The Ancestor Game* (1992) which tells of a three-way friendship between Chinese protagonist, Feng, a White man, Patrick Nunan, In-


10. Ibid, p.22

11. Ibid, p.23

12. Ibid, p.23


14. The spelling in this quote of ‘Maccassans’ is different to Stephenson’s spelling ‘Makassans’ and thus both are used in each context relevant to the author.

15. Ibid, p.57

**References**


A Change of Heart:
An exploration of my changing occupational identity in Central Australia

Jane Leonard

Introduction

On my daughter’s birth certificate eleven years ago, I noted my occupation as ‘writer’. We were living in inner city Melbourne at the time. Now, as I fill out forms to register her for high school in Alice Springs, where we have lived for over ten years, I write ‘adult educator’ in response to the same question about what I do. While only a simple change of words, this shift in the label I give myself encompasses a much a deeper process of adaptation, development and transition in my personal, educational and career trajectories. I’m still writing but also currently working in educational and training fields where questions of what do you want to ‘do’ or ‘be’ abound, and where most clients I work with seem bewildered with such concepts of self definition.

With a view to gaining a greater understanding of the notion of occupational identity and what impacts upon it, this essay will explore this shift in what I call myself and why, and how a move to Central Australia affected this. To do so I will examine these developments – what changed, how I navigated the changes, and what impacted on this process, against relevant literature about occupational identity (Unruh, 2004; Burkitt, 2005; Elliot, 2001; and Giddens, 1991). Finally I will consider the benefits of such a reflexive exploration of career trajectory, against the claims of all the above-mentioned authors that to do so is somehow useful.

Occupation and identity

While responding to the question ‘what do you do?’ or filling in a form that asks for a clarification of occupation could be seen to be relatively straightforward acts, Unruh (2004), in an article seeking to unpack ‘the relationship between occupations, meaning in life and identity’ (p.291), suggests there is a lot more to constructing occupational identity than merely stating your job. She puts forward that occupational identity encompasses not simply a description of ‘what you do’ but of choices that reflect future hopes, personal values and one’s particular relationship with society.
Unruh cites Kielhofner’s definition of occupational identity as ‘a composite sense of who one is and wishes to become as an occupational being generated from one’s history of occupational participation’ (Kielhofner, as cited by Unruh, 2004, p.292). When asked to state my own occupation, I have offered answers that, aligned with Kielhofner’s definition, reflect something not only connected with my past or present participation in a particular type of professional activity, but also that encompasses a sense of what I am striving to be at that time. For example, eleven years ago I would answer ‘I’m a writer’. This was a reflection of not only the small amount of paid work I did in this field, but also of the immense amount of unpaid work and professional development (studying Professional Writing and Editing) I engaged in as part of my desire to become a more legitimate ‘fulltime’ writer. At the time I also supported myself teaching literacy and general education to adults. Yet I would make no reference to being an educator in my occupational identity as this was not a career direction I then sought to take, and instead was something I viewed as simply a way to supplement money earned and time spent writing.

Similarly, today I answer ‘I’m an adult educator’ referring to the same sort of work I (still) do in adult literacy and learning, but also reflecting my more recent career aspirations to work more intensively in this field, and my attempts to increase my qualifications in this area through studying for a relevant degree at university. My current work and life still regularly calls upon my professional writing skills, and I still engage in some creative writing at a professional level, yet my ambition to pursue this area in itself has lessened and it seems I no longer seek to define myself by my writerly activities. As Unruh suggests, in both cases across time, what I call myself is a composite of both what I do and what I want, or deem important, to do at the time.

**Occupational identity, personal values, place and community**

In the instances described above, now and eleven years ago, I earned money and occupied my time both writing and teaching adults. Yet at different times I chose to identify myself and what I did quite differently. Why? What was behind my choices? Unruh’s article goes some way to offering an explanation. In her discussion, she highlights ‘the interactional nature between occupational identity, aspects of the person, and the environmental context’ (p.292). She uses examples to illustrate how ‘a person may reject or adapt to social norms in constructing an occupational identity’ (p.292) and how an individual can use occupational identity to define their place in the world and their relationship to society according to their own values.

This can be seen in my own occupational identity at different times in different communities. Eleven years ago, I was living and working in inner city Melbourne amongst youthful artists, writers, filmmakers and performers. Few had dependents or
any financial responsibilities aside from their own. Individual creative pursuits whether they were paid or not were highly valued and regarded as a way of expressing personal and alternative views, challenging existing norms, and rejecting ‘mainstream’ values and practices. For me such pursuits were particularly appealing because they seemed to counter the material, conformist, restrictive, conservative values I then associated with the upper middle class suburbs where I grew up. Calling myself a writer was a way of rejecting those values, and defining myself in a way that reflected the high value I then gave to personal creativity and individual forms of creative expression. Claiming this occupation also located me in a world amongst those I respected and shared values with.

Similarly my current expressed occupational identity reflects my present somewhat different values, activities and home community. Now living in smaller regional town, with my own kids, and within a much more family orientated social situation and community, I now place a greater personal emphasis on meeting the needs of my own family, and participating and interacting with the wider community I live in, rather than confronting issues and rejecting standard or mainstream social practices through my own individual creative and personal activities. I also now live and work in an extreme (physical environment, as well as social and community issues) regional community. While I still reside amongst many creative professionals, most I know also work in other fields including health, education, construction and community development. Living in such a small community that is close and interwoven both through shared network of family and friends, and through facing such extreme social and environmental issues, my experiences have shifted my views so that it now feels somehow more meaningful to identify my main and most constructive professional role as linked to my educational work, rather than to my creative writing. Using Unruh’s ideas, I can understand that choosing to call myself something different is a result of shifts in place, personal values and my relationship to the community in which I live.

The individual as a narrator with agency

While Unruh explores the choices we make about what we call ourselves, Burkitt offers discussion about how we use personal narrative processes to place ourselves as the central agents in reconstructing our occupational identities to manage career change. I will explore this by using the following narrative account of my own career shift, one I have often recounted to explain what have done and do to others.

My perceived career transition from writer to educator began initially with the birth of my children, which meant a period of several years where I did little in the way of either teaching or writing. This period also involved a change of location from inner
city Melbourne to remote regional Alice Springs, and with it a change in values, community and environment. As described above, both having dependent children, and the nature of the extreme remote community I now found myself in, contributed to a huge shift in personal values and challenged many views I held about what was important and not. When my children were old enough, as usual I tried to deal with and express my views and thoughts by writing while I earned money tutoring Indigenous adults in literacy.

A significant project spanning this five-year period was completing work on a play co-written with a young Indigenous writer. This included several rewrites, sponsored work with a dramaturge, two successful tours, and positive reviews. Despite this, I was paid only $500 dollars at the end of the project, and had to cover my own travel costs to see the final shows performed at the Darwin Festival.

At this point it dawned upon me that I no longer wanted, or was able to spend days writing mostly by myself for little financial or other reward, and I began to feel my work tutoring was more meaningful, useful, satisfying and appropriate to my current lifestyle. There was also more capacity if I gained qualifications, to contribute my own ideas and skills and earn more money with it. Consequently I decided to increase my qualifications and seek more involvement at higher level in the educational field I already worked in. I gained a job that allowed me to contribute more to learning than just tutoring, and also enrolled to study so I could qualify as a lecturer or trainer. Though there were difficulties adjusting at times, overall this shift was satisfying, and I received positive feedback in both the new job and from the study.

Recounting such a narrative does feel like it has helped me to make sense of and come to terms with what has come to pass regarding my changes in occupation, and to cope with many feelings of self-doubt and confusion that came up along the way as I wondered if who I was and what I did mattered to myself and those around me. Burkitt affirms the positive use of narrative in this way giving the example of ‘Paul’ describing his changes in occupation. He notes that Paul is ‘not simply recounting a series of random changes that have befallen him, he is looking for the deeper sense of meaning to these changes and locating the points of his own active influence over them’ (p.105). Like Burkitt’s ‘Paul’, my own description places me as the agent in my story who is in control of making key decisions to change, rather than being a failed writer, or someone with not enough money to make ends meet.

But rather than endorsing narrative as a universally successful tool for coping with such change, Burkitt claims the benefits of using the process of the narrative to deal with change depend on the degree of power an individual has to place himself as an agent in charge of change he narrates. He argues that some sense of stability and
certain circumstance is required to create such a coherent narrative, and that external factors have a huge role to play in this.

**External forces shaping occupational identity**

I will now call upon Elliot (2001), Giddens (1991) and Burkitt (2005) to consider the external forces at play in my narrative. Elliot discusses Gidden’s suggestion that changes forced by conditions of modernity (a more unstable, variable and risky world) causing experimentation with new senses of self can lead to ‘emotional growth, new understandings and strengthened intimacies’ (Elliot, on Giddens, p.39). While my own narrative places myself at the helm of my transition, is my response an act of agency and control, unaffected by outside forces, or have I just created that appearance, when in fact changes were shaped, and therefore the narrative as well, by things outside my control? Burkitt asserts that ‘no matter how powerful an individual may be there are always limits on that power, and this shapes biography and influences narrative’ (p. 105). What has influenced my own power to adapt and use narrative to negotiate change?

I have benefited from living within from a society and at a time that is now used to and encourages reflection and self-development as a response to change. That is, it is relatively normal, and widely accepted to choose, re-evaluate, analyse, change and reflect upon one’s values, career, and where one wants to live. Attitudes, social practice, my social and economic standing, and global conditions have enabled me to raise a family, participate in work of my own choosing, change where I live, decide to become more expert, enroll in university, and travel interstate for that study. All these things might not have been possible in past, more ‘stable’ historical times where for a variety of reasons choices and options were more limited. So my own case could illustrate that some features of the ‘high modernity’ Giddens speaks of have facilitated self-growth in my own life history.

However, while Giddens argues ‘no one can opt out of the transformations brought about by modernity’ (p.22), Burkitt goes on to assert that the freedoms provided by such conditions are ‘highly variable’ (p.100). He claims that ‘Giddens is wrong to imply that we all share the same power and equal access to knowledge on which the reflexive project of self is based’ (p.100). He asserts that external conditions relating to class, social standing, and global presses can limit and define one’s capacity to create a narrative. This can also be seen in examining my own narrative more closely, though like his examples, I choose not to emphasize the role of external factors.

My own narrative account fails to mention that our change of location related to my partner’s need to move for work. Nor do I acknowledge that part of my own decision to earn more money is a reflection of times where it is more difficult for families to
survive on one income, or discuss the increase in adult educational work available to me is a result of up-skilling related to global economic policy or a political response in the world of indigenous affairs. As Burkitt suggests, I have used my own power to create a narrative to place myself as an agent, not just because I can, but as a way of responding to and overriding external changes beyond my control.

My upbringing within a relatively comfortable, valued social class has also afforded me the educational and economic support that has made room for me to regard myself as capable of being a controlling agent, and even faced with change influenced by external factors, to formulate a narrative that allows me an acceptable place in society, and consequently an increased sense of well being. Many young marginalized Indigenous people I work with, with considerable experience of being devalued by family, community and society, and little opportunity of making choices or reflecting back upon circumstances, have no sense of themselves as agents in their own lives. Aligned to Burkitt’s ideas, it seems it is necessary to possess a particular degree of power, social experience and circumstance to navigate change constructively and to shape occupational identity in ways that offer a meaningful sense of belonging and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Calling upon literature about identity has offered me a range of tools for gaining a deeper understanding of my own changing occupational identity, of how and why I have navigated the changes so far, and what has influenced this process. Unruh suggests occupational identity is connected to self-identity which is in turn ‘central to coherence, meaning and well-being in one’s evolving personal life story’ (p.291). Burkitt puts forward that ‘one strategy to salvage character, identified by Sennet, is to adopt the narrative of ‘career’ to create a sense of coherence agency and responsibility in the face of a continually changing world’ (p.103). He also argues ‘through the very structure that a narrative provides, it acts as a form of healing, a way of recovering from the wounds inflicted by a fickle world’ (p.104).

This evaluation of my own changing career trajectory indicates I have adopted and adapted occupational identities according to processes described by Unruh, while also, as Burkitt suggests, used narrative to place myself in control of change encountered in a changing world. Having said this I do agree with Burkitt that my own cultural upbringing, social and economic standing, and circumstances place me in a position to utilize reflection and narrative to make sense of who I am, what I do and where I belong in this world.

From such an exploration I can conclude that though my occupational identity is linked to the values of others, it is more significantly connected to my own values and
is a way I define and express my relationship to the wider world. How I have adapted and changed as my values and relationship change has been a personal process, but this has not been separate to the external factors, like the influences of a modern world that have both contributed to a need for change and facilitated it happening.

From exploring literature on identity and work, it seems evident that both internal forces, that is one’s own processes and values, play some part in navigating and defining occupational identity and change (Unruh, 2004; Burkitt, 2005). But also that external forces, the different values and nature of the communities one lives within, also influence both the actual changes in occupation and identity, as well as the capacity to navigate that change (Burkitt, 2005; Giddens, 1991).

Understanding this process more deeply offers a way to recognize and understand ways in which both I, and others, manage and cope with change, and how narrative can be used to contribute to a sense of well being and belonging in the world. It also highlights both the usefulness and limitations of considering aspects of occupational identity and narrative at play in the journeys of many adult learners whose motivation around and experience of learning is often a response to being in the midst of such identity transition.

References
The hot desert wind swirled around the group of men sitting in what little shade the acacia bush growing on top of a lofty sandhill afforded, which was precious little. But it wasn’t the shade, nor the tree, that was of consequence; rather, it was a ‘man’s’ site … Women had their areas, men theirs … Gullal pointed with his face, his chin,

‘Young fella belong you come.’

‘Your turn Jimmy … He gotta learn.’

‘You-ai,’ said the youngest of the group, a young man of around thirty, the youngest of our fast ageing Elders. We were sitting, my back mostly towards the boy, but I could see out of the corner of my eye. Jimmy reached for two hunting spears as he got to his feet. Adam was trudging up the sand dune, eyes downcast, his joggers giving him no joy, making hard work of the climb, two steps forward, one step back, then the spear landed a foot in front of him. He stopped dead … Jimmy pointed for the lad to go back. The boy stood looking up the slope at him. Jimmy spoke.

‘Go back, this place taboo to children.’

The boy stood looking at him blankly.

‘Go back, you are not allowed up here.’

“You have to talk English, I don’t speak lingo. I want to see my grandfather.”

“You will have to hurry and learn “lingo” if you are to survive out here.”

“What are you saying?… Please, you have to speak English so I can understand.”

“I said, You will have to learn “lingo” in a hurry if you are to survive out here.”

“And before that?”

“This place is taboo to children.”

I saw the grim determination set in the boy’s mouth, the narrowing of his already half-closed eyes.

“I want to see my grandfather.”
“You have no grandfather up here.”

“He is sitting there on the top of the sandhill with the others.”

‘Go back!’

Jimmy had been slowly making his way down the sandhill.

“Fuck you … I said I wanted to see my grandfather and you ain’t going to stop me, taboo or…”

Further speech ceased instantly as he became aware of the quivering tip of the pointed spear moving like the head of a snake ready to strike.

‘I have spoken… Go back… one more step and the spear flies, and I won’t miss. You are a white boy intruding in a culture and lore you know nothing about…’

“Talk fucken’ English.”

‘Learn fucken’ lingo.’

Jimmy took another step, his arm going back getting ready to cast the deadly missile. I wondered what was going through Adam’s mind at that moment. His face was pasty white, making his blond hair seem whiter. He took a step back.

“You can kill me, but you’ll go to jail… My grandfather will kill you…”

“Don’t tempt me little white boy… Now go… My patience grows thin.”

“No!”

And then Jimmy screamed: ‘GO! … FOR THE LAST TIME … GO!’

The quivering tip of the spear began to bounce and I knew Adam had only fractions of seconds to move… The arm came forward at staggering speed, the woomera giving the departing spear impetus… I saw the horror on the boy’s face as he froze with fright. He imagined he could see his death coming at him in that fraction of a second before the spear flew past his ear, the wobbling tail clipping him in its passing. Realising he was still alive he turned and fled… The spear buried in the sand also flew. It landed a few feet to the front and side of him, adding more terror to his fright and flight as he tore over the small sandhill and out of sight… The laughter of the men broke the mesmerizing spell I had been under. Even though I knew no harm would come to my favoured grandson, my fright was as real as his.

*   *   *

108
“I want to go home…”

“I wanna go home, can’t you find some other words to sing?”

“I’ve had this place, that guy tried to kill me and you sat there an let him. I’m lucky he missed otherwise you’d be burying me out here.”

“Well at least the words are different, but let me tell you, son, Jimmy didn’t miss, his spear went where he intended it.”

“So you say … Grandad, you bought me here for a holiday, but I’ve landed in Hell.”

“Of your own making.”

“It’s still Hell… Why Grandad? Why can’t we pack and go home? You said we were coming to visit your old stomping grounds. Okay, we’ve been and seen, now its time to go.”

“Have you learned nothing little Wadjita?”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a black’s name and I ain’t black.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you told me.”

“How do you know I wasn’t lying? That I didn’t want you to be embarrassed because of my heritage?”

“Come on Grandad, I’d never be embarrassed… NEVER!...Are you black?”

“What colour is your bumhole?”

“My what? Grandad, that’s rude. You shouldn’t say things like that.”

“Afraid you might learn something?”

“Okay, you asked for it … I don’t know what colour my arsehole is and I have no intention of finding out … Why do you want to know?”

I shrugged… I knew my question shook him, but had also struck a chord with his curiosity. He’d be back. I had also distracted him from his longing to leave.

“How much longer will we be here?”
“That depends.”

“On what? Grandad you have a business to run. Dad can’t do it all on his own.”

“One day he will have to.”

“No he won’t, I heard him tell Mum that the day he puts you in the ground is the day the place goes on the market.”

“He’s been saying that for years… What if he can’t?”

“Can’t what? Put the business up for sale? Grandad, he’s your only son, in fact, your only child, when you go who else have you got to leave it to?”

“The church… Charity…”

“Hmmmmp… Over my dead body… You gotta promise not to die until I’m twenty-one. Any way, you’re too tough to die. Them kids in the footy team should come out here and try keeping up with you climbing them bloody sandhills.”

“Which reminds me… Take your joggers off, splay your feet, your toes outwards, and you’ll go up them like a bilby… By the way, how’s the tracking business?”

“Want a cuppa?”

“If you’re making one.”

It was his way out of a situation not to his liking… I smiled. He hadn’t taken to it, just like he hadn’t taken to any other lesson in bush lore… we had plenty of time… all the time in the world.

* * *

That wasn’t the first time… Television, Gameboy, computerised digital games, the Internet, but more than anything, the mobile telephone, were hellbent on wrecking the lives of the young of modern society. Without them children were lost. Instead of sitting and having a conversation with their parents, their grandparents or even their siblings, children preferred digital précised abbreviated msg’s from their peers, without their knowing it was limiting their powers of communication. Sure it was convenient in the moment, but they didn’t stop to consider their future and its needs. The cost to maintain their lifestyle was astronomical, and yet parents persisted in paying the price. It was easier to ‘give in’ than set the record straight and make them see what harm and damage they were doing to their young lives (the young simply didn’t want
to know)… And that, basically, was why I had my youngest grandson out here in the desert with me. By living the lifestyle that was forced on me from when I was a few months old to when I was old enough to be sent to Boys Town in Clontarf. He was being giving the same chance, offered the same experience at an impressionable age for when it mattered to his future. He was twelve years of age, young enough…

Hopefully

* * *

We were out in the desert beyond Balgo Mission, an old mission some 200 kilometres south of the first bit of white civilisation, Halls Creek. Between there and here was the station Bilaluna if you wished to be more specific about white civilisation, but they only wore Aboriginals for their ability with the horse and their sense of direction when it came to mustering their vast semi-desert spread, otherwise they relied on the occasional conscientious white ringer willing to come out to such far-flung reaches to do the work… The tribe was camped in their homeland on Balwina Aboriginal Reserve on the edge of the Gibson Desert, that wasn’t really a desert like the great Sahara with sandhills stretching for thousands of miles in all directions. These, the People, were true desert nomads. Their lifestyle basically unchanged since time immemorial. The greatest change to the new age was their children having to go to Derby and live in a hostel to attend the local government-run high school… So how did Adam, at twelve, get on for schooling? The Kimberley has one of the biggest classrooms in the world, the School of the Air… Modernity spread its mantle of electronic gadgetry across the vast distance. Adam did his schooling via satellites back to his teachers in the School of the Air in Derby, WA… His disparity with the tribe, his self-imposed reclusion, had one good effect; it made him turn to his studies in a way modern schooling never can. He immersed himself in whiteman’s culture, seeking the comfort and solace of being in touch with like-minded humans… Grandad was beside him, but he need others as moral support.

The first two weeks while everything was new, and therefore interesting, made life harmonious. It was during the third week that the grind of nothing to do, nothing more to see, nothing new in his young life, saw boredom set in. Night time was a relief – he went to bed with the day-time birds and woke with them, then the day was almost the undoing of him until he discovered the outlet of going to school, Kimberley station style… Then, evening after evening, his complaint was constant, “When are we leaving? Haven’t we been here long enough to do your business?”

And my staid, true, reply was also constant… “Aboriginals aren’t like white people who make decisions on the instant, they like to take their time and think things through… Chew on the fat so to speak.”
“Then I wish they would choke on the fat.”

“Are you wishing that on me as well Grandson? I’m an Elder of this tribe.”

“Awww Grandad, you know what I mean.”

And indeed I did, he was releasing his frustration… I wondered how long it would take for his mind to slow down… I smiled… The youths of today… What would sending the young of the tribe to Derby to be ‘edumicated’ like a whiteman, do to their culture, their laws, and the lore of their unique lives?

It was closing on the end of the second month that the episode with the spears pulled him up in his tracks… It made him go away and think… We were sitting in our ‘whiteman’ fold-up deck chairs one evening when he bought out his next problem… Camp dogs.

“They camp dogs aren’t very friendly, in fact, they’re damn right scared, slinking away with their tails between their legs.”

“And so would you if the only sign of affection was a kick in the guts or told to fuck off. What happened?”

“I tried playing with one, or at least, tried to get it to play and it couldn’t get away from me fast enough. And you’re right, once it was out of range of my foot it stopped to look at me wondering what I was about… I don’t understand. The babies can pull its ears, its tail, they even lie down on it and go to sleep and the dog stays there. I’ve seen the little kids playing with them and the dogs are quite happy to play tug-of-war, or be chased with a rag in its mouth, so why wouldn’t it play with me… They’re useless, what good are they?”

“A lot. They eat and gnaw at the bones when man has finished with them, cleaning the little meat still left. By chomping on it until the bone is cleaned, it keeps fly numbers down. Women take them with them when they go foraging. The dogs are expert goanna sniffers. The men sometimes take them when ‘roo numbers are down. The dogs herd them back, or if a wounded one isn’t disabled by the spear, they bring it down and harass it until the men can get to it.”

“Ohhh… I didn’t know.”

I smiled, “There are lots of things you don’t know about the Aboriginal way of life. You have to participate to learn.”

“No thanks, what good would spearing ‘roos, or hunting goanna’s have in a whiteman’s world.”
“Spoken just like a whiteman.”

“But I am white, Grandad.”

“Have you checked out your bumhole yet?”

“That’s disgusting… Besides, I can’t get my head down there.”

“Ohh well, you’ll just have to remain ignorant.”

“What has the colour of my arsehole got to do with whether I’m Aboriginal or not? Shit is brown, Grandad, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“You got me there son… I was once told that if you have brown dots where your eyelashes grow, it too is a sign that you’re Aboriginal.”

“And have you looked?”

“Never bothered, it’s a woman thing, mucking around with eyelashes.”

Two days later I saw him checking his eyelashes out in the driver’s side revision mirror. The day after, I noticed the mirror missing… I smiled… The next morning the mirror was back in place. There would no longer be a need for me to ask. I didn’t really want to know. My lesson was with the body and getting to know it better. Modern children are too caught up in the hype Linju’s (cops) spread as propaganda… child molestation… He had to know, to learn, there was no such concept in aboriginal culture. Not indigenous culture, which was slowly eradicating and sweeping away the old true culture evolved through eons, taking place over millennia and endured to ensure the continuation of the race. Now, like every other modern concept, it was being eroded and forgotten.

*     *     *

By week six Adam had almost stopped enquiring when we’d be leaving. His temper had also mollified. He was slowly slowing to an Aboriginal pace. Even his work with his school work had slowed, he had become more thorough in his application. I noticed his work had become better thought out, more concise with less padding, he was learning to stick to the facts… And then came the day of Jimmy’s lesson in Aboriginal culture. I had tried explaining there were certain areas which belonged either to the women or to the men. Men never entered women’s space, just as women never ventured into man domains. But sadly, his lack of interest would cost him the fright of his life… An evening a few nights later.
“I looked up the word taboo, it means unauthorised entry. I’m a male, you agree with that?”

“Yes.”

“Then why wouldn’t Jimmy let me come up and see you?”

“Adam, uninitiated boys are regarded as having no more rights than a woman. You were trying to intrude where you had no rights.”

“And what would give me that right? What do you mean by uninitiated anyway?”

“It’s a tribal ceremony. When you have gone through the man-making ceremony you will attain the right and privileges of being a man of the tribe.”

“Like you? You’re telling me that you went through all their mumbo jumbo so you could sit on a sandhill and talk with them.”

“You—ai… And if you think facing down the quivering tip of a hunting spear was frightening, then let me tell you, it takes courage in becoming one of the tribe. Courage I doubt you have.”

“Is this a challenge Grandad?”

“No Grandson. Knowledge gives me the insight.”

“Then explain this knowledge.”

“It’s pretty simple. From the day you were born you have never gone without. You have absolutely no idea of pangs of hunger, nor what cold is. The moment the temperature drops you reach for a cardigan, or jumper. When the temperature plummets to around zero, you pull on your ski gear, your waterproof pants, your parkas, your woolly mittens, your bloody great woolen ug boots, then sit in front of a heater. There’s no such niceties out here. No ski pants, no parkas, no ug boots. To get warm you pull your kangaroo skin tighter around your shoulders and sit closer to the fire and curse the fact that you didn’t build a bigger and better windbreak.”

“And you’ve done just that?”

I nodded. How was I ever going to get him to understand.

“Even the kangaroo skin bit?”

“Especially the kangaroo skin bit when the lazy wind blows.”

“Why do you call it a lazy wind, Grandad?”
“Because it blows right through you instead of going around.”

He chuckled... “I must remember that one.”

“Going to write a book?”

“Get real, I’m flat out spelling me name.”

“At least you’re honest... Time for sleep. Tomorrow is another day.”

––––
Poor Phella Countryman We Mob

Joey Flynn

We mob keep wandering around all the time, restless. All the time, nothing much to do asking everyone for grog money, cigarette money and never mind about tucker. Sometimes, someone been bring along wallaby or beef. We get full binji (stomach) then.

No more we respect ourselves, white phella no more respect for us so why we respect us. One time we all got along good way, but they white mob been change us, show us grog, drugs, all that no good stuff. They now boss us take our pension money so we got to buy food now. No more money for partying and going out bush.

Those grog and drugs makes us feel good for a short time but other time makes us feel angry. We been argue at each other sometimes, don’t know why. Angry for the way we been treated like no good myall one. We been lost our culture now, learning town ways, stealing, camping anywhere till the cops move us on. They empty our grog out, that makes us more angry.

We don’t like that white phella, that’s how they made their money with us black phella working our guts out for them. The white workers always got more money. We were the best stockman and workers in the olden days, working on the station.

Our women working for the missus. We had not much money but had plenty of tucker then. That station mob would let us shoot a bullock and the whole camp would eat plenty. Sometimes we would go out hunting for turtles, and other bush tucker. We don’t have no car now, mainly we just sit around drinking. Don’t care as no one else does.

Sometimes them smart black phellas been to school and they been help us but they rubbish us too. We want the good old days and be treated fair way, we black phellas. No more everyone been boss us all the time, make us angry.

They don’t ask us, they tell us phella what to do. No more, no more. We been finished we black phella now, we got nothing no more now. We been beaten us old phella, now them young phella smart to take our money, pension day. They boss us for our money. Then we got nothing for us. Welfare no more help, we been going there too much they been say. They mob no more understand we have to give to them bossy young black phella or they will flog (bash) us.
You mob white phella and smart one educated black phella make us feel no good alonga self. What can we do? Where can we go? Nothing, we finished now, we beaten. Our country taken for mining and money going to wrong black phella. Them mob never check proper phella belong country. Wrong mob living our country and we been chucked out. We phella get into trouble with police, we always fighting when we going and living in towns. Too many mixed up mob black phella there. What we phella can do?? No one knows.

We are lost, as some young people don’t want to know Culture. Not interested. There is no respect. We are in Big trouble and we may lose our Culture. Too much time to think and get up to no good. Trouble with Police. Where are we going, we are lost, we are lost.

Who is going to teach Culture when we are finished? Who is going to tell the stories, dance the dances, hunt for bush food? We don’t know. We phella been beaten, we hurting inside. That’s why we drink, to cover up our hurt and shame.

WE BEATEN PHELLA.

WE BEATEN PHELLA.
Visiting the Loved One of My Past

Nicole Gardiner

I can smell the crisp morning dew,  
As the salty sea breeze falls,  
Across my face.  
The closer I get to the islands,  
The more warmth I feel,  
As the ferry glides with such a sturdy pace.

Waves crash with great might,  
I feel a sudden rush of excitement,  
I will soon be close to her past.  
The closest I may ever be,  
This thought brings an inexplicable comfort,  
Not knowing how long this feeling will last.

The skiff comes to collect us,  
Like a baby sea turtle gliding calmly,  
Towards its providing mother.  
It halts suddenly a metre from the shore,  
We gather our overnight bags,  
Exiting the boat one after the other.

The sun shines on my porcelain skin,  
And the wind rips around my legs,  
With singular grains of sand.  
When I look to my left,  
Far across the beautiful, turquoise sea,  
I can see upon the horizon, Melville Island.  
This is where, long before I was born,  
She was taken, when the white man,  
Heartlessly stole her at six months old.  
Years have passed since those naive times,  
Many have forgiven, including my Nana,  
Who claimed it wasn’t a grudge she wanted to hold.
It was one of the things I so greatly admired;
Her strength to move on from the past,
To move forward into the light.
I can still hear her cheerful voice,
Reciting enduring words of wisdom,
These were so evidently right.

A couple of days have slowly passed,
It is so easy here to lose track,
Of the transitory time.
I experienced the essence of her ways;
The passing of a loved one in Tiwi culture,
But I can still hear her funeral music chime.

My heart stops for a few seconds,
The tribal chanting swirling in my ears,
Brings back memories of my Nana’s goodbye.
Luckily he is here to hold me tight,
As my salty tears trickle down my cheeks,
I realise that a simple reminiscence could make me cry.

A breath of the brilliant essence of the beach,
Calms every vessel in my restless body,
A part of her is with me now.
I daydream long into the shimmering ocean,
She is playing in the knee-high shore,
This is as far as my heart will allow.

Reality forces me to adjust my focus,
I feel her wise words that allow me to move on,
Her guidance repeats like a lullaby in my head.
My mind recognises this kind voice,
It sinks into my beating heart,
These words are what my loved one once said.
Opportunities cling to people like fireflies.
Or stars. Or little stringed fairy lights.
They are little bright lights that sometimes hover above heads, rest on shoulders or appear like quicksilver sunspots on skin and clothes.
He finds that stars and fireflies and spotlights look like opportunities, to him.
He watches the people walking down the street, in shopping centres, jogging in parks. Watches the little swirls and sways of light as their opportunities hold on or dance around them. Some are like pinpricks, tiny and almost unnoticeable, while others look like a huge fallen star, gripping with tiny, almost invisible tendrils of light to the smooth metal of a belt buckle or scraped skin of a knee.
No one else notices them.
At first he thought fireflies and stars were opportunities, only ones that normal people could see, too. He bought a bus ticket past the middle of nowhere, so that he could try to catch an opportunity, like people always talk about doing with fireflies. But when he had cupped the little ball of light in his palms, duller and more yellow than the bright white spots he was used to, he realised he was wrong.
Fireflies are just little glowing bugs, and stars are just balls of burning gas, millions of miles away.

*   *   *
So he was alone in his view of the world, obviously. No one else had reached for tiny balls of light as a baby, tangled in their mother’s hair, or clutched his father’s fingers because pinprick spots still clung to his big busted boxer’s knuckles.
Or, maybe they did. Maybe all babies could see what he could. Maybe he had just forgotten to forget how to see the opportunities that clung to his classmates, the way Benny Robinson had swum in little balls of light, to the point where his glasses and crooked nose were unseen behind the shine of brilliance that was his future.
Six years later, though, that shine had burned out and died with only the faintly pulsing pinpoints still lying in the crease of his elbow and the shoulders of his school
uniform. They looked like glitter, like glowing dust that could be easily brushed away. He had wondered why such a bright boy in both mind and opportunities had burned out so quickly, and a school assembly had told him.

The principal – a bitter man with piano fingers looped with cheery twinkles – stepped up to the microphone and told a sixteen-year old tale of bullying, divorced parents, name-calling, dismissal, being beaten up five days a week, and finally, suicide.

Opportunities don’t last forever. They hang around, but only until they’re taken or passed over. Some only last instants before they blink out, a brief flash of brilliance before the dull fade that says someone just took a wrong turn in their life.

But sometimes, opportunities are taken.

He remembers a little Chinese boy in a market, playing the violin so sweetly that emotion weaved through the hanging notes and held wide open on his face. He played like a master, and eventually a man in the vast crowd that had paused to hear him play, stepped back and pulled out a cell phone. The man spoke rapid, official-sounding French into it, his gibberish words laced with excitement and hope. As the man spoke, hands gesturing and eyes locked on the tiny figure playing his soul with a bow, the boy began to glow, spots and dots and circles and balls of light blinking into existence and glowing brightly. They appeared all over, blanketing his arms and violin like a suit of stars until he shone so brilliantly that other people must have been able to see it! He eventually had to close his eyes against the shine, though he didn’t want to take his eyes off the boy, rocked in the ebb and flow of his music, eclipsing all those around him until they glowed like tiny, indistinct yellow fireflies.

* * *

He brings up that memory whenever he feels angry, bitter, confused as to why someone or something had decided that he would witness others’ brilliance but not provide him with any of his own.

He remembers the homeless man who lived on his childhood street, in the subway station around the corner. As a bitter teenager, he had spent a lot of time thinking about how his beard had been lit up like it was plaited with fairy lights, how his eyes and his smile had twinkled, about the dusty pulsing points that collected in his boots and clung to his ragged coat, little burned-out lights that seemed more like opportunities put aside than missed.

But what he remembers most about that man was the way he spoke.
His words reeled you in and secured you to the spot, painted dizzying pictures and evoked powerful feelings. The little bright lights that danced on his breath were often playful, and sometimes, when he watched him preach in the subway, standing on nothing but a milk crate platform and speaking to the masses, he swore that sometimes he saw the opportunities on the homeless man’s words spin off of his body to dance rings around other people’s heads, joining their collections.

It’s a shame that mirrors can’t capture and reflect people’s opportunities, because he would have liked to see if maybe, he could stand there and bathe in the wise words of a man living on the street, and try to collect an opportunity of his own. A tiny one, a big one, several or just one, he wouldn’t care. Just. Just one. One little speck of light that could hover on his shoulder.

But it probably would’ve gotten lonely, anyway.

He doesn’t like the feeling he gets when he looks down, eyes automatically searching for the shine of opportunities so obvious on others. The way his throat clenches and his heart shudders in his chest and his ribs feel like they are going to poke through the thin skin covering them, because there are none. No little spots of light or dancing balls or shine. Nothing. That, to him, is almost the worst feeling in the world.

The worst feeling stems from alcohol. Or, well, its effects.

And he’s not talking about blurred vision or light-headedness or nausea. He’s talking about the way it screws and warps his vision, makes him see stains and marks and smudges in a deep, deep black colour that is more like emptiness and complete lack of colour than actual black. He thinks that maybe these are bad decisions, like opportunities missed.

His first time getting drunk had been in a local bar, and the stoic men on the stools, clutching beers or shots or bottles of something even stronger, well... They had been soaked in a sucking kind of emptiness. He had seen the bags under their eyes warp with every drink into something heavier, darker, staining and horrible. He had been so terrified by the absence of visible opportunities, swallowed by those infinite stains, that he had stumbled out onto the street and walked home with his head tilted skyward, comforted by the bright, clear shine of the stars. At least they hadn’t been swallowed by the night sky.

He never drank again.

He’d been watching a local talent contest when he met Rick.
They’d chatted idly, forced into conversation to ease the boredom of waiting another half hour for the show to start, seated next to each other in the third row.

When the fifth singer of the night had stepped on stage, he had taken a huge breath, startled by the amount of shine that clung to the girl removing the microphone from its stand. Her hair was blonde, he was pretty sure, but it was hard to tell because it was lit up like spun starlight due to all the opportunities dancing through the loose locks. She was thin and not all that attractive, a too-big forehead and too-thin lips, waif-like and looking as if a breeze could blow her away.

But when she opened her mouth, her voice was strong and clear and danced with lights the size of his fist.

Beside him, Rick sucked in a surprised sound, eyes trained on the figure on stage, yet, flicking to him every once in a while.

After the show, Rick admitted that he was a talent scout, scoping the area for ‘the next big thing’.

He had squinty eyes, and they narrowed even further when he turned and said, “I saw you when that girl stepped on stage. You knew she was amazing, even before she opened her mouth”.

“Nah,” he replied, but it fell flat.

“Well, whatever... just – here’s my card, okay?”

The little square of card felt light in his hand, and yet strangely weighted. What should he do? This was an opportunity, wasn’t it? But there were no dancing orbs or winking pinpricks, and the absence made him hesitate.

His eyes darted around, as if looking for an answer, and they snagged on a teenager wearing tatty sneakers and too-large sweatpants. His body was studded with pulsing dots, placed closer together at the bends in his body – knees, elbow, ankles... that was unmistakably the body of a dancer.

Rick followed his eyes towards the boy, shooting searching looks at both the average-looking kid and the frozen man in front of him.

“I was going to leave after that one stand-out performance, but something’s telling me I should stick around, huh? What’s his name?”

“No idea.” He answered on autopilot, still entranced by the roll and ripple of the lights on this boy’s body, “I just know that he dances.”
Rick smiled, still looking a little confused, but smug, as if he had just confirmed some sort of theory of his.

“Jesus, you sure are something special,” he said, breathless after they watched the boy flow across the stage in rhythmic steps and perfect bends.

At first he thought he thought that Rick had been addressing the boy stepping off the stage, but when he turned he found Rick’s eyes trained on him.

He didn’t really know how to explain to Rick that, no, he wasn’t anything special. That for his gift of seeing the greatness in others he had missed out on any of his own.

Instead of replying, however, he just stared at the halo-like ring of lights above the dancer’s head, seeing out of the corner of his eye the way bright spots rushed to the corners of Rick’s eyes, collecting in the creases and blinking into existence around his fingers and knuckles, as Rick held out a hand to shake. “You sure can pick the stars, can’t you?”

“Not really, I…” He lifted his own hand to meet Rick’s, and for a moment it was almost like those bright orbs rubbed against his knuckles, too. He glanced down at the business card he’d been given, and his eyes caught on a simple star, printed in gold on the card’s corner. Here was an opportunity, right? Maybe he didn’t need a twinkle or a shine or a flash to tell him that maybe, just maybe, this was his chance at something great. This was his opportunity. “Maybe… just the ones that shine particularly bright.”
Darkness

Laila Bennett

It was impossible to see. Stephanie was unsure whether her eyes were open or closed. All was darkness. Unable to open her mouth to scream, or to speak, she could not move. There was no escape. She tried to pull her arms up; move her legs. No good.

She had been bound too tight. She began wriggling and squirming against whatever it was she was tied to. Rough, cold and sharp, it hurt when she moved. Hopelessly she lay back breathing sharp, furious breaths through her nose; never before in her life had she ever wanted her mum and dad so badly.

The air shifted. Someone was in the room. Faint footsteps echoed across the floor. Stephanie tried to scream for help but an unbearable pain shot through her lips. A voice, silky smooth and charming, broke the dead silence.

“Oh Stephanie, I knew from the moment I meet you, that you were special. You see you are destined to be my bride of darkness. As I am one of the last surviving pure vampires, I must choose one special person to bestow the gift of immortality upon so our race can live again.”

Stephanie felt like crying but was beyond tears. As her captor leaned in close she could feel his stale breath on the side of her neck and then a sharp, excruciating pain suddenly pierced through her neckline, descending into her chest.

Tears flowed down Stephanie’s face as the pain grew more and more intense and at that moment she knew for sure there was no escape, and no matter how hard she tried there was no hope. Every single emotion engorged within her. Self-pity, regret, anger and fear. She had not really known what real fear, real desperation, was like until she had found herself here. Like a runaway train it had smashed into her, leaving her screaming in pain and unable to move.

Suddenly the pain stopped. He had let go. A deafening gunshot echoed through the air. A struggle began – she could hear the echoes of grunts and footsteps trotting madly, the sound of flesh upon flesh, thud after thud – there was no end. Nether would give up, then once again the sound of that damn gun exploded again. Then silence… The pressure from her bound hands and feet was released. A tear of instant relief steamed down Stephanie’s burning cheek as a stranger carried her away.

Stephanie clung to her saviour for dear life as his silky smooth and charming voice leaked down into her ear: “Fear not my bride, we are safe now.”
A Letter For Peace

Stevie Cosentino

Dear Abus of God’s great country,

Darling Khalid awoke at seven that fateful day, fifteen minutes later than he usually would. He ran out the door, his teeth not yet brushed, his shoes not yet tied, and breakfast still in his hand. He ran. He made it. He sat in his favourite seat and pressed his face against the bus window as he waved goodbye. Seeing as the school bus is often late to arrive at school, I imagine that day was no different. He would have had to run to his first class to avoid being yelled at by his Miss Jahdeed, as he had done on countless occasions before.

At nine fifteen he would have been walking outside to enjoy his first break of the day. With the warmth of Kabul’s sun on his face, he would have borne witness to a shower of sky rockets, the last thing he would ever glimpse. Dear Abus, these are the events that took place prior to the passing of my son. Sometimes, when the pain is too much, I seek refuge in knowing he waits at the gates with Allah, hand in hand with all the other children, his friends. Dear Abus, it pains me to question, but I must know, when did this war necessitate the taking of children?

At my son’s funeral Abu Mazen tried consoling mourners, “His death was not in vain, he was fighting for a greater cause”. He was eight years old. He had just learnt to differentiate between left and right, how could he possibly commit to dying for a cause many of us are yet to understand? With all due respect, dear Abus, children have no part in this game of adults. They are mere bystanders to the destruction we create, yet sadly, their innocence does not protect them from the bedlam this country often finds itself in.

Dear Abus, people are saying you have plans for Israel, plans to show them how strong we are, plans to show them enough is enough, we will no longer tolerate and nor are we intimidated by their attacks, plans to once and for all take back the land that rightfully belongs to us and to eliminate all those opposed. Abus, if war is all you know then I fear for the future of this great state.

Abus, I am writing, pleading, begging you to put an end to this pain myself and so many others are suffering; this time not by bigger bombs or missiles or rockets, instead by forgiveness. Understand, I have forgiven you for your retribution in the past, the same retribution that resulted in the death of my son; and over time I have learnt to forgive the Israelis for their atrocities. Abus, understand this: we will never have peace while we are killing our brothers, our sisters, our children.
Dear Abus, understand this letter goes beyond my own sufferings. It has been composed of the voices of those who have lost their own, those who have lost interest in this game we are being forced to play, those of the mothers who have lost their sons, but most of all, the voice of my son and all the children who have, and will, unless change is made, encounter his fate.

In the eyes of children fighting is easy to fix. The solution is to go home and come back the next day with the memory of their dispute somewhat erased, ready to start afresh. This is the example we must follow. We must not forget what has happened, but we must not retaliate either. We must remember what has happened and learn from it, learn from it and move on, start afresh.

If you do not look upon this letter with the intention of making change, and go ahead with your revenge and in doing so fill the night sky with the roaring sound of bombs and rockets flying, I will remember the sound of my son’s laughter, for love is not quiet. Love is loud. The sound of my son playing with his cars is more deafening then the sound of your bombs falling outside my window.

Abus, I fear your perception on life is limited, for you do not seem to understand that life is not trivial and love is neither comprised of rockets nor bombs. More concerning, Abus, is that you don’t seem to understand that in order to show true strength you must show forgiveness. Revenge is simply a sign of weakness. Abus, understand this: revenge is not peace, revenge is not love. Love is forgiveness and Allah’s reward for forgiveness will be peace. Until these lessons are learnt, we will not live in peace.

Abus, I take hope that someday soon the pain that I and so many others like me feel, will become familiar to you; as until our anguish is tied up with your anguish, our liberation cannot be bound with your liberation and until that day comes, the choices you make do not fully represent the full views of us, your people. Yet when that day comes, Abus, I pray you will remember this letter and seek to reconcile with all those who have done you wrong, by means of forgiveness; like so many of us have already done.

Until the day we have all been waiting for comes, I will continue to pray, for my son, for this country, and for you. I pray that you will gain the clarity to see the consequences of your actions, the faith to trust that peace will one day come, and the strength to make the first move.

Until that day comes I will be waiting in earnest hope.

Your faithful servant,
Amal Saheed
‘I love you’ emailed across the room.
‘Whatever’ spoken in sadness and gloom.
Sometimes we regret,
Wish we could forget,
And go back to when all was well.
When looking at you was as easy as hell.
No one explained the side effects of love.
She’s in her room, crying alone.
Her phone buzzes, his favourite tone,
Her best friend texts, ‘I’m going out’.
She wants to scream and continuously shout.
No one explained the side effects of love.
Her step dad says she’s a no good slut,
In her room her wrists she cuts.
Her blood falls like tears,
She can’t believe she’s endured the years.

Her mother’s almost always away,
Like she could help her anyway.
No one explained the side effects of love.
Schools a place where she acts,
She fakes a smile with feeling it lacks.
The funny thing is they walk by and stare.
Her friends try to help her, but people don’t care.
About the girl with the broken smile,
The one who won’t stay a while.
No one explained the side effects of love
She texts goodbye to all her friends,
Most don’t know it means her end.
Her best friend gets it, knows what it means,
Calls triple zero to send out search teams.
She sits there praying no not my girl,
No not today, tears start to swell.
No one explained the side effects of love.

She stands high on a building,
Looking at her surroundings.
If she could fly she’d fly away,
Perhaps to another day.
No, it’s not the coward’s way,
Simply for those who don’t wish to play.
No one explained the side effects of love.
A phone call is all that remains,
The end of her tears and his mean games.
A family left to mourn for a daughter.
A friend alone, torn in torture.
A boy left to regret.
But soon they all will forget,
About the girl with the painted smile.
No one explained the side effects of love.
When I died, all of the sound and light of the world that I had lived in, prior to the soft pop of the trigger at my temple, was sucked away like an unplugged bath. For a moment there was silence and no colour, not even black, and I thought to myself Oh. Shit. But then suddenly the sounds and light that make up things raced back into the world, a new one now, and I found myself watching them like a film. God, or Whoever, shows me little snippets of the people on Earth’s lives, that all come together to make one huge puzzle. I’ve seen a million things, all different. I’ve watched men stalk down dark alleyways and I’ve watched women whittle off their thighs on pretend bicycles. The film flickers from one person to the next and, with nothing left to move, all I do is watch.

I saw a lot of films when I was alive. These films made sense; they had a start, a problematic middle and nice, neat conclusion.

Almost none of what I have seen now has made a tangible sense and I can barely recall most of the lives I’ve watched. They all blur into one big patchwork where mouths slide around aimlessly, looking for their original position, on faces that glimmer and waver like heat rays.

One life, however, is clear as day. I can see every line that ever crossed her face, every inch of background that was behind her.

I’ve seen her three times throughout her life.

Each time, she’s been a different person.

One
Some dogs frolic, some dogs run and some dogs bite. When I was young, I had a dog named Max. Max was a pitbull: the Neanderthals of dogs, the biters. He had the fleshy head that overwhelmed his eyes into little slits, the short, angry legs and even a spiked collar. But Max, poor Max, wasn’t a biter, he was inherently and irrevocably a frolicker. He wouldn’t chase attackers, he wouldn’t even bark at strangers.

Some men have soft piano-playing hands, fleshy and moon-white, some men have eager hands, and some men have hard hands. My Father had hard hands, always red and scaly from the sun, with thick hairs like telephone wires sticking out of their backs. He twisted those hands together when Max wouldn’t bite. My Mother put her
woman’s hands, slender and elegant like a wine bottle, over his and pleaded softly. But he picked up his shotgun anyway, took Max into the backyard and shot him in his deceptive, fleshy head.

Sarah’s own childhood dog was a frolicker too, a little flop-eared sort of thing. She was walking it when she found me, its furry neck pulling suicidally at its lead. The dog smelt me before it or Sarah saw me. It smelt the dirt, the caked blood of the hole on my temple, the tangled blossom of blood and brains on the other side, the faded cologne on my neck and the grime in my hair. Sarah’s nose was less discerning, but eventually the trees parted and she saw me, and I could watch her seeing me. I was lying face down on the riverbank and my feet, with cheap leather shoes and starchy white socks, lapped softly in the water. She ran to me, called out “Mister!” once, and then again when I didn’t reply. She bent down, tapped my shoulder and a little of my blood got on her fingers, sinking greedily away under her pearly little nails.

As I sunk into her, I felt a shift from my own weightless, observant world. A little energy in my absent self, but also in her. A kind of anchor; what little speck was left of my life to her full and supple one.

When she felt the blood she let out a little fractured moan, and I thought to myself, Where’s the dog in all this?, but it had already run off, not frolicking for possibly the first time in its life. Sarah tried one more time, “Mister!” then turned me over and looked into my face. I saw the opaque jelly and still pupils of my dead eyes at the same time she did. She stood up and made like the dog, running away from the body, from me. I moved with her as she ran, watched her gangly, pale arms and legs flail, her pink little mouth contort in all sorts of strange shapes as she cried. We kept running, and the parkland soon turned into row after row of identical houses. I knew when we were at her house, because she started to shout for her mother, who was in the front yard with the no-longer-frolicking dog, holding a hose to some ugly palms. The house was like all the others: practical in design but not in its decorations. Frighteningly cheerful gnomes leered up at visitors from the flat, stubbly lawn, wielding sharp fishing rods and clutching little hardbound books.

The words tumbled out of Sarah, “There’s a man, there’s a man lying on the riverbank and he’s dead and there’s no one there!” and her mother took Sarah’s hand, my hand, went inside, presumably to call the police, and then I had to leave.

Two
When Sarah next flickered into my world, adolescence had stretched her face out of the freckly cake tin it had been. Her cheekbones jutted out proudly. Her eyebrows had been plucked into thin, perfect curves. She must have been fifteen, sixteen years...
old and she was sitting on a riverbank with a boy. There was a heavy yellow light congealing on everything, sliced up by tree branches and bouncing off of the water.

It’s the same light that my living memories are bathed in, suspending all of the people I knew like decaying flies in honey.

Sarah and the boy talked for a long time on the riverbank, but I was too busy watching her to listen to the words. I studied her fingernails. I wondered if I was still there, hiding somewhere on the fleshy nail beds, but they looked clean. I watched her eyes send sprays of little lines towards her temples when she laughed. Her hand slid through her fringe over and over. I lost track of time, like I often do, and the sun dipped further towards the horizon and stained the river orange. It started to rain, just spitting at first. When it got harder, the boy said “I know a place to get out of the rain”. They got up and his hand curled around hers, around the same fingernails I was under, and he pulled her into the tangle of grey trees. I followed them while they ran and laughed hysterically and Sarah tried to shield her eyes, worried that her mascara would run and the boy would notice that she was wearing it. The trees thinned out and suddenly the skeleton of an old empty car sat before them, rusting into the grass. The boot of the car had been set on fire, its metal black and studded with boils from the heat. “That’s it?” asked Sarah.

“I’ve checked it out a couple of times before. They stopped the fire pretty early on so the cab’s fine. C’mon, it’ll be dry,” said the boy, before slipping into the front seat. Hey, I tried to say, There could be spiders in there, Not just any spiders but poisonous redbacks, There have been six recorded deaths from redbacks in Australia alone, but of course Sarah didn’t hear me, and she got into the passenger seat.

I got in the car too. Watery orange light was filtering in through the broken windows and mites swam drunkenly in it. Sarah laughed, not the same coy, little one as before but one that filled the whole car and bounced off of the doors. “I’m soaked!” She cried, and laughed some more. The boy watched her like I did. There was a long silence. “Can I ask you something?” Asked the boy.

The rain pounded on the roof.

“Sure,” said Sarah.

“What did you feel?”

“About what?”

“You know, when you found the body.”
Sarah looked at him then down at the floor and was quiet for a while. “I think about it a lot, you know,” she began. “I think about the way the insects sounded at the river. I think about how hot it was, how I was sweating. I think about all the blood that was on the bank.” Her voice got softer. “I think a lot. But I don’t feel anything.”

I wanted to tell her I was sorry, I didn’t mean for you to find me, I only ever thought it would be a man, because men can see what children can’t; I’m sorry, I’m sorry.

The boy’s hand felt for hers and touched the nails that I belonged to again. “How did he die?” he asked quietly.

“He killed himself,” said Sarah flatly. I wondered how she knew. He put his arm around her, gingerly, like he was scared of breaking her, and she leaned into him. They sat like that for a long time, until the light pouring in from all the shattered windows and holes around them turned purple. Finally he said, “Sarah?” and she lifted her head, and their lips, all splattered with soft violet light, pressed together, and God moved me on.

*An In Between*

A man was sitting on a park bench, sleeping. I sat across from him and watched. I watched his hands, with veins like mountain ridges, with plum-coloured liver spots, with knuckles like golf balls.

It was snowing. Perfectly, softly.

It was night-time and all of the shadows that the trees cast in the daytime had been overwhelmed by the ones falling from the sky.

I sat, and I watched the man for hours, watched the soft snow gather on him like insects on a light.

When the morning sun pushed the shadows out of the sky again, as it always does, I could see the man wasn’t sleeping, he was dead. He was my father.

*Three*

On my third viewing, Sarah had become a woman. I don’t know how old exactly. Old enough to wear floral skirts that sat below her knees and to have those lines that once ran fleetingly from her eyes to her temples, always. Old enough to have children that weren’t babies but also weren’t angst-ridden teenagers; real children, those ones that see the world in primary colours, singular and simple. She was sitting in a kitchen, her kitchen, looking out a window to a slowly boiling sea. Her hands were wrapped around a stagnant cup of tea. They were long and slender and elegant. Like a wine bottle.
I looked at her closely, knowing by now that I wouldn’t have long and had to see all I could.

Her eyes were a soft yellow where they had once been white. I spent a long time looking at the eyes. My eyes were blue before they rotted away; when I was a baby kindly old women would stop my mother in the supermarket, peer into my pram like withered owls and say “Oh! What blue, blue eyes!”. Hers were like a milky coffee. I doubt any old women ever stopped her in the street when she was a baby and leered into her pram and said “Oh! What brown, brown eyes!” but I suppose that’s the heavy burden that all brown-eyed people must bear.

*     *     *

/There was a kitchen clock sitting high up on a wall, and I swear I’ve never heard a clock beat so loudly. Tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock, and so on, presumably until time ended. It must have driven her crazy, listening to that same clock beat the same time over and over again, just like her own heartbeat.

The cup of cold, dead tea suddenly sailed out of her hands and through the air, over the kitchen table and hit the clock, smashing both. Tea splattered across the kitchen, suddenly lively again. The clock ticked on; only its glass case was broken, not time.

Sarah slumped onto the table, and I swear I’ve never heard anyone sob so loudly. They came up from way down in her insides. She was gagging on them.

I wondered, hopefully, whether I was part of the lump in her throat. Whether it was my dead eyes that made her cry so inexorably, making the presence I had been on the world mean something. Or did she cry for the same reason I had; no reason at all? Did she have that same thing sitting on her brain and drumming heavy knuckles, knuckles like golf balls?

I would have given anything at that moment for a voice. A voice to say that I knew that it would pass for her. For you Sarah, all things will pass, everything is impermanent like flower heads, give it more time than I did.

But I had no voice. Sarah sobbed on and the clock went tick tock tick tock tick tock forever, and I had to leave again.

Now

Sarah flickers into the world. She’s dying. It’s obvious enough from her surroundings; the walls glow white with sanitation and antiseptic, and masses of wires like nests of snakes coil out of breathing machines. There are what seem like thousands upon thousands of flowers in the room. Their fragrant and heavy heads look like people to
me, all engaged in a rambling conversation about their recipient. The carnations say “Cancer, how awful,” the lilies interject “How sad, how sad, how sad,” over and over like the throb of a clock and the daffodils warble “That poor, lovely, old Sarah”. She is old, mind you. Those laugh lines on her temples are deep notches now, like cracks on rain-thirsty land. Her eyes are closed and an ugly lattice of burgundy veins run weave across their lids. It’s night-time, and the room is empty.

Except for me.

One of the machines measures her heart rate in horrible, staccato beeps, mechanic and rigid, not at all like the smooth push and pull of a real heart.

I watch Sarah’s chest rise and fall, soft and breakable like a bird’s wing. It’s only in the absence of a body that you realise just how fragile the damn things are. Take too high a fall and you’ll curl into the pavement; don’t look the other way on the road and you’ll curl into a car.

The ugly staccato beeps are becoming more and more scarce.

Her body convulses suddenly. It moves back and forth in a violent wave. The lids slide back from her eyes and they roll blindly around the room like marbles. Her hands claw wildly at nothing and she says something in the softest of whispers.

My name.

My blood is rolling out of her fingernails and it’s as red and rich as the day it seeped under and a tiny, tiny explosion is happening, and I have hands, I have a face, I have a torso, I have limbs, I have dirty hair.

Sarah is saying my name again. I press my hand to her face. She smiles, her face creasing like a beautiful paper crane.

The beeps stop.

I still hold Sarah, I’m still me. There’s a soft pop, the same as the one of the trigger at my temple that brought me here. I still hold Sarah. The flowers are evaporating and the floor is falling away and all around is night. We weigh nothing but we weigh nothing together. The night is glistening with billions and billions of planets. On every one of them living things are dying but also, and more importantly, living.
Her Fingernails Are Claws

Kierra-Jay Power

She paints her nails funny colours – some days a thin black, some days speckled with blue, some days red and thickly coated. She doesn’t say why those particular colours or patterns take her fancy, why sometimes she rides the bus with the varnish still drying. He talks to her in the halls at school, comments, but never asks whatever craze or fad or whim has left her fingernails striped white-black-white or dipped in orange.

He asks her out while her nails are a deep but washed-out yellow, the colour of chipped motel paint from the eighties, and dried-out daffodil petals. She says yes with a little smile, twirling her long hair between her fingers. He’s mesmerised by the flashes of saccharine yellow that wink at him from among strands of light, shining brown.

She comes over the very next day, pushes him down onto his own bed and smiles through miles of brown hair, all white teeth and dark eyes. He thinks that maybe it should be too soon, but she laughs when he asks if she’s ready for this.

His sheets are navy blue, and he can’t stop staring at where her fists are clutching handfuls, soft cotton gripped tight and threaded through her fingers, little yellow tugboats of colour against the dark, rumpled sea.

She comes to school the next day with nails painted navy blue, the exact shade, and the satisfied smile on her face says that she knows it. He thinks it’s cute and more than a little bit sexy, and tells her so by pressing her against the wall outside the girl’s bathroom. She throws her head back and laughs, wraps legs even longer than her hair around his hips.

He goes over his best friend’s place, and they play out-dated, crappy Xbox games until three in the morning when his mum gets home from her night shift as a nurse. They’ve known each other for years, and there’s an easy kind of silence that settles as they stretch out on his friend’s bed, chunky remotes in hand. He’s distracted through the first three rounds, paying even less attention through the next two, until his mate chucks the controller at his head and it smacks into his buzzing skull and bounces off the lime green bed sheets.

I’ve known you for longer than I’ve been dressing myself, his friend’s equal parts fond and annoyed voice says. What the hell’s on your mind?
He mumbles a quiet, There’s this girl... and launches into a detailed explanation of everything about her. He knows he’s rambling, but it just keeps spilling out, gushing.

He introduces them giddily, arm looped around her shoulder and eyes still glued to the chipped navy blue on her nails. He wonders why she doesn’t just re-paint them.

The next day his friend won’t look him in the eye, and when he cracks jokes to try and cheer him up, the smile pulls on his face like it’s painful. She comes to school that day with perfectly painted nails, an evenly-coated lime green.
I Cannot Have a Lion as a Pet

Kierra-Jay Power

You call my bullshit, test my limits, and scream when I’m wrong. You wield your opinions with unapologetic bluntness, cover yourself in deflection tactics and have the act of kissing and changing the subject down to a fine art.

You narrow your eyes, hold your secrets close, and never let me know anything that would make you seem weak. You square your shoulders when faced with accusations and grin like a feral thing when questions stray too close. You pick apart my lies, my opinions, my views, my work, my actions, my trembling body. You live in your own head, allow me only glimpses. Do what you want, say what you want and take what you want.

But where did those jagged edges go? When did you start giving and seeking? Kisses rather than bruises? You were never mine, of course, and once you told me that I was only yours skin-deep.

People are not pets, you said. But you lost your lion claws and developed a housecat’s glazed eyes, trimmed your mane and lowered your head. Bared your throat. You are not even watching my teeth.

You ask me the time, and I know it is past five, but even so, I say four. It rolls off my tongue, doesn’t catch or stutter, and it is the first time I have lied to you in too long. A little lie, but you used to be a bloodhound for deception. But now you nod your head, don’t even glance at the clock to confirm.

When did you lose your independence? Your inability to take anyone’s word, lose that need to check for yourself?

I don’t come back the next night, in time for our disgustingly-clockwork six-thirty dinner. But at one, I find neatly stacked dishes, long dried on the rack, and leftovers in the fridge at my eye-level, not yours.

I throw the whole thing in the bin: plate, cling wrap, spaghetti, fork and all. I don’t mention it in the morning, even when you ask what time I got home. I say that I got back to the house at nine, apologised for work running late and a major traffic jam involving a motor cycle and two delivery trucks. You don’t raise your eyebrow at my correction, you don’t sneer at me that apologies are a sign of weakness. You don’t see the lie. You nod.
You don’t even pick up the stranger’s touch still lingering on my skin, relaxing my muscles. You are pathetic.

I miss that quick-witted savage thing with harsh lines – that razor-sharp smile and those truth serum eyes.

Later, I lie awake, furious as you fall asleep before me. Where is the caution, the watchful eyes that you kept open until mine were closed and defenceless? I grip the pillow with cramping knuckles, think about how easy it would be to lay the clean fabric with its fluffy padding over your slack face, press until you squirm and shake and scream and lash out blindly, raking your blunt, neat nails in livid lines and spit with wildfire eyes.

Your guards had walls and your walls had guards, but now you’re belly-up on the mattress with your throat exposed.

I had guessed that you loved me, that affection and regard were to blame for your docile behaviour. That would have been bad enough – love – but you trust me.

* * * * *

Did pain make you so strong, so beautiful, so captivating? Did rejection give you your harsh lines and cruel comments? Did hurt make you sneer and bare your teeth, and never let them get an inch on you? Did betrayal make you respect, but not trust? Did anger give you the bristles and spine that gave me pinpricks and paper cuts and gashes and stripped knuckles and ruined fingertips?

Did the last person leave you, in order to make you into the brutal, unrestrained and unrepentant lion I found? I would ask, but I am disgusted by the thought that you may actually answer.

* * * * *

So I take all my things and pack them in your car, and burn down everything left.

But I cannot resist drifting, hidden in the street until I see your reaction.

Your face is shocked, eyes watering through the smoke, with desperate glances thrown at the leaping flames while you clench your teeth around your lip. For a second I think you might dive in and try to find me. But then you smell the petrol in the air, splashed over the neat rose garden and the trimmed grass, and see that both your car and I are gone.

There is anger, there is hurt, confusion, but finally – finally – there is indifference. Your stance relaxes, your shoulders are thrown back, and you stare down the fire with your
chin jutted out, a wild smirk curling your bloodied lips. You don’t back down from
the heat of the flames, even though the sharp kick of arson and smoke is no doubt
stuffing your throat.

The neatly trimmed, owned and meek pet you have grown into – I smothered it in
your sleep with my petrol-soaked pillow.

And you are suddenly again a lion, hungry but satisfied – all stretching, coiled strength
and slitted, dancing eyes.

You have jagged edges and cruel eyes and fingers that can worm into anything and
pick it apart lie by lie, piece by piece, until you can grin and spit at the trembling,
stripped remains.

Once again, you are not mine.

But you are glorious.
New Perspective

Kierra-Jay Power

She walks barefoot everywhere, no matter if they are crossing mud or twigs or hot pavement. The heat doesn’t seem to bother her – in fact she basks in it, stretching like a well-fed, lazy cat. The only time he’s ever seen her complain is when they stood in the freezer aisle at the local supermarket, wiggling numb toes against the cold tiles and hissing like the icy gush of air from the freezer was a personal insult.

She is like a child, eyes wide as she takes in the everyday wonders of the world– his world. She makes him conscious of the little things, things he takes for granted, things his eyes pass over normally. Everything takes on a new light, a new understanding as explained through her eyes. Her ramblings seem off track, off topic, random, but they highlight connections and questions that he’s never realised, never asked before. Some things sadden her, though. Like concrete.

“Why?” she asks, examining the shiny pink patches on her toes where the skin has been stripped away. It comes seemingly out of nowhere, but he knows that if he gives her a second, she’ll most likely remember to back-track and explain. He’s right.

“Why they cover earth?” He thinks she’s probably referring to the pavement she just stubbed her toe on, which is confirmed when she sends a scathing look in the direction of the bike path.

“So people can walk there, ride bikes on the path.” He had introduced her to the wonderful world of cycling yesterday, and though it had been an adventure, something she was always up for, he had noticed that she looked relieved when her bare feet touched back on the ground.

“Why they need cover earth?” she repeats, and okay, he’s a little confused as to what she’s asking now. She must see this in his face, because she blows the stray, wispy hair out of her eyes and huffs. “Dirt. Walk on dirt, yes? Dirt can be flat, yes? Grass also good. Flat. Nicer. Not all hurty and stingy like – like sliding down vine.”

Ah. He opens his mouth automatically, to answer, but then stops. Thinks a little. Huh.

“I guess it’s to mark a boundary… like, ‘you can walk here’.” He nods, because that should make sense, right? But she shakes her head, biting her lip. Her eyebrows tug down, lines forming in her face. She actually looks kind of adorable… even though he now wants to hit himself for thinking that.
Her mouth opens and closes like she’s struggling for the words, frustrated. But then she suddenly springs to her feet, dashing to the base of a tree and darting back. He starts at the sudden movement, but watches closely as she lays down two twigs, parallel. She digs her fingernails into the dirt between the two twigs, scratching at the earth. She points to the disturbed ground, the twigs, and then gestures to the space beyond them. “Dirt. Walk. Stick. Not walk.”

“But stuff grows out of the dirt and makes it hard to walk on there. And the rain would make the dirt mud, and slippery.” She rolls her eyes, a movement that makes her seem almost like a normal teenager, and then shoots a pointed look at the cement path. There are weeds growing out of cracks and creeping over the sides. Okay, so she may have a point there. And now that he thinks about it, cement is still slippery when it rains, sometimes even more so than the grass.

Why do they feel the need to pave the way with concrete and cement and clean-cut lines?

Oh, great. Now he’s thinking like she does – all ‘they’s’ instead of ‘we’s’. But… wait… he isn’t the one who paved the city, someone else did, probably someones, actually, and those people are a they… so he’s perfectly justified in his wording and oh, god, this is why he hates hanging around her too long. She turns his thoughts weird, backwards, inside out, turns things he knows into uncertainties.

He says, “Hey, want to get some ice cream?” rather than deal with her questions any more, and even though he feels kind of like a coward by evading her like that, the way her face lights up means he doesn’t feel too bad. As much as she hates concrete, she loves ice cream.

They’re heading to the corner shop to buy some frozen treats when he sees them. Two mounted policemen, drinking a bottle of water by the shop front. Apparently, she also spots them at the exact same moment, if her squeal of “Beasts!” is any indication. She goes to make a run for the horses and their surprised riders before he manages to tug her back.

“No! Stop!” he wheezes, as she wriggles, straining her neck over his shoulder to look at the chocolate brown animals. “Stop!”

She finally listens, stops trying to break free and huffs, squints at him. “Beasts. Pat the beasts.”

“No, you can’t. Those are police beasts…” He stops. “I mean- horses, and you can’t touch them.”
Police horses are categorised as police officers. If you shoot a police horse or a police dog, it’s classified as murdering an officer of the law.

He really doesn’t want to deal with a fine for assaulting a police officer.

But his words seem to have stopped her. She relaxes in his grip, her expression thoughtful.

“Police?”


“But… they… they not… not…” she’s struggling again, baring teeth in frustration. She expels an annoyed breath. “What word for… makers?”

…What? Makers?

She waits for him to answer, but she’s pretty much lost him on this one. Out of nowhere, she points to her chest. He follows the line of her finger, sees where she’s indicating. Um. He admits quietly to himself that the view is kind of nice, but he still doesn’t get it.

She rolls her eyes and grabs two handfuls of her shirt. He flushes, eyes widening. Okay. Um. Even more confused now.

She rolls her eyes again, makes a curving motion from her chest to her hips. Almost like she’s miming… a fat stomach? Oh. Baby makers.

“You mean women?” She thumps him on the chest and grins, flash of white teeth a stark contrast to her deeply tanned face.

“Women. They not women– not be hunters if not women.”

Aaand – she’s back to making very little sense.


How does she know the words ergo and balance but not women?

He thinks about what she’s saying, though. He realises she must be talking about her tribe, back wherever home is for her. If he’s reading between the lines right, then she’s
saying that only women can be hunters, because they can give life as well as take life. Keep a… balance. A natural order.

Apparently where she comes from, if a hunter kills a lot of things, then she would just make up for it by having lots of babies.

Huh. This makes a lot of sense, in a weird, weird way.

She nods and smiles like she can hear what he’s thinking, then darts inside the forgotten corner shop with a cry of “Ice cream!”.

He wonders, for the first time, if he can one day ever visit her world.
This publication is a collection of poems, short stories and essays written by the finalists and winners of the 2011 Northern Territory Literary Awards.

Phone: 1800 019 155
or (08) 8999 7177
Email: ntl.info@nt.gov.au
Fax: (08) 8999 6927
Web: www.ntl.nt.gov.au
Post: PO Box 42, Darwin NT 0801
Location: Parliament House, Darwin