Northern Territory
Literary Awards
2013

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

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

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

Entry Forms are available from the Northern Territory Library and ONLINE at www.ntl.nt.gov.au
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*Due to copyright restrictions, scripts and screenplays cannot be included in this publication.*

WINNER  Sarah Hope - *The Hoist*

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Troy left the porch in a rush, clearing the steps in one jump. His bike lay nearby; he lurched for it and pedalled frantically away, juddering over the deep ruts of the drive.

The gate at the end of the drive was out of sight of the house; once he’d veered through it he stopped pedalling and stretched high on his toes, letting the bike ease to a coast. His initial dash over, his breath began to ease, and as the thumping of blood in his ears receded he felt a great sense of control. He bounced a little on the pedals, testing his balance, then settled back onto the bike’s seat.

It was six kilometres to town, but school was further and he rode there everyday in less than half an hour. Plenty of time. Troy let the bike slow to the point where it was unsteady, lurching, then slowly, listlessly, started to pedal, veering back and forth across the gravel road to keep his pace to walking.

If they’d had a phone it wouldn’t have mattered that the car keys were missing, he wouldn’t have had to ride into town. They could have just rung. But Troy’s dad wouldn’t allow a phone anymore. Not since he came in early one day and found Troy on the phone to his mum, snivelling like a bloody baby, his dad had said. Can’t have that, he’d said as he yanked the socket from the wall, and then his heavy tread to the back door and the phone flung from the house with such force that it hit one of the dogs, who’d held his leg shy of the ground for a fortnight after. ‘We can’t have a phone in the house if it makes you into a fucking crybaby,’ his dad had smiled as he turned back towards Troy and his disgraceful tears, and it was like losing his mum all over again.

Troy hit the brakes at the sharp bend above the creek and let the bike hit the ground, its wheels turning slowly, purposeless. He slithered down the bank to the rocks by the creek’s sluggish flow and squatted heavily for a while, bouncing rhythmically as he watched the dragonflies swoop to skim the water’s surface. They could do that all day, just keep bouncing off the surface like that, he thought as he rocked. The sun licked a warm tongue across the back of his neck; it was a comforting warmth, it felt like being tucked tight into bed by his mum when he was little. He’d been so warm, swaddled by the blankets, he’d never had trouble falling asleep then. And he found his eyes starting to sink, the way the sun huddles its warmth and sinks slowly each day when it’s time to sleep.

But this was no good, this was wasting time. And time wasn’t to be wasted, thought Troy, jerking to his feet. That’s another reason his dad had refused to get another phone in the months since he’d smashed the old one, it would just encourage Troy to waste time, and god knows he was already useless enough as it was.
Troy turned quickly from the creek and scrambled back up the bank to the road. This was not the time to be idle. He'd probably only come a couple of Ks. He pulled himself over the road's shelf and scuffed back to the inert bike, his hands pushed deep in his pockets. The bike seemed to him to have an air of expectation in its motionlessness, sprawled on the ground as if impatient to resume its journey. It wasn't a bad bike, it would get him to town as swiftly as his twelve-year-old legs could persuade it.

Troy pulled his right hand from his pocket as a fist. Over the hovering front wheel he opened it. The tack on his palm was rusty and old, but the point was still good enough. He placed it carefully on the road by the bike's front tyre, and leant heavily on the handlebars as he rode over it. It was typical really. This sort of stuff happened to Troy all the time, he was always having accidents. It was part and parcel of him being so bloody useless his father would say at the inflicting of another accident. Just like his clumsy mother.

Troy leant and released the tyre's valve cap for a bit, then resumed riding with his weight still pressing on the handlebars, till maybe a kilometre later the rubber was blousing emptily beneath the rim. Like a dead snake, thought Troy, and he despatched the useless bike into some scrub. He didn't think anyone would steal it, but he wasn't sure whether he might need it in Sydney. He began to walk the remaining distance to town, kicking at rocks and following their crooked route.

His mother's post office box was in Sydney. Not in the neighbourhood where she lived, she had to travel to get her mail, she'd told Troy when she gave him the address, telling him to write it down very carefully and put it in a safe place. She thought it would be better to have a post office box in a different neighbourhood, just in case. They both knew how vulnerable safe places were. While the old dog was still limping from the phone, Troy wrote his first letter. It was hard for him, he'd always had trouble with his spelling. Even in his second go at grade 5, Miss McEwan still winced over his exercise book. He'd never been very bright. ‘A workhorse,’ said his dad, ‘not a show pony.’

His mother didn't write back. Troy wrote again, tearing pages from his exercise book. When? he wrote next to the jagged edges. Will it be sune? Every day his heart would judder as he eyed the daily pile of bills on the kitchen table, but there was never a letter from his mother among them. Soon it was his gut rather than his heart which palpitated whenever he saw the mail. His father would sort it slowly, holding each envelope high in turn, saying ‘Hmm, this one doesn't look very interesting does it? What about this one?’ And he would hold out an envelope with the bank’s logo, his eyes intent on Troy labouring under the nausea of disappointment. ‘Nothing very interesting at all.’ And later, his blue eyes with that special sparkle, the one that pierced, he said, ‘Maybe we should get you a penpal eh? A friend to write to you. That’d be nice wouldn’t it?’ The big smile, the alligator face. ‘Hey son? Be nice to get a letter now and then.’

The sun smiled from just to the west. Troy figured it had probably taken him just over an hour to dawdle to the last bend before town. He stopped for a moment, safely out of view, and dropped to his knees on the road, rubbing his arms to the elbow in the dust. He stood slowly, with a sense of purpose, the heavy weight of responsibility, and broke into a stumbling run.
The doctor’s surgery was in Peterson Street, round the corner from the IGA. Troy ran harder once he reached the first of the town’s cluster of boarded up shops. But at the doctor’s gate he slowed to a jog, not wanting to be too out of breath.

In the surgery two elderly couples and a large wheezing man filled the plastic chairs. In the corner was a young, tired looking girl; at her feet a large infant with tousled hair and a messy nose thumped a wooden block onto a toy with destructive glee. At every bang the girl winced and deflated, while the elderly women tightened their mouths and trained their gaze on something distant.

The doctor’s receptionist wore a clean white smock. Her hair was helmeted into a neat bun, so that not a single strand waved. She raised her eyes as the door closed and frowned at the sight of this dirty little boy. Looked like he’d been rolling in the dirt. She lowered her eyes to her clean desk again and left them there.

Troy stood and waited. Finally, she sighed to her appointment book. ‘Can I help you?’ Troy realised he was being addressed. ‘Um,’ he said, ‘I need to see Dr Forster.’ ‘I see,’ the woman exhaled. ‘And you have an appointment?’

‘No.’

Now the woman’s eyes rose to his. Troy knew this look well: scorn tinged with delight. ‘I’m sorry,’ she smiled, ‘but Dr Forster is fully booked this afternoon.’ Her eyes darted to the glum little crowd in the waiting room.

‘But I need to see him,’ murmured Troy.

‘So do all these people. That’s why they’ve made appointments. That’s what appointments are for.’ Her eyes scraped over his dusty arms, his scabby elbows, with evident distaste. Troy shifted from foot to foot. The woman’s expression conveyed to him, with ill-concealed satisfaction, that he wasn’t very bright, and that wasn’t good enough for her.

‘Can I wait?’

She sighed as if expelling something unpleasant. ‘Dr Forster is too busy to see you this afternoon. You’ll be wasting your time.’

That was okay though, that was fine. Troy was good at wasting time, it was one of his talents. He was a mopper, said his dad, always waiting around for something that was never going to happen. ‘Hear me boy? Never.’

Never was a horrible word. It clogged his throat and made it hard for his breath to get in and out. He could live with Useless and Not-Very-Bright, and his dad’s favourite, that long one, Ir-res-pons-i-ble, always delivered with a heavy kick, but not Never. The thought made Troy gag.

But he was calm now, breathing normally. He turned his eyes from the receptionist’s bright
red lipstick and shuffled towards a plastic seat the same colour and just as hard. He would wait. He was good at that.

It was only the force of the word Never that had destroyed Troy’s capacity for patience. It had filled him with the bile of desperation. He’d taken such a risk, stealing the coins from his dad’s jeans while he was having his shower. He knew it was an Irresponsible thing to do, but Never was like a lead weight, and under it he’d be crushed.

After school the following Monday he’d dropped his bike on the grass next to the phone box. At the back of his maths book was the magic number, broken into pieces and disguised as a long division exercise. It had been his mum’s idea, the first time she’d rung and given him the phone number. That way it was hidden and he wouldn’t lose it. He could ring her whenever he liked, as long as he was careful. Dad mustn’t know he had it.

But then the phone had swirled across the backyard. Troy was responsible for the phone’s demise, which, in turn, had made him responsible for getting into town.

He’d fed the public phone his stolen coins and dialled the number disguised by lines and symbols. At the sound of his mother’s voice he’d choked, and then he heard himself begin to wail, a real crybaby now, he’d thought, if his father had been there to hear him. He’d sobbed so hard that he couldn’t even speak, and his mother kept saying ‘Troy?’ like she was trying to gulp him through the phone. And finally he’d managed to breathe again and he’d howled at her, like a little kid, ‘Why don’t you never write to me?’ and she’d gasped back, ‘I do Troy, honey, every week.’

‘Oh God,’ said his mother and she started to cry and Troy saw his father’s smirk over the pile of uninteresting mail, and it was like a graveyard, the phone and all those letters buried in it, rotting.

Troy sat perfectly still on his plastic seat, watching the clock slowly tick the remains of the afternoon away. Every now and then the doctor’s door would open and someone would emerge looking relieved, and a few minutes later the door would open again and the doctor would stick his head round it and say ‘Mr Wallis?’ and wait while someone would grunt their way out of their uncomfortable chair and shuffle into the room. Troy would stiffen, wondering if the doctor would notice him there as the clock’s hands journeyed. But the door would always close again, and the people waiting would readjust themselves and settle back to their magazines. Troy watched as one by one the elderly couples, the puffing man and the sad mother were called into the room and replaced by other glum-looking people.

Occasionally the phone would ring and the receptionist would crisply make appointments in her ruled up book, allowing precious quarter-hours of the doctor’s time as if bestowing gifts.

Finally there was no-one else left on the plastic seats. It seemed like a lifetime since Troy had hung sideways on the porch steps, quietly slipping his dad’s car keys through the gap in the boards. His bum was quite numb now. He’d been waiting for hours.
Dr Forster sauntered from his office, stretching his tired arms. It had been a long day. His eyes fell on Troy, looking worried on the hard seat. He frowned. ‘Hello there,’ he said, but his voice wasn’t very friendly, ‘are you waiting for someone?’

‘I need to see you,’ gasped Troy, all his relief at having finally arrived at this moment, this release of responsibility, making him giddy after the tension of having waited so long. So long.

‘I told him he couldn’t see you without an appointment,’ piped the receptionist, smug in her attention to protocol.

‘It’s me dad,’ spoke up Troy. ‘There was a brown trapped in the shed. He’s been bit.’ There was the tiniest of pauses, tiny but bloated with the significance of Troy’s words.

‘How long ago?’ snapped the doctor.

Troy shrugged helplessly. ‘Dunno. She said I had to wait.’

The doctor reeled round to the receptionist, whose red mouth was moving soundlessly. ‘How long has he been here?’

‘I … I … he didn’t …’ It was like watching a chip bag in the fire, the way her face crumpled and collapsed, thought Troy.

‘My bag!’ ordered the doctor, heading for his office. At the door which Troy had watched opening and closing all afternoon, he turned back to the receptionist, who seemed unable to stand, barricaded by her desk.

‘If we are too late for this man I’m holding you personally responsible,’ he barked.

Troy watched her face as it disintegrated under the weight of responsibility for Troy’s dad’s death. It was hers now, this responsibility. Troy could go back to being Not-Very-Bright and Ir-respons-i-ble, in Sydney. The woman turned stricken eyes to him and he smiled at her, companionably.
From where I thought you would appear
Josh Cameron

Tom and I were the best of friends when we were young aspiring writers. Both of us were ambitious, though in his fantasies, we were the Kiwi Hemingway and Fitzgerald. There was more partying than actual writing. As the years went by, he clung to that romantic lifestyle of always dreaming and never doing. I became a disappointing bore. I started getting published. As success and accolades beat down my door, Tom became morose. We drifted apart, and I wouldn’t see him again for another forty-eight years.

I used to think it was bitter envy that destroyed our friendship.

Why after so long, did I seek him out? Curiosity perhaps, or maybe as some need to collect remnants of the past to reassure myself that things don’t disappear behind you, or possibly I just needed to know my long lost friend, turned bitter rival, turned stranger, was real.

I found Tom.

I wondered, as I followed the nurse along the corridor, why she had to use such a sympathetic tone. Tom would have found it patronising.

I remember feeling depressed about the yellow nylon carpet, the beige walls from which hung uninspiring acrylic landscapes. I’ve never understood the two dimensional school, with their clean lines, their perfectly symmetrical hills and their one shade of green grass. I wondered if it was all to help its un-paying residents die quickly.

He was sitting in a chair next to his bed, staring at the beige wall. A tartan rug covered his legs.

The nurse crouched before him.

‘Mr. Beatty. Mr. Beatty…’ She talked at him as if he was stuck down a well. He showed no response, just kept a lost concentration on that wall. The nurse squinted. I could hear her brain working. ‘Victor Reed.’ She said my name like it was a revelation or a magic word even.

Like magic, Tom was brought to life. He roused with a sudden jerk, as if electrocuted and started searching the room. He found me standing to his left and looked up at me with such adoration, that I rocked on my toes and smiled with embarrassment.

‘Victor Reed,’ he said.

The nurse turned to me, looking at me with disbelief, and then she turned back to Tom. His concentration on me had not ebbed and now a bead of saliva hung from his bottom lip. A paper towel appeared in the nurse’s hand and she wiped his lip clean.
‘Will only respond to Victor Reed.’ She said this in a harsh tone, obviously meant to eat away at my conscience. She then turned to me again, looking through me, as if I were nothing, or just a bad friend. She sighed loudly before storming from the room.

His smoky eyes had a twinkle to them.

‘Victor,’ he said in a broken voice.

‘Tom.’ My voice was strong and clear. I felt cruel showing it off.

‘Victor,’ he repeated in a whisper. ‘I’m almost blind, Victor. I can see a blurry image from my left eye; enough to see you’ve gone completely bald, Victor.’

‘But you’ve still got a fine head of hair. It’s as white as snow.’

A slow crooked smile crept over his face. ‘How did we get so old Victor?’

‘Time,’ I managed to say, before falling into a trance of deep reflection. The image of stars accelerating through space, faster and faster. I could feel a panic attack coming on.

‘Yes, time,’ he said, savoring each consonant, like a poet reciting his Masterpiece. ‘But you’ve got no regrets, I shouldn’t think. You’re a hugely successful writer. A lovely wife. How is Carolyn?’

I shrugged. ‘We divorced 32 years ago.’

‘Oh.’

His gaze fell to my feet and froze there. The look in his eyes was too sad and thoughtful to be about the make of my shoes. When he finally raised his eyes, he did so with the slightest hint of a smile. ‘She always knew how to bring me up. She’d say, “You are one handsome man, Tom. When are you going to find yourself a woman?”’

I stared out his window at the flax bush that blocked his view of the car park, and just waited for him to change the subject. I began chewing the nail off my index finger.

‘There was a woman once though.’

I straightened in my chair, took the finger from my mouth and looked at him like he’d metamorphosed into some brilliant new thing.

‘You might remember,’ he said. ‘I was over from Masterton, and you were picking me up from the train station.’

Details of all the times I had to pick him up, were fuzzy, all blurring to one.

He continued. ‘It was about eight in the evening, the moon was full, a bit gothic actually, moving in and out of clouds, and it was warm. Do you remember such a night?’
I shook my head.

‘I was waiting at the bus terminal. That’s where I said I’d be.’ He paused turning his one working eye to me; maybe to make sure I was still there. ‘I was standing there bored as hell, staring at the corner I thought you would appear from. Then the faintest breeze, and I say the faintest, because this breeze would barely have extinguished the flame of a candle…’ He hesitated, feeling for his words. ‘This breeze… Victor? I’ve always been a rationalist Victor. You know I’ve never been… I’m agnostic. Not subject to… I know I didn’t imagine this. I’ve wrestled with it and I’m not…’

‘Just say…’

‘Mad’

‘…what you want to say, Tom’

‘I’ve wrestled and rationalised for fifty three years’

I reached out and touched him on the arm, ‘Just say it.’

‘This breeze. This faintest of breezes tickled the back of my neck. I turned into it.’

His smoky eyes had widened, focusing as if they were 20/20, on some imaginary figure.

‘Then I saw her.’ He sounded other worldly. He was there, not here. ‘She wore a dress, quite a long dress; unusual in itself in those days, but most striking of all, was the colour. It was purple, or violet, or…’ He screwed his face into a tangled ball and let out a stricken cry. ‘Or something, I can’t remember.’ An eerie silence poisoned the room; made it hard to breath and impossible to speak. I saw his facial muscles twitch. Was it a stroke? I went to get a nurse, but was stopped short of the door. His tone had become determined, almost heroic, like the story needed telling.

‘Crossing the street, under that Gothic moonlight, her dress fluttering around her legs in that gentle breeze, her long auburn locks never keeping still; or did she wear a hat, I don’t remember. A bus came passed, obscuring my view briefly, or so I thought, because in that short time it took a bus to pass, she had disappeared.’

‘She caught the bus?’

‘No. The bus didn’t stop.’

‘Could have she ducked into an alleyway, or a shop, or up into her apartment?’

‘No, she didn’t. Anyway, I was heartbroken. It was strange, because I’d only just seen the girl. I’m not normally prone to love at first sight.’

‘Oh, you’re such a romantic Tom, you should have had the writing success, not me. If only
you shared my repulsion for cliché; your tendency to over sentimentalise…’

He directed a scowl at me.

‘Don’t get defensive,’ I continued. ‘That’s always been your problem. “Don’t criticise…”

‘…I haven’t finished yet…’

‘…the great undiscovered genius.” Wicked of me to lie, but it was the only way to boost Tom’s burnt out Hindenburg of an ego. I watched his simmer placate.

He looked up at me. His smoky eyes began to tremor and were starting to pool. His mouth opened and closed like it was too weak for words. I repressed my urge to shake him.

‘You know I never did anything with my life after that night. Just wasted it away. Starting something, only to give it away and start some other thing. The years flew by. I watched you live my dreams, envious, self-loathing, never having the guts to… Where was I? Oh yes. Moments later I saw her a second time. My final chance. That light breeze again. Footsteps; approaching from behind and stopping very near. I turned slowly. There she was.’

He suddenly let out a breath of amusement, like he’d thought of something funny.

‘You know, I’m not sure I remember exactly what she looked like. Did she have a hat? A little red beret? Was the hair tied up? Was it auburn? I remember her eyes; big brown and sad. Not sad, but sensitive, soulful. And the colour of her dress. Her mouth; pretty sure I can remember that. Small with full lips. No the lips weren’t that full. Oh what does it matter what she looked like? It wasn’t her looks. It was something about her. She had an essence. Do you know what I mean?

I nodded out of politeness.

‘She said something like, “I think the bus stops over there,” like she thought I was silly to be waiting in the wrong place, or maybe she said, “doesn’t the bus stop over there?” Maybe she was asking, “does the bus stop over there?” Or, “Is this the bus stop?” Or maybe it doesn’t matter what she said, because it was just an excuse to come over and talk to me. Very brave of her. And if I were as brave I would have carried on the conversation, like normal people do, and then who knows. But what did I say in reply to her approach? I was dismissive. “Nah, I’m not getting the bus, I’m waiting for a car.” I don’t even think I bothered to look into her eyes when I said it. Then a bus pulled up. I watched her get on. It pulled away.’

He stopped. I was reluctant to say anything, in case he hadn’t finished. We sat there in silence, I don’t know how long, but it was long enough to be strange. He had drifted into such a deep contemplation, that it felt natural for me to leave.

As I was walking back along the corridor, I felt the gentlest breeze. I doubt I would have noticed it, had it not have been for Tom’s story. It seemed to be coming from a door that was slightly ajar. I nudged it open. There was what looked like an artist’s studio. Paintings
scattered in every available space. Such richness of colour I’ve never seen, the movement of the figures, even the trees in the landscapes seemed to dance. Those pictures were living worlds that made me dizzy for fear of falling in. I picked up a small dark painting. It had dark blues, dark greens, dark reds and contrasting yellows for the lamplight and the faint clouded-over moon. Under the street lamp leaned a figure, looking out of the picture, listening for something. ‘Tom!’ It was him, I knew it, although the figure was small and the artist was not a realist, he had him, he had Tom’s essence as a young man, I couldn’t think how I knew. ‘Of course, the story.’ Then I saw on the right edge a wave of purple or crimson or violet or some beautiful colour not yet named. It was the dress fluttering in the wind. I was just about to take the picture to Tom, when I heard soft footsteps and felt a presence behind me. I turned slowly. An elderly lady was standing there. Her dress was covered in years of dry paint. We stood, looking into each other’s eyes. She had an ageless beauty about her.

‘Do you like that one?’ she said, coming near to me, soft footed.

‘Yes,’ I replied. I felt myself feeling things I had long forgotten.

‘When did you paint it?’ I asked.

‘Yesterday. I can never get it right.’

‘Yesterday!’

‘Yes. Although, I’ve been trying for years. It’s the picture I see in my mind, that haunts my dreams, the elusive masterpiece, I can never get free from my system.’

‘It’s incredible.’ A lump went to the back of my throat.

She smiled. ‘Thank you. Although I have to tell you, I still haven’t got it’

‘Do you know him?’ I asked, offering her the painting.

She went quiet. Her eyes, her entire face became sad, gentle and a twinkle of something a little adventurous as she looked close in at the figure.

‘No, I never knew that boy.’

‘I do.’

She looked up at me, puzzled and amused.

‘You what? You know him?’

‘Yes’

She started to laugh.
‘How can you tell? I haven’t put any definition in his features.’

I put my hands on her shoulders. ‘Can you wait here?’

She gave me a ‘where else am I going to go?’ smile.

I touched the small dark painting. ‘Can I take this with me?’

She nodded.

I took it and ran from the room, forgetting I was seventy-six, and burst into Tom’s room.

‘Guess what?’

Tom wasn’t there. His chair was empty. The tartan rug was left untidy. I felt it, and it was still warm. I walked out a little deflated, but still eager to find Tom.

I went to the front desk. ‘Tom Beatty?’ I asked, ‘where would he have gone to? He’s not in his room.’

The receptionist lady gave me a confused look. ‘Tom Beatty?’ she said, as if I’d imagined him.

‘You know, Tom Beatty. He’s a resident here. Sad old bastard. Can’t see very well. In and out of the real world.’

The girl just gaped at me. Then the nurse, who had earlier taken me to see Tom, approached the desk.

‘Finally, someone who knows Tom.’ I said, relieved. ‘Do you know where he is?’

The nurse gave me a smile.

‘And who might you be Sir,’

‘I’m Victor Reed. An old friend of Tom’s, remember you were the one who took me to see him.’

She bent down and whispered something in the receptionist’s ear. I thought it strange, and kind of rude. Whatever she whispered, it caused the receptionist to change the expression on her face. She looked at me like I was mad. I didn’t have time to take offense; I was still frantic to unite Tom with this wonderful painter, whose name I’d forgotten to ask. ‘Bugger!’

The nurse’s smile at me, turned sympathetic.

‘Now look,’ I said. ‘I don’t have time to go into the details, because it’s rather unbelievable, but long story short, is I have to unite Tom with one of the other residents in this place.’

‘Which resident were you going to unite with?’
‘I didn’t get her name, but she’s in one of those rooms on the left. She’s a painter. You must have been in that room and seen those extraordinary paintings. Can you not see that she deserves worldwide recognition?’

‘Oh, oh yes,’ said the nurse, hesitantly. I didn’t believe her.

‘I suppose you were planning to wait till she carked it, then claim the paintings as your own work. Yes, well too bad, because I’m going to see she gets the recognition she deserves.’

I turned my back on them. They had my final word. I would go to the artist, fill her in on the plan and then we’d find Tom. I would then call my editor, see if he could put me on to any art agents. Find out if this place was up to anything unlawful.

I knocked before entering.

The room was blurry and only visible from a certain angle. The only way I could see, is if I tilted my head to the right. I could see the pictures were still there, but the artist had gone. I didn’t think conspiracy until I had a closer look at the pictures. They had been switched with imitations. Someone had gone to the trouble of painting a double of every one of her pictures, then setting them out exactly as they were ten minutes before. They were dreadful imitations; lifeless shapes full of dull muddied colours. Where the originals made one yearn for adventure, love, mystery and all the crazy things we should do, these paintings were nothing but sad, clumsy attempts. It was hard to say what it was this artist was trying to say.

Then remembering the one in my hand, I looked down. Somehow someone had switched that painting too.

Now I’m sitting in Tom Beatty’s chair, his tartan rug covering his thin wasted legs, staring with his narrow vision from the corner of his right eye, at the blank beige walls.

The inanely smiling doctor thinks I’m Tom. She lies to me that the awful paintings are really good; says I’m talented. I tell her I didn’t paint the bloody things. She says she’s seen me in the act of painting them. I shrug and say, ‘it could have been someone who looks like me or...’

She leaps on my hesitation. ‘...Or?’

I blow her a raspberry.

After wiping the small bead of saliva from her cheek, she bravely leans towards me. ‘So you’re Victor Reed.’

I lean towards her. ‘That’s right.’

She pulls back suddenly like I’m too close. Probably my putrid old man breath. But now she’s digging into her jacket pockets; something that rustles. A crumpled up magazine.
‘Who’s that?’ she asks, while holding up my face on the front cover of The Listener.

‘That’s me.’

Now she’s going for her other pocket. A mirror.

‘Who’s that?’

I see an old man. The wrinkles tell stories of bitter envy, while the thin white hair falls dead and lank down over the man’s ears, down to his shoulders and his eyes are like a blinding mist sweeping across a desolate wasteland. That is the world of his soul.

‘My prison.’
The village of Pugliano hangs precariously yet tenaciously to the side of a great mountain. The women of Pugliano are similarly tenacious about hanging on to their husbands. So when Lucia Constantino saw a familiar pair of men’s underwear flying like a victory flag from the washing line of Maria Therese Ciccone, there was about to be an eruption the likes of which had not been seen since volcanic Lake Bolzano was formed.

Maria Therese Ciccone was not the most beautiful woman in Pugliano. She was however well known for her capacity to make men fall in love with her. What Maria Therese lacked in conventional beauty she more than made up for with her cooking skills. Although it could not be proven, it was widely believed that Maria Therese’s cooking included ingredients used by ancient Etruscan women to sap men of their will and turn their minds to mush. And unlike most of the women of Pugliano, she was shamelessly unmarried and happy to stay that way.

“Why buy a bull when a lazy neighbour forgets to mend their fence…is it my fault when the bull finds his way to greener pastures?”, Maria mused after each and every conquest. While some women in the village were prepared to overlook their husband’s indiscretions, Lucia was not one of them. She was Pugliano epitomized. She was not one to let go easily. Lucia marched straight over to Maria’s front door and pounded on it like the carabinieri. Maria leaned casually out of her first floor window. Showing a blatant disregard for containment of her ample bosom, she looked down into the street at the disturbance below.

“Hey Lucia, what is the matter with you…have you lost something?”

“It’s not me who has lost something Maria Ciccone. But my husband seems to have misplaced something! Why don’t you come down here and help me look, being the ‘good’ citizen of Pugliano that you are.”

“Well, I would like to Lucia, but I am a little busy with my cooking. What is it he seems to have lost?”

“He seems to have lost his MIND!” screeched Lucia, “because he has forgotten where his bed is!”

“Oh, and I thought he might have lost his underpants!”, said Maria Thesese. “Now those I could help you with, but his mind is something else!”

Lucia’s rage caused the veins on her head to almost explode, sending pigeons scattering from the rooftops. Suddenly the busiest of busybodies of Pugliano thought this a perfect time to shake out their tablecloths in the street, taking longer than usual with this task.
“You come down here right now and we will see what is in your mind when I tear the hair from your head!”

“Now Lucia, tell me, do you really care so much about that fat, lazy, no good man of yours? He is a lousy lover and you are a beautiful woman. You deserve better. You can’t possibly be happy with a man with so little...so little...passion”.

Still shaking their tablecloths in the street, the women smiled knowingly at each other. They held up their little fingers in a mocking gesture that indicated it was not so much his ‘passion’ that was the problem!

Maria Therese was not one to hide from the gossips. However, she had always thought Lucia Constantino was not like the other women of Pugliano. There was something about Lucia that caused Maria to soften a little.

“Come up and let’s talk this over before these gossiping women shake the patterns off their tablecloths”, said Maria.

As Lucia climbed the stairs to the apartment Maria’s words rose in her consciousness along with the intoxicating aroma of cooking. Marco Constantino was once a virile and handsome man. Sadly however, he no longer bore any resemblance to the sleek Etruscan ancestors who had carved their city from the volcanic rock. He had been so pampered by his mamma that she had spoiled him for manhood. Lucia had also grown tired of the constant comparisons of how his mother made her saltimbocca. By the time Lucia reached the door she heard herself thinking he was a lousy lover and he was lazy and she did deserve better! The afternoon saw several bottles of Pinot Grigio drained as the two women dissected the unremarkable owner of the underpants, laughing and falling about the place.

Sometime around evening, Marco Constantino noticed that his apartment was dark. There was no aroma of Lucia’s cooking calling him home as it has for the last 22 years. The silence both frightened and annoyed him. ‘Lucia, Lucia...where is my dinner? I’m hungry. What is going on here?’

Marco decided he would find company in the arms of Maria Therese if his wife was off doing frivolous things. Perhaps she had gone to mass. Perhaps one of the chattering women Marco passed each day in the square needed help with a screaming child. Perhaps she was doing some washing, but Marco did not like the emptiness and the change of routine. Maria Therese on the other hand was anything but routine. Marco didn’t mind this in a mistress, but not in a wife. He headed out the door and into the street making his way down the narrow cobblestone lane that lead to Maria Therese Ciccone. His nose, captivated by the thought of Maria and her mysterious pots of bubbling tomato sauce, led him to the window of his lover.

The village of Pugliano hangs precariously yet tenaciously to the side of a great mountain. The men of Pugliano have grown fat and complacent since their Etruscan fore-fathers had done all the hard work. When Marco saw a familiar pair of lacy underwear flying like a victory flag from the washing line of Maria Therese Ciccone his manly pride stirred in his chest. He
stared at the panties of his wife flying above the laneway. Jealousy was something that took too much effort for Marco. His ego however, was almost as large as his belly. Instead of being jealous, visions of two women swam in his head. “Every great bull should have a herd of adoring females…after all, is this not nature’s way?” thought Marco Constantino.

Marco knocked urgently on the front door of Maria Therese. Maria leaned out the window, again showing blatant disregard for containment of her ample bosom.

“What brings you pounding on my door at this hour Marco Constantino?”

“Bella…I was just wondering if you have seen my beautiful wife Lucia? I seem to have lost her this evening”.

“Oh yes, I have seen her”, purred Maria Therese. “In fact, she asked me to give you a message. She is such a good wife she wanted to make sure you got both your dinner and your washing. Always thinking what can she do to make things easier for her charming husband”.

There was something in the way Maria Therese emphasised ‘charming’, that unnerved Marco, as did the squeal of laughter heard coming from inside the apartment. “Yes, yes…she is a wonderful wife. I am a lucky, lucky man”, said Marco, hoping his wife was listening.

“Will I come up then?”.

“No need” replied Maria Therese. “I’ll send them down to you”.

Without warning a large pair of men’s underpants dropped to the laneway below, spilling the contents of an aromatic tomato sauce all over Marco. Lucia was leaning from the window, beside Maria, looking down on her reddened husband. “Hey Marco, would you like some vino to go with that…some bread…parmesan perhaps!” Ingredients rained down on the ‘great bull’. He stood in the lane, dripping with tomato, white wine and embarrassment.

As Marco considered his situation he came to conclude that perhaps there was a reason why bulls did not live in the same paddock as their females. He licked the tomato from his fingers. Tonight, he thought, may be a very good night to visit his dear old mama and taste some of her home cooked saltimbocca.
Whitefellas give what they would otherwise throw away

Dani Powell

Nellie is stretched across the concrete slab, one arm crooked under her head, black skirt streaked with dust, back to me. Out the front, a man is bent under the bonnet of a dusty old Patrol, fiddling with wires. The sky is weighted with clouds, blue-black. Camp dogs sniff at scraps in the dust.

Monica sits cross-legged on a tatty mattress on the sunny side of the house, scraping a wire stick in the dirt. Her body has changed since the baby. Always the slightest of Nellie’s children, she used to get around the camp in tight pants and slinky tops. Now she hides in the standard oversized polyester football shirt, stretched thinly over a round tummy, shiny black shorts hanging from her hips to her knees.

Nellie rolls over to see what’s up. Quickly, unexpectedly, she shifts, wrenches her weight from the concrete and, as if following a set of steps, almost mechanically makes her way up. Like she knows every turn in the road. The road that works. Her walk is quicker than I thought to write. Hips tipping from side to side she stumbles straight to the billycan and gives it a shake. Gets some tea. As if my arrival has triggered this animation yet at the same time her actions seem unrelated to me.

When I’d pulled up a pack of kids were playing in front of the house. Seeing the car they’d scattered through the broken fence wire like dice. Slowly they’ve edged their way back. They feign disinterest as they bash away at a plastic keyboard on the other side of the house but their eyes keep sneaking my way and when I catch them they collapse into giggles. I have no doubt the keyboard concert is for me.

Nellie asks if I want her to get the new grandchild. ‘Don’t wake her.’ I’m hesitant. Monica is already up. They want to show her off. She goes inside and comes back with a bundle of baby, chubby chocolate limbs sprouting all angles from the pink rug. Monica lands her in my lap. She is limp with sleep, damp from the humidity. She starts to squirm, bleats a little, then nestles into the crook of my bent arm.

We sit under the tin roof and watch the first spits of rain dimple the dirt. I ask Nellie and Monica how they went in the wind last night. The women shake their heads gravely and Nellie launches into stories of washing flying past the windows like ghosts taking to the hills. Of people tossed from their mattresses outside where they’d been sleeping. She describes the camp when they’d woken this morning – clothes clinging to wire fences, sheets of iron sculptured around trees. Bins tipped and rubbish scattered high and low. ‘We had to go looking for our things.’

Nellie throws her bulk into the stories to recreate the windstorm for me – is at once the wind, at once the washing. Monica, shy, sees in a second, how we are both caught up in
Nellie's dramatisation of the night. She tucks a smile into her chin and drops her head, scraping the wire stick along the stained concrete. Nellie cackles, delighted in the re-enactment as I am.

But while she speaks I watch the rain get heavier and all at once it is really coming down. The mattress. I pass the baby back to her mother and head for the car. The ground has already softened and rivulets of rain cut the clay.

‘How much for that car?’ Nellie calls behind me, throwing her chin towards the station wagon as I open the boot. ‘It’s not for sale.’ I call back, laughing. We have been here before. ‘How much you pay for it? I been savin’ up.’

I tug the rolled mattress free from the boot and haul it across the yard, trying to avoid scraping it in the mud. A wide trough of water has formed around the house like a muddy moat – lolly papers, plastic nappies, VB cans afloat. I hesitate. To reach the verandah I will have to step into the mire.

The moat of rubbish filling up. Me standing there with this cumbersome mattress. Trying not to look like I’m looking down. Trying not to look like I see the rubbish. Nellie on the other side, waiting for me to cross. One of us has to move.

We both lean forwards. She reaches for the mattress. Relieved of its weight I leap towards the top step.

‘I brought this for you because…’

‘… you would throw it away.’ She finishes my sentence.

‘No,’ I begin ‘you’re always asking for spare mattresses…’

The noise of the rain on the roof drowns my protest. Nellie is already busy rolling out the mattress, patting the foam to test for dampness. When she’s done she hoists it over a broken chair and we sit in silence and watch the downpour from our little island of dry.

I wouldn’t have thrown it away. With so many kids and grandkids always staying at her place I knew Nellie was always looking around for mattresses. Is this how she sees me? Whitefellas give what they would otherwise throw away.

When the sun pushes through I tell them I must go. ‘I’ll be waiting for that car,’ Nellie teases, ‘when you ready to sell.’ Slowly I drive away out of the town camp. Country and Western music filters from somewhere. The rain’s made mud of the place. A child in a pink tulle fairy dress watches from the verandah of the last house, streaks of red hair dye streaming down her arms. Camp dogs spin across the road in a scuffle of heads and tails and limbs, a willy willy of high-pitched yelping. As I cross the cattle grid to go back into town it is as if the hills behind me huddle, hide the camp from view.

When I came to Alice Springs ten years ago the town camps were not marked on the street
map. Nineteen or so camps – many of them on major roads, all of them squares in the grid of the town – did not seem to exist on record. It was a long time before I knew the camp where Nellie lived was there and longer still before I crossed the grid that opened this world to me. I remember the first impression: broken houses, paint peeling; smashed windows boarded with bits of wood; broken down cars and car parts scattered in the dust; plastic bags snagged in trees peppered the hills and all across the camp rubbish scattered, tipped from bins by hungry dogs and wind. But after a time of working here it’s not that I no longer saw these things but more that they became the background, with the people in the foreground. People whom I would not have met had I not been for the work I did for so long.

When I pass through town the river’s come down. People file along the footpaths of the surrounding streets like worshippers coming to pay homage to what might be only an annual event. The main road over the river is closed, now submerged in a heaving torrent of clay-coloured foam and froth. Onlookers edge close to the barrier where the road has been swallowed and all along the overhead footbridge lines of people lean towards the deluge, cameras clicking. Cars line the banks, parked at various angles on the balding grass.

I drive down a bit and pull up near the lower causeway where the current is not so fierce. A group of young blackfellas are doing back flips into the water much to the delight of the small crowd now congregated at the edge of the submerged road. Their hoots and laughter is infectious. A couple of older whitefellas are wading close, up to their waists and fully dressed. I see that they are looking out for them. In a day or so the current will have eased and everyone will be in. It is irresistible in summer, when the heat cooks the town for months on end, keeping us confined to our air-conditioned houses, waiting for a crack in the sky.

And when it comes it comes like this, the river, sometimes without the prelude of a downpour of rain in town. The hollowed out basin of sand that we call a river is often filled by waters travelling down from the north so that here you might wake to find a river in flow. It is the magic of this desert town. And in the first flush all of the rubbish – bottles, VB cans, plastic and tin cans – is scooped up and carried away. Discarded clothing embedded in the sand suddenly unearthed, as if the dead had been awakened, and sent dancing downstream. Everything will be reformed by the tumbling river, and laid to rest somewhere else when the water is gone. The whole landscape will be transformed, rearranged by the river’s passage.

Across the river a row of Aboriginal women sit on the bitumen, legs crossed: little pyramids of black stone. Squealing kids orbit them, dart to the edge of the river and back, not daring to enter. Dogs splash up and down the banks, barking excitedly. Tears blur the picture before me, unexpected. It is all here it seems in this scene, awash in the afternoon light. Portrait of a town turned out for the river. Its palette of white and black blurred by the rain. Apart from the footy it might be the only place we come together like this. Whitefellas and blackfellas all the same. All of us together by the river.
Nothing on the map makes any sense. We should have seen water in this creek by now, but there's nothing. It's debatable whether it can even be called a creek, or is just the overoptimistic interpretation of the slightest indentation in quartzite. Maybe we're just seeing what we need to see: we are down to our last litre of water each, the water Mike always makes us save for an emergency. But all through this long Dry and the walks we've done every weekend and every spare opportunity, we've never needed it. This is starting to look like the time that we will. We are up the creek we cannot find.

Mike calls Byron and me over to the shade of a woolly butt, and calm as ever hauls out the map.

"Whaddya reckon, Rae," he asks me, "dry day for walking?"

Byron and I look at each other, then at the map. Mike's the bushman; Byron's the ecologist; I'm just lawyer-girl based in the city. The three of us had met at a rally in Raintree Park months before. "Fuck your northern foodbowl," screamed the placards. "Don't take our Wet away" and "I don't give a Dam," said others. We'd never have met otherwise, but we'd been friends ever since.

I say nothing. Although Mike is always polite and careful to include us in the huge glow cast by his self-confidence, it's his country and it will be his decision. Byron tips back his bush hat and wipes sweat from the thin skin covering the cool part of his brain.

"Should we break into the last litre and push on for the main creek?" he asks.

"Oh, I don't think we're quite at that point," says Mike. "I was thinking we could try for this spring here." He points to a tiny blue dot on the topo map. The spring is on a faint wavy line that alleges to be another creek. "Let's push on for another few ks and see how we go. If it's not what it looks like here, we'll deal with that when we get there. Agreed?"

Byron crosses his bony white arms but says nothing. Sometimes Mike's winging it and flying by the seat of his pants ruffles Byron's scientific sensibilities. Byron likes to work through each decision the way he keys out the species he studies. His life is a series of yes/no questions that he answers smoothly before stepping on to the next phase. But Mike's the one who's introduced us to these places, taken us on walk after walk, each more perfect than the one before. The Dry has unrolled into one long string of escapades across the stone country and it's Mike who's guided us through it all, slowly releasing the reins as our enthusiasm grows.

He's been inoculating us with his self-confidence since we've known him. Like the time we'd been out fishing and faced a huge storm coming home. He'd ceded the outboard to Byron and said to make sure not to miss the entrance to the creek where the boat ramp was.
gone up to the bow and fallen asleep. And somehow Byron, who’d only driven the dinghy a couple of times before, did it: turned the dinghy into each wave at just the right angle so we didn’t get swamped, scanned the gray sky to pick that opening into the creek, and threaded the eye of the needle to get us home. Mike didn’t even seem to wake up until the last ten minutes, but who knew what was really going on under that broad-brimmed bush hat up the front? I was convinced he’d had one eye on us all the time. Almost.

This time Byron’s brain tells him that he’s smart but he’s first year out from Melbourne and Mike grew up here. And he’s never let us down. But there’s something about Mike’s flashiness, his huge charisma and the risks he takes that doesn’t sit with Byron. He can’t imagine a life lived by rules other than order. We look at each other and nod.

We march on, heads thudding. Dehydration headaches. Mike’s up front: we’re behind. It’s the worst time in the afternoon: the cruel time when the sun doesn’t even pretend to be a benevolent dictator. Our arms numb, circulation impaired by the straps of our packs, and blood pools in our stiff useless hands. Just picking up each boot requires intense effort, but that’s exactly what we must do: pick up each boot and then put it down again, over and over and over. Thousands of times. The sweat runs down and puddles in our socks. No matter how we adjust our packs, our shoulders ache and the insteps of our feet are tortured by the broken stones beneath them. Now we’ve lost not just the creek, but this spring and the creeklet that it’s on. Ten minutes back we crossed a small dent that looked like an animal pad: surely that couldn’t have been it?

We push on towards a rock outlier, the only decent patch of shade. We check our maps and see that we have indeed walked over the spring. Given how remote the country is, it could be just another “map lie”. Anyway, we’re here now and at least it’s cooler. Byron and I rest up in the shade. Then we hear Mike’s cooee, his joy echoing off the stone pillars. We follow it deep into the twisted bowels of the rock and he’s sitting in a huge rock art gallery. Each surface is covered with layers of every conceivable type of human activity. There are people fighting, fucking, hunting. Byron’s transfixed by a frieze above us: two men rattling barbed spears at each other, a young woman off to one side, breasts up under her armpits. He reaches for his water bottle and stops. Hidden high up on a ledge is my favourite: dynamic figures, humanity rendered in four or five brushstrokes, leaping forward into space. And concealed in a crevice of stone, another secret: a skull and part of a long bone.

“I didn’t know about this one,” says Mike. “Maybe the old people don’t either”.

Mike works with the old people from this area, but none of them come up here now. “They drink our water,” was how they used to dismiss the clans who lived downstream, below the escarpment to the west. Now people who live much further south and east of here will drink their water. And use it to wash their boats and cars. People who lived in places like Rose Bay. People like me.

“We should tell somebody,” I say.

“Or you could just say nothing,” Mike says, “you’re pretty good at that.”
“Ouch.” Byron looks over at me and looks away. This is Mike’s running joke—how can a lawyer, somebody who speaks for other people for a living, have so little to say? He loves the irony that I, of all people, have ended up as a native title lawyer. Me, whose ancestors forced people off their land near Sydney so they could squat on it. And Mike is the one who’s always quick with a story, not me. That’s all the law is—stories. Who tells the best story on the day, and whose version of the truth will be the most believable. At least now I’m in native title it’s the claimants and their anthropologists who largely get to tell their stories. Not that we’d done so great here.

But now the day is slipping away and we really need to get to water. With a gallery this extensive, the major water supply can’t be too far away. We climb on top of the outlier to get a visual on the main creek line. Up top, the features in the distance—and there are bloody few of them—line up neatly with the map. We’re down to our last litre, but we know where we are. And then Mike walks over to a rock crater and lets out a whoop.

“Water,” he yells, “bloody beautiful water!” It’s a dry July, so dry the creeks have stopped holding water earlier and shorter than Mike’s ever known, and here’s fresh rainwater in the craters, showing it’s rained out of season in the last week. We’re laughing as we fill up our bottles. Mike somehow always manages to pull one out of the box: he’s as surprising and perverse as the country itself.

We joke as we walk the last few ks to the main creek. We’ve drained the batteries in our cameras capturing everything in the secret gallery. We’re glowing inside as the sun starts to slide down towards the line of the escarpment.

We’re happy tired as we turn downstream on the main creek. Byron has gone into ecologist mode and is describing all the endemic species. Like the grevilleas in the hard country that aren’t found anywhere else: he’s seen a dozen distinct species in an area the size of a footy field. The scat from shy marsupials that live in fissures by permanent water and are rarely seen. That only makes Byron love them all the more, the fact that these little-described species have so successfully evaded the human gaze. He loves it that they live up here, unseen, unphotographed, playing their part in the whole. His eyes are wide and his hair sticks up like a little boy’s. When he talks, I can see him as a child: his hands shielding a small moth, rescuing a wounded bird, flipping through the pages of his grandfather’s natural history guides. Being teased for his passion but never really fighting back: just fuelling more of himself into studying the world around him.

I too read when I was a child, but was more moderate in my passions. I studied more the people around me, the big people who made all the rules. It felt like someone else, someone bigger, was always deciding for me. I’d wanted to be able to decide for myself. That’s what I wanted for my clients now.

It’s time to make the most enjoyable decision: where to camp for the night. The creek meanders downstream, twisting through sepulchral towers of rock flanked by flat slabs of stone. Our feet aren’t dragging but almost bouncing along: another day, another walk, another weekend up high in the stone country. We’re young and strong and our legs will carry us forever. We carry our hearts up high in our chests and our heads are clear and
empty. Our feet pick their own way over the rocks, seemingly unguided by our minds.

Each bend of the creek is more spectacular than the last, and we decide we’ll push though to the head of the falls. Mike leaps along the rocks up front, showing us the best way through. We’re running out of daylight, but it’s just like him to push through for that last perfect camp, that last superlative experience.

The sun’s bleeding out into twilight as we throw down our mozzie domes near the head of the falls. Waves of colour bounce orange, purple and red off the rocks as the sun dies over the escarpment. The colours melt and swirl in the water of the creek.

After dinner, we’re perched right on the lip of the falls eating purple sticky rice from a blackened billy. Mike’s added a strip of pandanus for Asian authenticity. “Are you sure it’s edible like daun pandan?” asks Byron. “Because it’s not the same species.”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out soon enough,” says Mike, “but you know the old people eat the fresh young part of the leaf, so it can’t be too bad.” He winks and laughs. And throws in some more.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with the old people out here, haven’t you,” says Byron. It’s not a question.

Mike straightens and turns towards Byron. His face is backlit by the fire against the sky, bruising from purple to black. He slowly tilts his jaw. He looks at Byron, but says nothing. Beneath us the escarpment plunges away to the valley floor beneath. Millions of years ago where we sit was a sea cliff and below it an ocean. Soon the valley floor will be covered with water again.

Byron turns from the fire to face Mike and he’s hard and sharp as a blade. His whole body is steel and his eyes glint in the firelight.

“Do you know how many species this will take out?” he asks. “Nobody with a shred of credibility will do the environmental impact study. They’ll get some broken-down has-been old drunk and they’ll give him a weekend and a trailer full of grog and he’ll slap something together. Something that no scientist worthy of the name would call a report.”

He moves closer to Mike, and a rock explodes in the fire, sending up a shower of sparks.

“And when they’ve rubberstamped their report, there’ll be no more real studies. All the things we don’t know about this place—everything I’ve been working on for the last year—we’ll never know now, will we? All those undescribed species will stay that way.” Byron stops.

I turn towards him and touch the sleeve of his t-shirt. “It’ll go to the high court.”

He shrugs and my arm falls by my side, limp and useless. “And you’ll lose.”
“Show some faith,” Mike says. “It’s her work too. We won’t lose.” He turns towards me, his face as open as a child’s. He’s about to ask, but my eyes say don’t.

As sharp as Mike is, he doesn’t understand that what I get out of our time up in the stone country is silence. Perfect, companiable silence. Away from work, I’m happy just to listen.

In the Wet season, the water will roar and churn and thunder over the falls. They’ll have a good supply—or so they’ll hope, now that they’ve worked out how much money it can make them. The creek will have long since broken its banks, and where we sit will be covered in water. The floodplain below us, covered with water. As far as the eye can see, water.

But tonight it’s the Dry and when I listen, I hear water lapping over sandstone. Water that tells its own story.

Mike plucks a white quartz pebble from beside the fire. It glows white in the pink of his palm. He flings his arm forward and pitches it past the head of the falls, into the pool somewhere far below. It tumbles through space, plunging downwards toward the water.

Our eyes follow it. We crane forward and take one last look.
The next time I saw him he was dead. He was lying on his back in his open coffin, wearing the white tunic the undertaker had dressed him in. He looked much smaller than he’d been in life, and much thinner than he’d been when I’d last seen him, and tears burst from me the moment we entered the chapel. I tried to stop, of course, scrunching up my face as if in agony, covering my face with my hands.

‘Oh, they’ve trimmed his beard,’ Mum said. ‘I’m glad,’ and she seemed pleased to see him. She had seen him the day before, in the palliative care ward, an hour after he’d finally succumbed to his cancer. He had his mouth open, she told me, and he hadn’t trimmed his beard in weeks, and he looked dreadful.

In life he had his beard trimmed every two weeks. It was always between three and six millimetres long. As it approached the half centimetre he would fret about it, feeling himself unkempt, and I reckon if he didn’t have his raised-in-the-Depression frugality he would have visited the barber more often. Mum was with him on this; his beard was like the lawn: it had to be kept short, or what would the neighbours think?

Dad was probably the biggest fuckwit I’ve ever met. I say that as a joke, of course, but it’s true. He was an awful person, violent, loud, selfish, childish, and hateful: very occasionally he’d speak well of someone, but everyone else – including his family, including passers-by – was a ‘bastard’, a ‘lair’, a ‘dunce’, a ‘mongrel’, a ‘smart alec’, a ‘show off’, or an ‘imposter’. Nevertheless, I cried when I saw him lying in his coffin, not so much because he was dead, but because he had lived such a sad, useless, pathetic life, and because he was my Dad.

And nevertheless, a joke can ease the tension in any tragedy, in any horror story.

Mum still lives in the family home, but we four kids left long ago, and, fifty years after he married Mum, Dad left as well, moving into a flat a few suburbs away. I don’t think he wanted to leave; he wanted to upset Mum by saying he was going to leave, and after dragging out the process for a year, being horrible in every way he could, he finally asked Mum if he could stay, but Mum, to spite him, said no. He then lived alone with his Foxtel sport and his bitterness until he could make an exit, and he didn’t see Mum again until she visited him on his death bed.

I didn’t see him on his death bed. When I last saw him he had the energy to yell at me, to monitor and misjudge and attack my every movement, my every word. The death bed was too good for him. Better dead. Over and out. Thank you.

‘Oh!’ I said, and my daughter and I looked at each other. My brother Patrick had just told us Dad had died while we were on the plane. ‘Oh,’ I said again.

Things weren’t going well. First, on the phone last night, Patrick asked me about the clothes
I was bringing. Then – though I’d told him we’d catch the train but he insisted on picking us up – his wife was short with me when I rang Patrick’s phone after we’d been waiting outside the airport for an hour. Now Dad’s dead. What next?

Frances, sitting in front of me, turned her head and said, ‘My father died last year, then my uncle, then my sister. You’d think I’d know about funerals.’

I thought for a few seconds. ‘Yes.’

Then Patrick turned to face me. ‘And what does Steven know? Hey?’ He looked back to the road, then back to me. ‘What does Steven know?’

I looked at him as he drove. He turned around again.

‘He wouldn’t know Jack Shit!’

I couldn’t see Frances but I knew her face was screwed up like a cat’s bum.

And so it was. My sister Mary told me, quietly. ‘Steven told Patrick not to smoke in the house.’

‘But he always has!’

‘I know.’ And we considered this a moment, then she said, ‘How’s that, hey? Is that on?’

‘What?’

‘Smoking dope in your mother’s house!’ And we considered it.

‘And how’s that?’ she said again.

‘What?’

‘Telling him not to. So, what clothes have you got?’

And so it was in the house of my father. His survivors – the widow, the several middle-aged children and children-in-law, the several teenage grandchildren – bump around in the wreckage for a few days, never mentioning him.

I remember Dad. I was seven. Dad was standing behind me as I sat at the dinner table, whacking into me with the belt he pulled from his trousers, for holding my fork one way and not another, for asking, ‘What does it matter how I hold my fork?’ Mum was there, and my older brothers, and my sister, heads down, scared they’d cop it next.

Dad gone, we all sat around the dinner table with the funeral director. With the funeral director gone, the talk turned to clothes. Steven was wearing a suit. I had to wear proper shoes, definitely not sandals, definitely not runners.
Even as a little kid I knew there was nothing wrong with how I held my fork. The wrongness was in Dad. He sometimes said, of his violence, ‘this hurts me more than it hurts you,’ and there’s no doubting his hurt, his damage. So I asked, at seven, loving him, having faith in him. And I kept asking him – what does it matter how I hold my fork? – through the years, not giving up on him. I asked other people, too, for the same reason. And I asked other questions. What does it matter what we wear?

Mary was doing the eulogy. ‘Can you help?’ she asked me. ‘You’re the writer.’

‘Ah, yeah, um, okay…’ I said, and I sat and thought of Dad, and all I could think of was him saying ‘and the ball goes to the five eight, the inside centre, the outside centre, and HERE COMES JIM!’ Jim was Dad’s name, and he used to shout that when he was in the shower, or mowing the lawn, or lying awake at three in the morning.

The only thing we had in common was rugby league. I was thankful we could fill the silences with the Broncos, Souths, who the selectors would pick for Origin. When I was last down, I visited him in his flat and we watched Penrith play Manly.

‘These new play-the-ball rules,’ I ventured. ‘They’re trying to make the game faster, but the game gets slowed down with all the penalties.’

’Soo, you can just break someone’s jaw with your elbow, can you?’

I looked at him. ‘Ah… no.’

‘That’s what you’re saying!’

‘No I’m not.’

‘Yes, you are. You’re saying you can come in with your elbow and break someone’s jaw!’

‘No. I’m not saying that at all,’ and we sat in silence for a minute.

’Soo, you can stand on the try line,’ he said, ‘and someone can throw the ball forward fifty metres and you can catch it and score a try?’

‘No.’

‘Well that’s what you’re saying. You can be fifty metres offside and that’s alright.’

‘No, Dad. I’m not saying that at all. You know I’m not saying that.’

‘Look, if you break the law you’ve got to be penalised!’

‘But sometimes you can play on.’ He scowled at the idea. ‘If you were ref you’d be blowing the whistle every thirty seconds,’ I said.
‘Yes, I would!’ and he was happy, proud of the fact.

I was the only one, out of his kids, out of everyone, who had time for him, faith in him, who believed in him. At half time Phil Gould and Mark Geyer were standing on the field, wearing suits and looking at the camera, and I said, ‘Phil Gould used to coach Penrith, and Mark Geyer used to play for Penrith, hey? Phil Gould would have coached him, early nineties.’

‘That’s not Mark Geyer.’

‘Yes it is.’

‘That’s not Mark Geyer!’

‘Yes it is. It’s Mark Geyer! They said it was Mark Geyer.’ It was Mark Geyer, legend. But Dad was yelling as much as his body allowed. ‘THAT! IS! NOT! MARK! GEYER!’ The suits were gone, we saw the players in their dressing sheds, the voice-over commentary saying, “Thank you, Gus Gould and Mark Geyer. Don’t go away, folks. After the break we have the second half,” and Dad doesn’t blink.

If a ghost has power, how much more has a real person? If Dad can haunt us now, fly from morgue to living room, how powerful was he alive, rubbing against the furniture, seeping into the walls, taken in, day after day after day, decade after decade?

If you see it in a certain way, if you walk into a dark room without turning on the light, and then, in the dim, distant lightning flash, you see it from a certain angle: me having faith in him and him betraying my trust, not once, not twice, but all day, every day, for fifty years... the horror!

Dad’s impulse to cut you off, to cut you down, to cut his hair, to cut my hair, to cut the lawn, to prune the trees, was there in his rugby league: the opposition, the fight, the shutting down, the slamming any gambit to the earth, the cutting any tendril as it sprouts.

Mary had no time for Dad. She lived twenty minutes’ drive away, but hadn’t seen or spoken to Dad in years. Can I help with the eulogy? And there is Jim, released from this mortal coil, on the wing, flying down the sideline. Whenever I thought about the eulogy over the next day it was the ball going from the five eight, the inside centre, the outside centre, and here comes Jim! But he never got to try line. He had the ball, and he had to beat the fullback and the cover, and he was in full flight, about to step, or palm, or chip, or pass, and... that’s as far as I got.

That night I was on the couch with Mum. ‘Do you remember,’ I asked her, ‘it would have been in 1985, you had some jewellery stolen?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, Dad rang me and he told me it had been stolen, and he was very stern and angry with me, and he asked me if I’d been here at any time recently while you were out, and
he told me that you were no longer going to keep the front door key hidden under the house, and if I came home I had to ring you up before I came to tell you I was coming, and knock on the front door and you would come down and let me in. I said “okay”, and when I got off the phone I thought, “gee, he was telling me that he suspected me of stealing the jewellery”.

‘Well, what are we supposed to think?’ Mum said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘What are we supposed to think?’

I couldn’t grasp what she was asking me. ‘What?’

‘Well, I asked you if you were fine with money, and you said yes, so what are we supposed to think?’

It slowly dawned on me: she, with Dad, suspected I stole the jewellery. I was shocked to my core. Why would she think that? Because I said I was fine with money? Finally, I said to her, ‘It wouldn’t stand up in court, would it?’

Mum just shrugged and said again, ‘Well, what are we supposed to think?’ and we turned back to the TV. There, two grasshoppers were mating. They do it for ages, and while they’re doing it she slowly bites his head off. But there he is, entirely headless, still performing his act, still doing what is expected of him.

The next day I talked to Steven. I thought he’d be shocked about Mum’s and Dad’s suspicion, as I’d thought Mum would be shocked to hear of Dad’s, but he showed no surprise, and from his silence and his body language I could tell that he too thought I’d stolen the jewellery. I was more shocked than I’d been the night before.

Anyway, he’d bought two shirts, seventy dollars each, he wasn’t sure which one he was wearing, I could wear the one he wasn’t.

I got black shoes from K Mart, trousers from an op shop. I combed my hair, and was set. Everyone commented. No one had ever seen me dressed like this. ‘Your father would be very proud of you!’ they said, and it was true – clothes, hair, table manners, that was about it.

But, surely, that’s too easy? Wear one thing and not another and he’s proud? Is he really that shallow? Any mass murderer can put on shirt and shiny shoes. What does it matter what I wear?

I heard it somewhere: wear one pair of shoes and not another out of respect for your father. And I turned up to a church full of people wearing one pair of shoes and not another.

But he’s dead, right? He can’t see us. He doesn’t know what we’re wearing. What does it
matter what we wear? Hello? Please? You, sir. What does it matter what we wear? And rising up at me was the giant grasshopper, missing his head but still doing what is expected of him. He does it because his father did it before him. She bites his head off because that’s what her mother did. It’s not a matter of thinking, or feeling, or even being alive.

I was excited about meeting Dad’s brother Peter. Peter and Dad lived on opposite sides of the same city but never saw each other, and talked on the phone only once every few years. For decades I’d considered contacting Peter, to ask him a few questions about Dad, about their childhood, but I never had; now, I figured, was my chance. I picked him out in the foyer of the church: several inches taller than Dad, and a few years older, but unmistakably Dad’s brother. I walked over to him.

‘Peter?’

‘Yes,’ he said, looking at me quizzically. I knew he knew I was one of his brother’s sons, but didn’t know which one.

‘James.’

‘Ah! Are you the Perth one or the Darwin one?’

We chatted for a few moments. I introduced my daughter to him, he introduced the woman standing beside him. I asked them, ‘Are you …? Um…?’

‘No, not married, just friends.’

I told Peter that my kids were amazed that Dad and his brother lived so close but never saw each other.

‘Oh, go away!’ said Peter, and pulled away, scowling. He looked at his friend.

‘Oh, well, y’know … ‘I said, shrugging my shoulders. I didn’t know what his ‘go away’ meant, and I wanted him to know I meant no offence. A man my age walked over to us.

‘This is Kevin,’ said Peter. Kevin is my cousin, Peter’s son. He lives near Peter, and works in the city. Once, thirty years ago, he visited us for a Sunday lunch. I reminded Kevin about it, but he couldn’t remember the occasion.

‘I remember!’ said Peter.

‘No, I don’t think you were there. I remember just Kevin being there.’

‘No, I remember. I was there.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘That might have been another time.’

‘No, I remember. I remember Mary telling you to go away. “Go down and play your drums”


she said.’

‘I don’t think Mary would have ever told me to play my drums,’ I said, shaking my head. And then ‘It’s funny how we have our different memories.’ We were being ushered into the church. ‘But you’re right; I used to play the drums.’

The funeral went smoothly. I read one thing, Steven another. Mary read the eulogy, about how Dad would do anything for you, and how his grandchildren rang him and asked him questions about History and Geography. It was as right, as fitting and proper, and as much a cover-up as the clothes people wore.

We had sandwiches and biscuits and tea. People were happy to be out of work, to meet and greet, to wear their special clothes.

Uncle Peter asked Patrick, ‘You’re the gardener. What kind of flowers are these?’

‘They’re yellow ones,’ Patrick said, pointing to the yellow ones, and, pointing to the red, ‘they’re red.’

‘And they’re purple ones, I said, pointing to the purple. ‘You can tell that by the colour.’

‘Oh, go away!!’ said Uncle Peter, loudly, turning to face me, and then, turning back to Patrick, he raised his eyes to heaven.

I knew then that I would not see Peter again, would not exchange phone numbers, would not ‘hook up,’ would not find out anything about Dad’s parents or Dad’s childhood from him, would not see if he had any photos. And I saw how it was for little Dad – with his big brother pushing him away – battling the bastards, the imposters, the liars, the smart alecks, the clowns, the bullies, the show offs. And how he never went flying down the sideline, how he rarely got the ball, how he had no chance to swerve and fend, but was cut off, put down, bundled into touch. It’s tragic, and horrific, but Australia’s Funniest Home Videos would love it.

We put the coffin in the back of the hearse, and I felt like cheering as Dad – with a glorious curve down the driveway – slipped away from us, leaving us floundering in his wake.
Five memories from the end of a life
Kaye Aldenhoven

‘Take two panadol and don’t waste my valuable time.’
Darwin Hospital Emergency Department

1 They don’t even know who I am

I thought my son was safe curled up in the big chair
I’d pushed into the room they said he would occupy
when a spare bed was found. When I returned Brett
was still in the big chair but in another room.
A nurse bent over his wrist, cutting off his identification tag
with her scissors.

Don’t leave me here Mum, he cried tearfully.
Don’t leave me, Mum.
They don’t even know who I am.

An orderly had woken him,
tried to take him to Tiwi Gardens Nursing Home,
at first gently, then forcefully. Brett had protested:
I am not Anderson, I am Aldenhoven.
He physically resisted his kidnapper. When the orderly,
attempting to discharge his orders, sought assistance,
the error was discovered, but not admitted, never admitted.

When kindly Dr Rob asked Brett how he was
a short time later, my son said:
Monty Python’s Flying Circus continues,
and showed the laceration from the sharp edges of the ID bracelet.
2 Red Jelly

How hard can it be
to give me red jelly?

Only yellow, the anxious Filipina replies,
handing him a tray with
egg and lettuce sandwich (can’t eat it)
an orange (can’t eat it)
cold custard with canned peach slices (can’t eat them)

I reconnoitre the trolley shelves in another ward,
thieve red jelly,
return with my loot.

In his journal my starving son wrote:
‘Three tea-spoons of red jelly
and a cup of green tea.
That’s all.’

3 Yellow jelly

a glance at the old black dog was all
I needed to be sure he would like yellow jelly,
left-over yellow jelly that my son could not eat;
yellow jelly that could not pass down,
blocked by stomach cancer.

A sweet old black dog with grey beard,
his owner dropped him at the hospice on work days.
He enjoyed the air-conditioning, visited my son’s room,
to lie with his stomach on the cool floor
as my son lay dying, listening
to the black dog’s regular breathing.
Chin resting on the floor,
black dog watched over my son
as his breath weakened.

4 In sympathy

When I was crying loudly, walking around the boxes of your bits and pieces, sorting shells, feathers, stone tools, fossils of marine creatures collected a Gunn Point, photos of plants, gardens, babies, dogs, red glass cups you put on the louvres to watch the sun pass through, the weighty rib bones of dugong, coloured lures with barbs still attached, books I had inscribed to you, a poem handwritten in 1986, your Graduation Programme, your primary school reports, the ivory fish you chose from Rene’s relics, the dragon Louis drew and framed for your birthday, your favourite velour dressing gown you wore on your Black Dog Days, mud crab claw trophies of your most impressive catches, a fish shaped candle, a bowl of spindle reels, when I was wailing loudly, pleading Don’t look Brett, Don’t look Brett, as I threw some stuff in the rubbish bin, Lily-dog lay on my bed with her brindle head on my fresh pillow-slip, and howled too.

5 Strange food

At 3am I get up to soak
dried apricots in a tin of apricot nectar.
I open a tin of baby food – rice cream the label says-
to eat with warm stewed apricots for breakfast.

I feed two chocolates to my grandson,
chocolates bought by Cousin Sonya.

You ate ones that melted in the warmth of your mouth, the sweet smoothness sliding down your hungry throat.
To your blocked stomach.

With the two packets of red jelly crystals
I will make a trifle
to eat after we spread your ashes
at your favourite fishing spots.
Atweme atweme / Hit kill
Michael Giacometti

A moonless night beyond the pall of streetlights
A touch of grog
A stand of spearbush close to hand
A naked thigh
Two pairs of raised eyes, making eyes
A broken beer bottle half-buried in soil
More grog
Too much grog

You prick I cut your dick you prick
Ah! I bash you with a rock

The record spins, scratches
the same refrain
scoring revolution

You prick I cut your dick you prick
Ah! I bash you with a rock

Gouging deeper delusion
and impulse into action
The horror! The horror!

You prick I cut your dick you prick
Ah! I bash you with a rock

The needle skips — atweme
A rock in hand to head — atweme
A glass shard inner thigh — atweme
In the police siren spotlight —
A scatter of empties

Reflections of broken bottles
A rock in hand to mourning head
This degenerate night
And red emptying into red

Note: In November 2011 at Hidden Valley Town Camp just east of Alice Springs, a teenager was fatally stabbed in the femoral artery by his teen girlfriend after a jealous fight.

The horror! from Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness
Family Shapes
Karina Brabham

i.
in year 12 my thursday lunches
in a four hour gap were mum,
grandma, poppa and i. we ate
salad rolls where alfalfa sprouts
captured in the corners of grandma’s
and mother’s mouths. we sat on the balcony
with the fan’s rhythmic squeak.
conversation floated in the lazy air.
we named bird calls, listened slowly
to cicada song, grandma would talk about
an article she’d read. something like margarine
increases your chances of mental illness.
mum bought butter the next week.
two months later butter gives you bad cholesterol.
the marg is reinstalled in the fridge.
it’s easy to laugh about these things
and forget their voices sanding away
at the shape of my thoughts.
it’s not so bad. i like the simplicity
of grandma’s green cotton dresses
cut for decades from the same pattern.
sometimes i find offcuts of green
squared for quilting in my craft box.
they unpick memories of the cloth filled,
of slow smiles and off-key hymns.

ii.
we planted grandma as ashes with
a frangipani in the garden of st petes.
the tree's a small frame now, budding
three or four glossy leaves, a tiny peek
of yellow dusted petals. the sweet
scent of frangipani is my childhood.
it is the remembered smell of backyard games
and tree climbing. it mixes with the earthiness
of a hot ground lapping up the cool relief of water.
i see my mum at dusk, barefoot, garden hose in hand.
she waters the fishtail palms, the pawpaw trees,
the herbs and insect bitten tomato plants
struggling up from styrofoam boxes.
the tickle of grass on ankles gets fainter
in memory. growing up is growing out
to leave footprints in the earth of other places.
yet the imprints of my mother’s soles
are full of the shape i step into and step out of.

iii.
we packed a lifetime of objects
into boxes. the house was too empty,
poppa too old, now that grandma was gone.
i cradled books coated in dust from bookcase
to island piles drifting across the lounge room
floor. i opened one and found grandma’s
cursive in a younger hand, still in primary school.
she wrote her name, address, and date.
amidst the riddled holes of silverfish
tunnelling was the black inked order
of herself. yellowed pages
coated my fingertips with the soft
powder of disintegration. the losses
of the past find their way to cling
to us still. i find some shape
in my mother, in my mother’s mother.
My Lying Bedroom Mirror
Lindsay Johannsen

When I look in the mirror the person I see,
Is a person that’s somebody other than me.
This person is baggy … and saggy … and tired,
Where I am more slender, alert and admired.

My profile is classic, my cheekbones set high,
My skin smooth as velvet, soft-scented and dry.
I move with the grace of a swallow in flight
and I see the horizon with eyes clear and bright.

One’s feminine form is a joy to behold,
And I can assure you, my loving is gold.
—Yet this image before me – this insult; this lie!
Is a manifestation of physics gone wry!

Misrepresentation! A trick of the light!
A distortion of fact, neither truthful nor right!
What sinister magic can render so dismal
the image before it? It’s wrong! It’s abysmal!

The complexion is sallow, the coiffure graying.
The dermis is showing distinct signs of fraying.
On the face there are wrinkles (displayed at their worst).
The profile is puffy. The waistline has burst!

Gravitation has rendered the bum elongated.
(Two suety-textured balloons … half inflated.)
The bosom is withered; the eyesight is poor.
Its corpulent aspect’s the size of a door.
But how to address this rank falsification? This blatant, derogatory, FOUL fabrication!

The obvious answer, it has to be said, is to bathe with the light off.

…And get dressed in bed.
My great-aunt’s hands
Sue Fielding

Her hands are bound,
the tip of each finger
stuck down
with skin-coloured Band-Aids
to hide the swollen redness.
I tilt towards her, embarrassed
my ten year old hands tucked
behind my back, neck craned
to her powdery cheek.
I am enveloped
in the musky sweetness of brandy.
She holds her drink so well,
is rarely seen on a bad night
when pain drives her back
to the bottle,
makes her sit in a chair with
eyes shut
while the room lurches on a
heaving sea.

I remember the days when she
served tea
with white gloved hands,
passed dainty plates of cake
to friends
around the old mahogany.
They clapped and sighed
while my cousin and I gave
puppet shows and plays,
made the living room a ship
with sails
to take us far away.

Ten years later I return,
bend down to reach her
so delicate.
She takes my hand in hers
which is cool,
leads me to an armchair
then percolates the coffee,
serves it black.
I see the empty whiteness
of her fridge.

There was a man whose ring
she wore until he left
at twenty one,
she couldn’t risk the
heartbreak twice
and turned her mind away.
The ring is gone.
But there is grace
in unrequited love in old age,
the deliberate movements
of the solitary-who dare not say
lonely,
but begin each day brave and
each night hold firm.
Finale (for James)
Sue Fielding

Once,
your music was a summer afternoon
all stretched out and laid back,
full of something good.
You made me laugh
your eyes bright, feet light
on the ground.
But then the dark descended
and soured in you like
unripe fruit.
I couldn’t listen anymore.

The policeman said
you died in steel capped boots
made to last longer
than you,
and walk further on rough ground.
And there were other things
I found: your blood
in the bathroom sink, signs of
pain and disarray. A diagnosis.
Remember that night on Norton Street,
our last dinner-
and you saying, I’m sorry
I just can’t make it lighter,
and it’s dark - so dark.
I watched you walk away
head down
past the Town Hall,
knowing I’d lost you to something
I didn’t understand.

And when the music stopped
it kept on coming
from the church, and the earth
where you were buried,
from the silence of our mother and
fists of our father
as he beat his head, over and over.
And it bangs on in me like
a mad orchestra.

Why did the sweet note in you
turn on itself?
Made in Alice
Jo Dutton

They get on planes and fly long enough to get their lost days
To places I can’t pronounce
Talking in other languages
Like they belong
So far away from their birth place

It’s kind of crazy
One day he’s lying on the couch
Surrounded by what we call the lads
Eating the last of the chips
Creating what they call recycling credits
Because getting pissed is not PC
And asking if you’ve seen his shirt, but hey
Stress-less
It’s just a question
And all the lads laugh and goad him about being a boy

Then it’s hola and muchos gracias
Videos from Buenos Aries
Of cobblestoned streets and the crowds in Yoga Park
Poems from Brazil follow
evoking the beauty of the Inglesse falls
And by the way the spare keys
For the car he had thought of as his
Are on their way back, of course not by air

At the movies another mother leans across the row
To show me on her phone
My son and hers dancing salsa
In a street I have no reference for
And we smile at each other
Bemused but delighted
Flattered they are so bold

Though the truth is it's this place
The Centre
Raggedy violent cesspit
Divided and in revolt
If you believe half of what
The papers write
Taught them everything they know
About acceptance and difference
How to travel, how to come home.
I am only afraid at the airport. I walk through the automatic doors with my daughter asleep in my arms. Her plump legs dangle. One tiny shoe hangs from the toes of her left foot, about to fall.

That she will die. This is the fear. Typhoid. Malaria. Terrorism. The town I come from lost three young men in the Bali bombing. All of them blond with sunburnt noses and large brown feet. The only one who came back had freckles and blue eyes and red hair. I didn't know him well enough to speak to, but I noticed him. Everybody did.

I slide Molly’s shoe back on her foot and she wakes, stretching like a cat in my arms. People stream around us. I lower her onto the floor and we step together towards the security gates. She puts her velvet rabbit on the conveyer belt, watching solemnly as it disappears behind a black rubber curtain into the x-ray machine.

We arrive in the dark warm middle of the night and I push my face against the taxi window. The buildings are worn and beautiful. On the side of the road, a man pushes a huge-wheeled, bright-lit food cart. In front of us, a family of four share a pink scooter. The bare soles of a baby’s feet illuminated in the taxi headlights.

The driver’s name is Nyoman. He has bright, even teeth and smooth skin. His face is hairless as a boy’s, although he is nearly forty. Same age as me.

When we get to the hotel, he lifts my sleeping daughter from the back seat. A moment then, when we are bent together over my sleeping child and he smiles into my face with all his bright teeth, before rolling Molly gently into my arms.

He gives me his card and I carry my sleeping child along a narrow path between a swimming pool and a tall stone wall. The wall is patterned with a vine of heart-shaped leaves. The sound of water rushes from the pool.

And then the soft quiet moment where I stop and see that here we are, unbelievably, in Bali. Not for a holiday. Something else. Something open.

I rent a one room house made of bamboo with a grass roof that is grey with age and leaks in the rain. But I don’t know this yet. At first everything is dry.

The woman next door is tall with dark brown hair and a French accent. Her name is Margo.
She sits down at our small table, facing Molly, “Where’s your daddy?”

Molly looks at me, then at her spoon.

“Where’s your daddy?” says Margo again. “Papa? Where is he?”

“This spoon is very shiny,’ says Molly, turning the spoon this way and that so the light is reflected brightly in its silver curve.

“He’s in Australia,” I say, leaning over the table to take Molly’s free hand, hold the silky fingers inside my palm.

Nyoman takes us to the supermarket on the back of his small red motorbike. He wears a white cotton shirt he has silk-screened himself. A pattern of water falling. He says he went to art school and sold the shirts in a shop for a while, but there wasn’t enough money. Now he is a driver.

Riding through Ubud, the streets seems emptier than a week ago. The supermarket too.

Nyoman says, “The tourists are leaving. I think they are afraid.”

“Cause of the rain?”

“A little bit. But also the Bali bombers. The execution.”

“Oh.”

“They are worried there will be more bombings.”

“What do you think?”

“I think if the tourists go, we will not be able to have any money to buy food and this will be difficult.”

Molly and I are lying in bed. Outside a storm is thundering. We listen together. Through the windows on either side of the bed, and the open door at the far end of the room, the sky cracks white with lightening. “Did you see the claws?” she asks, “The claws of light on the sky?”

Her own hands are in the air, claw-shaped.

I make my hand claws too. We lie there under the mosquito net, being lightening.

The sound of water running and rushing all around. Frogsong and swarms of mosquitoes that may or may not have malaria.

Water drips onto the bed.
Thunder rumbles on the other side of the olang olang roof.

She puts her claws down. “What makes the thunder?”

“I think.” I say, “it’s the clouds rubbing together.” I rub my fists together. It seems unlikely.

I am on the toilet. Molly comes slamming like a cowboy through the swing doors, leaving them open behind her.

“How do you make a baby?”

“Can you shut the doors please?”

“Why?”

“I like a bit of privacy when I’m having a wee.”

She turns, closes the door. “Now,” she says. “Tell me.”

“Well, first you need a man.”

“No,” she says, adamant. “You don’t need a man.”

“Yeah, you do.”

“No, you just need your mama and your friends, they help you get the baby out.”

“Well. Yes. Often that’s true. But you need a man to put the baby into your belly.”

“Oh.” I watch her face. It is so tiny. A little furrow between her blond eyebrows. She is thinking so hard. “Tell me.” she says.

I don’t know how much to tell.

“Well. It’s best if it’s somebody you love. Love makes for the best babies. You have a special kind of cuddle and this makes the baby get started inside you. At first it doesn’t look much like a baby, but slowly it grows inside you and it gets legs and arms and...”

“And eyebrows and a face and a nose.”

“Yes. All that. Everything. And when it’s too big for your tummy, it comes out.”

“Out your vagina.” She bends her knees, whooshes her hands down between her legs.

“Yep.”

“Oh.” She turns then, and walks out of the bathroom. I sit there for a moment on the toilet,
looking up through the branches of the mango tree. A squirrel runs along one branch, way up near the top.

A moment later, I hear her holler, “MAMA!” and there is such urgency in her voice, I think she must be hurt. I pull up my undies and run fast as I can up the bamboo steps. “What? What is it? Are you are alright?“

She is sitting on the edge of the bed. Apart from a pair of bright orange floaties, one on either arm, she is naked.

She says, “Who did you fall in love with when you had me?”

“Ben. Your dad.”

“Oh,” she says. “I didn’t know that.”

Coming back from the supermarket, Nyoman carries Molly on one hip and the shopping in his free hand. “How’re you going, Nyoman?”

He shrugs. “I am happy. Always when I see you I am happy.”

“Oh.” I take yoghurt from the shopping bag. “How was your day? How’s business?”
He stops smiling. “Not so good. Everybody is leaving.”

“Oh Nyoman, I’m sorry.” I look at him then and think of his children, two boys and a girl. All under five years of age. His brother who is sick and the hospital which is expensive. His mother and father, dried and worn thin by work. His wife. “I’m sorry.”
At the house, he slips his shoes off before stepping inside. He puts the shopping down and then places a frangipani bloom behind Molly’s ear. “Like a Balinese girl.”

She laughs, delighted.

He places her carefully onto the bamboo platform and I give him fifty thousand rupiah. He pushes it into his pocket and we smile at each other.

And then he leans. Towards me. As if to embrace, or kiss.

I lift my spine, the opposite of a lean, but I bow my head, not wanting to hurt him. “Thank you,” I say, again, and he smiles, his open smile, all those white teeth. I turn my body towards the shopping and he steps backwards out of my house. “See you tomorrow.”

At the café, a tall loud white American is using skype at the table next to us.

“Honey, the world banking system is about to collapse. If it does, nobody is going to be able to get any money from the banks. It’s that simple. No. Honey, don’t yell at me. If it the world banking system collapses, I’m not going to be able to get any money either. I’ll be in the same boat as everyone else.”
The world banking system collapse? What I would do, what could I do? How would I feed my child?

Molly gets sick. A flu that doesn’t go away.

The third morning she wakes up cranky. Slams her legs down on the mattress, rubs her nose. “I’m all sniffy. I can’t smell.”

“Here,” I get her a tissue.

“It’s torn. I want a new one.”

“Use this one, it’s fine.”

“I WANT A NEW ONE!”

“Here.” I try a new tack, “Have some vitamin C.” I reach across the bedside table and pick up the bottle.

“Take it downstairs and then bring it up.”

“Why?”

“TAKE IT DOWNSTAIRS AND THEN BRING IT UP.” Legs slam into the mattress.

“Just have one, sweetheart.”

“NO. I’ll only have one if you take it downstairs and then bring it up.”

“Okay. Don’t have one. I don’t care.”

She starts to sob.

I try to stoke her but she slaps my arm away.

“What’s up, Molly?”

“I want a vitamin C.”

I pass her a tablet.

She scowls. “I’m not going to eat it until you take it downstairs and bring it up again.”

“Well, I’m not going to do that.” I hold my palm out again, “Come on. Just take it.”

But she turns her head to the pillow and howls.
Margo is leaving. “The execution is days away,” she says. “That’s what everybody’s saying. They will be reprisal bombings. Against westerners.”

“But Margo. It’s Ubud. It’s not Kuta. Surely we’re safe here.”

“Draw me a spider web.” Molly passes me a blue pencil. I look at her delicate profile, her pale skin and blond hair and for a moment I can’t remember exactly how a spider web goes.

“If you want to be safe, you have to go home.” Margo is all hissing urgency.

“But the Balinese. If we all go…”

“Draw me a spider web.”

I bend to the paper and draw a crooked line.

Molly draws a red spider with eight fat legs. Her face is scrunched with concentration.

Margo stands up, gathers her bag. “If the ATMs shut down, it’ll be impossible to get out.”

Nyoman appears then. Molly looks up, sees him, drops her pencil and scoots, fairy-like, down the stairs and into his arms.

I stand and gather up crayons, bags and follow my child. Margo on the step beside me, says. “Your own government is warning people not to travel. It’s not safe here, anymore.”

We are walking along a narrow stone path. Every couple of metres, Molly stops in front of me and puts her hands out, so I bump into her. It is eight o’clock and already hot. “MOLLY. Enough. You’re going to make us late for school.”

She turns and scowls at me. “Why are you so mean?”

“We are running late. Come on, just go.”

Out the front Nyoman is waiting. Molly climbs into his arms while I go to the shop. I imagine Nyoman thinking bad thoughts about me because I am a bad person. I want to cry. I buy Molly’s milk and when I come out, they are both on the bike and I climb onto the back and don’t put my arms around Nyoman. I feel dark and afraid and sad. Molly at the front sings and sings. And I think, I took my panic out on her. I feel like Evil Mother, but then as we crest the hill, she reaches behind her, past Nyoman, to take one of my fingers inside her small hand. She pulls until my hand is on her belly. And suddenly, I am not alone. I am joined to my child and to the gentle man between us.

We ride through rice fields. Bright texta green. Full of reflective water. It is like riding through sky.

On the way back, it starts to rain. All around us, Balinese on bikes ride covered in plastic
ponchos. Nyoman calls over his shoulder, ‘Are you alright?’

“I’m fine. Are you alright?”

“Oh yes.” He laughs. His hand rests on mine, which are clasped around his waist.

The rain gets heavier. We ride into it, take corners that are dark with puddles. We ride past offerings on the road and the huge wooden bull which will be used as a sarcophagus for a cremation next week. The bull is covered in bright skin-tight fabric, red and black and gold.

Then the downpour comes, sudden thick, fat tropical drops, falling straight down.

Quick as thought, Nyoman pulls into an empty concrete garage. He stops the engine, puts the bike onto its stand.

I step off the bike and pull my helmet off, laughing, exhilarated by the storm. When I turn, he is in front of me with his shirt saturated. “Nyoman, you’re soaked.”

He lifts the thin white cotton with his dark large hands. The fabric drops back against his skin, transparent, catching at his dark nipples, his collarbones and belly.

The rain roars and the air inside this small concrete cave is charged and bright. We are laughing with our faces close together and then he leans, suddenly, gracefully, sweetly, puts his head onto my shoulder, lays his cheek against my neck. I feel my breath surge with tenderness.

He lifts his head, his wet shirt. “So wet,” I say, looking at his shirt, not at his face.

“You are dry.” His hand on my belly. A moment, then gone. I am loose and happy and it would be so easy to fall into him. That this is how love should start, in a sweet moment like this.

“You’re soaked.” It’s like this is all I can talk about is the rain. He says, “You’re dry.”

“Cause I was behind you. You caught all the rain.”

He turns around. “My back is dry.” And we laugh again like this is the funniest thing.

The rain stops. The air is cool and smells of wet stone. Sunlight falls into the garage, on our water-glossed bodies. It feels so completely right that we should kiss. But when he leans in, I duck my head, suddenly awkward.

He kisses me on the cheek, gentle, dry, tender. “I cannot stop thinking about you.”

I want to laugh but don’t.
But then he says, “Every night when I make sex with my wife, I think of you.”

And then I do laugh and my mortified hands go to my mouth. “Oh my god, your poor wife, Nyoman. That’s awful.”

He shrugs. “It is how it is.”

I step toward to the bike. The seat is beaded with water. Nyoman sweeps the drops with one long stroke of his palm. He passes me a helmet, and puts on his own.

“It’s okay.” I take the helmet, but don’t put it on. “I can walk from here, it’s not so far.”

He smiles, shakes my hand in that gentle way the Balinese do. I step out in the wet sunlight and watch him climb onto the bike and ride away.

Molly is asleep in my arms when I find out the bombers have been executed.

They were taken from the prison at 11pm. The dark almost middle of the night. They were driven to a place called Nirbaya. It is in the forest. They were tied to posts with black cloth over their heads. There were three firing squads. It was raining. Ten minutes after they arrived, they were dead.

I think of their mothers. And the mothers in Australia who lost children. The boy who came back to Mollymook without his friends. And Nyoman’s wife, Wayan, and her three small children.

A breeze moves across my face, and I lift my head to look at the ricefields, the patterns the breeze make across the water surface, and then I look back at the child in my arms and I am pierced. This is the feeling. A clear sensation of a thin long needle moving into my chest, through the muscle and gristle, and I think of cupid’s arrow, thin as sewing needle, moving deep into my chest. This precise sharp line of love.

I want to hold her forever and keep her safe from all harm, always. But even now, she wakes, wanting to swim. Moving away from me.

At the pool, she stands in the shallow end, grinning up at me. She pushes her left arm towards me and I roll the floaty on. “It feels like happiness,” she says and waves her fat arms in the hot air. The pool is pale and all around us. At each end, stone goddesses with water pour from stone urns.

She is suddenly, wildly joyful. “This is a good feeling. It’s a shower feeling and a friend feeling and a mama feeling and a flower feeling!” The sun falls on her skin, glossing her arms. She closes her eyes. “It’s a big feeling, mama.”

She climbs out to check on her bunny on a wooden deck chair and then stands of the edge of the pool, ready to jump. She flings both arms into the air and says, “I'm strong as King Kong! I'm brave as a woman!” And then she leaps, arms out, eyes shut tight.
Wanting to Sing  
Barbara Eather  

The Franciscan Brother in front of me has intense blue eyes, intense almost beyond pigment, intense like the eyes of the pilots who used to fly a missionary airline that I’d travelled with years ago in Arnhem Land. Just before take-off, they’d make the sign of the cross. In the final spurt along bush runways splattered with clumps of buffalo manure, their eyes gleamed with the faith that there was a maker to meet. With my frayed seat-belt fastened securely, I’d stare at church bulletins and sick bags stuffed in the seat-pocket in front of me, listen to the single engine scream like a washing machine on final spin, and torment myself with what Kerry Packer had said the time he returned from being clinically dead for six minutes, ‘The good news is there’s no devil. The bad news is there’s no heaven. There’s nothing.’

Peter, whose blue eyes pierce me, is in charge of a slightly battered armchair, not a pre-loved Cessna. But he is still in charge of my future. Not my complete future as such, just the next eighteen hours of it. In conversation, so far, I have learnt that Peter is from Germany and is a trainee monk. His responsibilities toward me are not as critical as those of a pilot in whose plane I may be hurtling, but they are significant. I may have, in the last fortnight, become accustomed to frequenting monks’ sitting-rooms late in the afternoon after a day of walking along this pilgrim trail in northern Spain, but I have not become immune to the pain, cold and hunger that comes with pounding my feet for twenty-something kilometres each day. I need, with increasing urgency, all of the following:

A toilet that flushes. I can provide my own paper.

A shower, preferably hot, but cold will do.

A sink to wash today’s clothes in and a line to hang them on.

Directions to a bar, where, dressed in tomorrow’s clothes, I will slurp enough vino tinto to render me fluent in Spanish.

Instructions as to where I can find a pilgrim meal.

A bed, mattress or patch of floor on which to roll out my sleeping bag.

An understanding as to what I shall do for breakfast tomorrow.

Peter tells me that there is a problem. My happy-in-the-monks’-sitting-room bonhomie shatters. Is the alburge full? This never happens this late in the season. Or is it closed? This does happen this late in the season. Well why did he, with his Jesus loving eyes, let me in and invite me to sit down if he is now going to turf me out? Monks! No wonder they are not allowed to marry. I know I should have stayed in Belorado where there are at least three pilgrim hostels - some with washing machines and dryers! That extra five kilometres of slog
on earthen track may have brought me to Tosantos, official population sixty, guidebook promises of rustic premises and warm hospitality and marginally closer to tomorrow's target destination, but if I can't stay here I may as well fling myself on the ground and wail. I can't go forward to Villafranca Montes de Oca. It is seven kilometres away and my ankles have given up the ghost. And I can't go back to Belorado. It may be closer, but if there is one rule of the walking pilgrim it is - never go back. A gust of wind rattles the window. The nasty end of autumn leers at me. Ten minutes ago, when I arrived here, I had chuckled at the sign above the front door - Casa Parroquial Hospital de Peregrinos - thinking that I wasn't far gone enough to require a hospital. Now, faced with sleeping rough and being savaged overnight by merinos, I need an asylum.

Peter raises his hand to calm the thoughts spread across my face.

‘Do not worry,’ he says, ‘It is only a small problem. We have no water for washing, but we have water for cooking and we will provide supper and breakfast.’

‘So you have room for me here then?’ I ask.

‘Yes of course, plenty of room, but we have some rules I need to tell you about.’

Right now, I will agree to anything. And I do. I agree that at six o’clock when the señora comes with the key to the church, I will go with her. After supper I will observe a tradition of the house. I will attend prayers in the attic. In the morning, I will not get out of bed until seven o’clock for Peter and José, who run this alburge, don’t want to be woken at the crack of dawn by pilgrims bursting out onto the trail. This is not a problem for me for I consider seven in the morning to be, in fact, the crack of dawn. My needs will not be met exactly. I won’t be provided with a toilet that flushes. There will be no shower. My clothes will remain unwashed. Filling in the hours between now and supper will not take place at the only bar in Tosantos for that is closed because there is no water in the whole village. But my evening meal and breakfast are guaranteed and I will not spend the night huddled in a haystack trembling at the sound of merino hooves approaching. The only danger apparent is two religious attendances in the one day.

Peter takes me upstairs to a small room where nine gym mats lie side-by-side. The premium positions, against the walls, have already been taken by earlier arrivals. One of these is Ella, a pilgrim from Poland. Our paths have crossed over the last few days. With my non-existent Polish and her limited English we have had a number of almost successful conversations. We exchange end-of-the-day nods. I flop onto a mat, change into tomorrow’s clothes and hang today’s over my backpack to air. By the day after tomorrow, when they will again become today’s clothes, I hope that they, and I, will have forgotten that they are not an immaculate conception.

In recent days I’ve taken to sleeping overnight in the smallest villages I can find. I want to be more like a pilgrim of the Middle Ages, complete with deprivations, although I can do without bubonic plague, Saint Anthony’s Fire and other scourges from those times when everyone drank wine because the water was not safe. In theory, deprivations are fine. Now, prostrated on a gym mat guaranteed to harden throughout the night, I tell myself that
I, a lapsed Anglican, chose to tackle this pilgrim trail because I wanted to do something authentic. I should not torment myself with thoughts of my bed back home complete with tortoiseshell cat. It could be worse. A few weeks ago, in Codex Calixtinus, the 12th Century and earliest known text about this pilgrimage, I had read about the people from one region that this trail passes through, ‘The Navarrese also make use of animals for incestuous fornication. It is told that the Navarrese affixes a lock to the behind of his mule or horse, so that no one else may have access to them. Also, he kisses lasciviously the vulva of women and mules.’ Here now, the wind wails. I stare at paint flaking from aged tongue-and-groove walls. Yes, it could be much worse. It is a long cold wait until Peter tells us that the señora with the key is on her way, but I am safe in a Franciscan hostel for pilgrims.

Six of us meet the señora one street away. Along with Ella from Poland, there is Ursula from Canada and a French couple she has been walking with. A strident man and woman, they talk, in French, at Ella and I. We don’t comprehend a word they say. Michel, also from France, speaks a little English. He has walked all the way from Marseille although he took a break for a few weeks when he caught a train back to France to have a ligament operated on. He mutters grimly that blisters can come at any time. Ursula unites us for she is fluent in English, French and Spanish and assumes seamlessly the role of translator.

I covet the señora’s heavy cardigan, thick stockings and comfortable loafers. Days earlier, in the city of Logroño, I had spent an afternoon in a bar filled with Spaniards and cigars. There I had watched a bullfight on one television screen and a weather forecast on another. Smiling suns in the Bay of Biscay had morphed into angry faces complete with black clouds, rain and lightning bolts, but under the influence of vino blanco, tapas and the sweet murmurings of Dominique, a French pilgrim, the bullfight had seemed romantic and the forecast a mere apparition. Now, on a bleak street in Tosantos, the foul weather that has come down from the Bay of Biscay is real. Hunched against the wind, we follow the señora. She takes us to a track that snakes up a hill. We are in for a treat. We aren’t just being taken to San Esteban, the village church, we are being lead to the Ermita de Nuestra Señora de la Peña, a mysterious looking chapel carved high into the side of the hill.

At the chapel, the señora unlocks a heavy studded door. Inside, she switches on the lights and unlocks the cage that surrounds the altar. We gasp at all that shimmers. Through Ursula, the señora asks us not to take photographs. She explains that the ermita has been broken into a number of times and that it always seems to be shortly after they relax the rules and allow photographs to be taken. Apart from the camera ban, there is no fuss. We are not expected to perform any rituals. After the señora summarises the history of the ermita, we are left to sit in quiet reflection or to explore the small cavern. Whilst examining its hewn walls, I realise that I have disturbed the señora. She approaches, clutches me and babbles intently. I’m being accused of something. Have I turned my back on some holy relic without genuflecting appropriately? My limited Spanish might enable me to ask where the elephants are, but understanding the señora’s consternation is beyond me. Ursula intercedes,

‘She says that she thinks you want to sing.’

I shake my head, slide out of the señora’s grasp and slink into a pew. I don’t sing. Well I did.
once, but that was a long time ago when I was in the church choir at boarding school. So why would a stranger in a tiny village in Spain think I would want to now? The señora stops babbling at me, but she doesn’t stop staring at me. Soon it is time to leave the ermita. As though by a miracle, a small basket appears in the señora’s right hand and we make donations. Outside the wind has whipped up a small dust storm. I am the last down the hill. Ursula and the señora wait for me. Ursula gestures to the señora,

‘She still thinks that you want to sing,’ and walks off leaving us alone. The señora speaks fervently. My Spanish vocabulary of seventeen words is of no use to me, but the language of pleading is universal, whatever the plea may be. Is it my sole responsibility to save the señora and her twelve grandchildren from eternal damnation? If I don’t sing will the alburge, with me in it, burn to the ground overnight? Shall some great pestilence befall some innocents somewhere? If anyone is closer to God than me it is this woman in her beige cardigan. So, as though it has always been expected of me, I sing. Well it’s not really singing, it’s humming, but it’s the only ecclesiastical piece that comes to mind, ‘Ave Maria’. The señora leans towards me. Her dark eyes fill with tears. When I finish, she pats my arm tenderly. We scurry away from each other as though we’ve been Francoites sharing secrets. I look back once. All I see is a desolate street in a shuttered village - official population sixty, apparent population six pilgrims, two monks and one señora. Did that just happen? I ask myself.

Back at the alburge, we huddle together in the small kitchen. Surrounded by red and yellow laminex, José chants while he prepares supper. Outside, trucks barrel past on the highway, their wheels whizzing around as though they are possessed by demons. No one stops in Tosantos unless they live here or are a walking pilgrim. As night falls, a halo of light spills from the kitchen window. Inside, José chants throughout supper. Cocooned together over lamb and lentil stew, we share stories about what we do in our non-pilgrim lives. When I say that I work at a crocodile farm, Peter grabs one of my hands and gestures amazement that I have all my limbs. Everyone laughs. When I disclose that I am the farm accountant, the room goes quiet. I’m sure that this is a ploy to steal all the hot water. Inwardly I seethe, but curb my desire to make churlish accusations. But José too has ears. Mid-syllable he stops chanting.

‘It is a tradition of the house that everyone attends prayers in the attic.’

Michel protests, ‘I just thought that if I had my shower it would free the bathrooms up for everyone else later.’

José assumes badger proportions. He swivels to eyeball Michel. ‘It is a tradition of the
house…it is a tradition of the house that everyone attends prayers in the attic.’

Michel, like a ferret unaware of danger, looks around the room, seeking support. Before his eyes can meet mine, I am examining the few remaining lentils on my plate. Ursula says something to him in French, something that sounds very much like,

‘Come to prayers, it is expected.’

We eat shiny red apples while José finishes the washing up. Before we can abscond, he leads us to the attic. The rough-hewn stairs creak underneath our weight. We enter the attic through a door that is more like a window, with a deep sill that we step over and a beam at the top that we duck to avoid. Inside the attic, the ceiling slopes down to a corner where there is a small altar about which José fusses, lighting candles, dusting objects and chanting. We sit on a bench along one side of the room. Peter settles himself in a chair next to the door, cutting off our only escape route. José clasps his hands together and chants sonorously. And he chants for quite some time, during which the greatest affliction of the walking pilgrim strikes me – the inability to keep still. The bench hardens. Cold seeps into me. My muscles contract.

Eventually, it is time for prayers. José explains that we are twenty-one days walk away from the cathedral of Santiago de Compostella, the ultimate destination of this pilgrimage, for the remains of the apostle Saint James are said to be buried there. José says that any prayers left here by pilgrims will be read before they reach Santiago. He reaches into a used yoghurt container and finds a prayer for each of us to read. I hope that none of us will be allocated one of Rhyme of Ancient Mariner proportions. If I don't move soon, my legs will snap in two. The prayer that I read is short and is for Karen who has multiple sclerosis. The prayer that I am expected to write, and leave in the yoghurt container for some other weary victim, is not theologically great. ‘Peace on earth and goodwill to all’ is the best that I can manage without being completely self-serving and asking for lashings of hot water in all pilgrim bathrooms. The torture ends with José delivering a chanting benediction. I flee to an Icelandic shower.

In the morning, I wake to an empty dorm. Downstairs, in the company of José, I breakfast on bread, jam and coffee. He sends me on my way with a benediction. Out on the trail, there is rain ahead, but yesterday’s wind is gone. I build up to a steady rhythm. Before I’ve gone two kilometres, I am gripped with the desire to sing as loudly as I can. I start with the plodding strains of ‘Song of the Volga Boatmen’. I morph into the classic by The Church, ‘Under the Milky Way Tonight’. I laugh at this choice, for Santiago de Compostella translates roughly as Saint James of the field of stars. This pilgrim trail, leading there, replicates an ancient Roman trade route that followed the Milky Way to the Atlantic Ocean. I blurt out my old school hymn, John Bunyan’s ‘He Who Would Valiant Be’ and conclude that those Sisters of the Sacred Advent brainwashed me, for they made me sing its noble pilgrim aspirations hundreds of times. Unable to resist some valiantly sung opera, I launch into Puccini’s ‘The Flower Duet’ from Madama Butterfly, replacing the words I’ve never known with tonsil-wavering trills. I scan the horizon for mauradering merinos, ready to hit them up with an operatic ‘Begone ye foul-breathed ruminoids.’ But it’s just me and ploughed fields. I ponder that maybe Kerry Packer was right. Maybe when we die, there is no heaven
and there is no devil. There’s nothing! Maybe all we have to look forward to is the present. I stride on, revelling in my own version of now. I feel a twinge that perhaps I should go back and thank the señora for giving me this moment. How did she know that I wanted to sing? But it is only a twinge. My pace doesn’t falter. I don’t even glance behind me. If there is one rule of the walking pilgrim it is – never go back.
Part One

I've always liked fast cars. I once owned a bright red 1950s Austin Healy sports convertible. It was a blast, went like the clappers and I guess petrol still flows in my veins. So when my rented Toyota Tightassica was upgraded to a sports job, I was in heaven. I had 400 km of steep mountain roads to cover and an appointment with two million horny salmon at the end of it. Speed was good. Grabbing the keys and setting the stereo volume at 11, I tore off up the mountain on a warm, sunny, blue sky day (a rarity in the British Columbian Fall). I was off to witness the final act in the great salmon drama that has fascinated me during my travels in North America.

The 2010 Fraser River Sockeye Salmon run was the largest since 1913. In 2009 just 1.7 million salmon returned to spawn so the 2010 tally of 25+ million is mind-boggling. Sockeye runs occur every year with the larger runs of sockeye generally occurring every 4 years. (Sockeye take about 4 years to mature -- 1 year as river dwelling fingerlings and 3 years as sub-adults feeding on plankton and small crustaceans in the productive ocean waters where deep water up-wellings occur). So while a bigger than usual run in 2010 had been expected, the wonderful and humbling thing about the massive numbers of sockeye this year is, that, despite all the research and huge sums invested in salmon management, no-one predicted just how big it would be and so far no-one can really explain it.

What you can say is that that many salmon in one place, fighting, spawning, thrashing, splashing and filling the rivers and creeks from bank to bank with their gorgeous deep plum red bodies is just stupendously, colossally awesome. It's one of the greatest wildlife spectacles on earth -- up there with the likes of the Serengeti wildebeest migration; the north American Monarch butterfly migrations; the nesting arribadas of tens of thousands of Olive Ridley sea turtles in central America; and the march of the Spiny Lobster. The Fraser River Sockeye Salmon run of 2010 is a massive celebration of bio-abundance that was not to be missed -- certainly worth the trifling hassle of rescheduling flights home.

Part Two

Canadians and Australians have much in common. We share the same queen on our coins, similar democratic institutions, a similar history of colonization and conquering frontiers (with similar tragic consequences for the original owners), same language and a similar dry sense of humour and understatement. But our lands are geological epochs apart and Canada, unlike my brown and sunburnt land, is awash with water. There are rivers, streams, and creeks every few steps. Every Canadian either has a cabin in the woods by a lake or knows someone who does. Of course, having lots of rain and snow helps keeps these rivers
Canada is also blessed with colossal mountains and fertile soils - a truly rugged and geologically young landscape shaped by glaciers and recent volcanic activity. Australia, by comparison, is an ancient and flat dustbowl. Our mountains have been worn down to mere stubs compared to the heaven-reaching proportions of the Canadian Rockies. And with the exception of fertile, better watered pockets on our coastal fringe, Australian soils are impoverished and our rivers and creeks barely run at all.

Some facts and figures -- North America receives over 800mm of annual precipitation and has an annual river discharge of 1.3 m (this a continent average and includes southern arid USA so the Canadian river flow is actually much greater than this). In contrast, Australia receives around 450 mm of rain and our rivers are the barest trickle with an annual river discharge of just 35 mm – about 37 times less than north America. (Note: see http://www.bom.gov.au/info/leaflets/ourcont.pdf).

Of course Australia's rainfall is highly variable and when our rivers actually run it's often in cataclysmic floods -- made worse by our treatment of the land as though it were a well-watered paradise with fertile and robust soils like the England that early farmers arrived from. Australia is truly a land of droughts and flooding rains –but the floods are infrequent and unpredictable.

It's the volume and predictability of the Canadian rivers that made them the highways of the developing nation of Canada. Plus the landscape, for the most part, was just so rugged and impenetrable that rivers provided the only passage. The Canadian landscape is a patchwork of old trading routes and trading posts determined by catchment geography and the trading activities of First Nations who bartered goods across hundreds and even thousands of kilometres. Later in Canada's history, enormous trading empires like the mighty Hudson Bay Company pulsed through these arteries of the Canadian economy – borne along on trading canoes of all shapes and sizes. Any Canadian can tell you what portage means while I suspect many Australians have never even been in a canoe. Railways, and in more recent times, sealed highways have now replaced old river routes, and trains and trucks have replaced canoes. But waterborne passengers and commerce still prevail in rugged wilderness areas like coastal BC; and of course, canoes and river journeys remain part of Canadian history and folklore.

Rivers aren't just highways for people of course. They are also transport corridors for wildlife such as fish. And a highway/railway analogy suits the Fraser River with its multitude of tributaries each with its own unique salmon stock. All five of the Pacific salmon species occur in the Fraser River and there are 150 (genetically) distinct salmon stocks that return to the tributary of the Fraser River where they were born. Each stock migrates and spawns at distinct times so the Fraser River, at any time from May to November, is carrying multiple distinct salmon stocks of several different species, with different origins and different destinations and different schedules. The timetable would be as complicated as that of Canada Rail.

Imagine it from a sockeye salmon’s perspective. They are born in rivers and streams as
much as 500 or even 1000 km from the sea. After a hazardous year of scrounging an
existence in freshwater they migrate downstream to the ocean. Whilst at sea they travel
tens of thousands of kilometres in their search for food for their rapidly growing bodies.
After 3 years or so they gather into schools with their close relatives and begin their long
migration back to the exact river of their birth. They stop feeding as they enter freshwater
and their bodies change shape and colour dramatically as they travel upstream. These new
look salmon have only one thing on their mind – sex.

Travelling some 30km a day, the sockeye must surmount major obstacles like rapids and
waterfalls, avoid getting misled into joining a different salmon stock, and then find again
the river, creek or stream where they were born. It’s a high risk life style -- only 1 in every
4000 eggs laid makes it back up the river to spawn. But it’s probably just as well -- otherwise
25 million salmon laying up to 8000 eggs per couple would have most of British Columbia
knee deep in salmon in just a few years.

It’s a bit of mystery how the salmon find their birthplace – scientists point to stellar
navigation and the smell of their river. Local folklore certainly supports the importance
of river smell. When Hells Gate Canyon in the Fraser River was blocked by rock falls during
the construction of the Trans-Canada railway in 1913, fish ladders were built to help fish
around it. (Fish ladders are built as a series of stepped pools that the salmon can leap or
swim between to ascend a barrier that is otherwise too high to leap up). According to
local folklore, one salmon stock was stalled at the bottom of the newly-installed ladder,
seemingly unable to proceed. An inspired salmon expert released a truck full of water from
the salmon’s home river down the ladder and the salmon were soon on their way again up
the ladders. A truck-full of water into the mighty Fraser is just a drop in a very, very large
bucket.

Canadians, like Australians, appreciate irony. And the great irony of the unexpected
immensity of the 2010 Fraser River salmon run is that it coincides with an official enquiry
into why the Fraser River salmon fishery has collapsed. Over-fishing, habitat loss, increases
in predator numbers, and new diseases and genetic weakening arising from the escape
of salmon from salmon farms, as well as just plain bad fisheries management, have all
been blamed for the massive declines over the last few decades. And the declines have
undeniably happened. But the massive rebound in numbers remains largely unexplained
and has even raised concerns that there are too many salmon now and their spawning will
be damaged by their own sheer numbers.

Too many salmon also means that the price drops and in fact many fishermen claim that
the oversupply means they can’t even sell their catch even though the fishing season has
been limited to a few periods of just 32 hours. Back in August in Bella Bella, coastal BC,
some 50 000 salmon from the Fraser River fishery, were delivered to the 1400 Heiltsuk
residents as part of the First Nations allocation of the catch. Its just as well the Heiltsuk
are an industrious mob because the backyard canneries, smokehouses, drying racks and
barbeques had to work over time for a week processing the fish for winter stores to come.
Salmon drive economies and ecosystems in BC. They are a hot topic of discussion, and
opinions are as diverse as the salmon stocks themselves. But there is no doubt about the
respect and affection Canadians have for their salmon.
Part Three

The Adams River, part of the Fraser River system, is a major spawning ground for sockeye. In 1977 the Roderick Haig-Brown Provincial Park was established along the Adams River to protect some 65 ha of the “finest sockeye spawning grounds in British Columbia” – and in 2010, two million sockeye salmon are expected to try them out. In their honour, locals hold a “Salute to the Sockeye Festival” – an event that happens once every 4 years to celebrate the “majesty, beauty and tragically poignant life of the Pacific Sockeye Salmon” (http://www.salmonsociety.com/). The 2010 Salute, with two million sockeye salmon as guests of honour, and 300 000 humans to salute them, is the shindig to be at. The opening day extravaganza had speeches, bands and dancing and performances from amongst the record 23 entries in the best song about salmon competition. Local politicians were on hand to smooch a salmon for that photo-op. Community service groups and a hundred or so volunteers gathered en-masse to run the month long event and manage the traffic gridlock and the visitors who come to witness one of the largest single aggregations of spawning sockeye on earth.

And I’ve been low flying up the mountain highway to be here to see it…

I’m here on day 3 and it’s still a carnival -- information booths, artist stalls, food caravans, picnic grounds, dozens of yellow buses disgorging hundreds of excited school kids. Some 63 school buses visited in one day at the 2006 salute and 2010 is dwarfing that event. Its mayhem in the multiple parking lots while hundreds of excited, fascinated and reverent humans line the river banks. Fingers point, cameras flash and hushed and excited voices fill the air. To avoid the crush I walk some 5 km up-river and its salmon, salmon, salmon all the way. Salmon thrashing, splashing and fighting, locking jaws and biting at tails and bodies. Every fish bears scars from fights and the long arduous swim through shallows, rapids and waterfalls. Mating pairs rest together every few metres or so, or circle each other, maybe sizing each other up. Others, past the introductions, are a side-down thrashing the gravel bed with their tails to create a small hollow into which the female releases here eggs. The male follows doing a little shimmy as he ejaculates.

From overhead it looks like the entire river bed has measles except there is constant movement between the red splashes of colour. In backwaters and slower flowing pools, huge balls of salmon congregate to rest. They have travelled over 450km to get here and it’s not surprising they are a little tired and bruised. Hundreds of dorsal fins pierce the surface and the water fades between red and black with the movement of gargantuan numbers of fish. The water is shallow, fish are easy to catch and bears and eagles grow fat at this time. The bears on the Adams River hunt at night -- too shy perhaps to face the many visitors but their salmon-rich droppings and dismembered dead salmon are obvious on the river banks. As they rot they will provide a massive injection of fertiliser to the riverside forests. The abundance of life here is overwhelming but so is the abundance of death. Every few minutes a newly dead salmon, its red colour already fading, drifts past.

But under water, swimming with the salmon, is where I want to be. With a well-fed bear grumbling in the bushes nearby, I don my dry suit, mask and snorkel and slide into the water. It’s cold…like really, really, really f*cking cold and I can feel it through several layers
of thermals. My face is numb and my head is crushed with an ice-cream cold of Olympic proportions. But the discomfort evaporates as the salmon, momentarily dispersed by my entry, begin to mill around me.

It's the sockeye that grab my attention first with their bright red bodies and green grey heads. The massive humpback and upturned snout and big curved teeth of the males gives them a ferocious look. I momentarily wonder what would happen if they were to turn on me like piranhas. An angry mob of salmon weighing 4 kg apiece and 70-80 cm long could do a bit of damage. But despite the big teeth and an attitude problem, the sockeye are really just a swimming gonad driven by hormones and I'm just a log, or rock or another yet another thing to swim around. We get used to each other and quickly the encircling crowd of red-green bodies fills my vision. Many bear stark white scars from their long upriver journey, fights, mishaps at waterfalls and rapids, and narrow escapes from hungry bears and eagles.

Amongst the sockeye, like dark battle-weary submarines, gigantic chinook salmon appear occasionally. It's definitely sockeye night at the prom though and most of the chinook can't find a date, but every so often a pair get lucky and the happy couple waltz together among the sockeye like basketball players at a midget's ball.

Lurking bewildered amongst the ruby resplendence of the sockeye are drably-dressed jack salmon. These are juveniles that, for inexplicable reasons, have followed their older cousins upriver and now find themselves date-less and frock-less and without a way home. I find them vaguely disturbing – reminding me of a recurrent childhood nightmare in which I arrive at school half-naked having forgotten to don my underwear and trousers.

The sleekest players are the brook trout, darting through the crowd in fine shape, silver grey with spots and a healthy pink glow. They are in heaven, feeding and fattening on the mega-abundance of salmon eggs that litter the gravel creek bed. And swirling slowly in back eddies and hollows, or drifting past in the current's embrace, are the battered bodies of dead salmon. Wedged under a log, I watch the passing parade of life and death for hours until my hand, lifeless and numb from the cold, can't depress the shutter button anymore. It's time to get out.

It's a gorgeous blue sky warm day and the warmth is slowly returning to my body. For a self-confessed fish lover (I firmly believe that time spent watching fish is not deducted from your life span), it's been the greatest show on earth. But my excitement is tempered by the knowledge that soon, very soon, all these fish will be dead and their ripe, red bodies lifeless and still. In life is death.

Already the ripe stench of decaying fish fills the air. Battered, scarred and rotting bodies squelch under my feet. Trapped in the carpet of my car, the smell will remain with me for the long drive back to Vancouver, reminding me that all is impermanent. The irony is that if you came unknowingly to the Adams River, the stench and the piles of rotting fish would seem an environmental disaster of monumental proportions. Yet it's a scene of a river ecosystem in the best of health --and of one of the great planetary cycles in full swing. I'm going to leave the final words of this story to the late Roderick Haig-Brown,
conservationist, author and magistrate and someone I would have enjoyed watching fish
with. In his book, The Salmon, written in 1974, Roderick said:

“The salmon runs are a visible symbol of life, death and regeneration, plain for all to see and
share... The salmon are a test of a healthy environment, a lesson in environmental needs.
Their abundant presence on the spawning beds is a lesson of hope, of deep importance for
the future of man. If there is ever a time when the salmon no longer return, man will know
he has failed again and moved one stage nearer to his own final disappearance”.

Long live the salmon.
In Berlin I was without sleep. My evenings started late, after dinner was done and gone. The last drops of wine were drunk and the others in the house would head to bed. I would also go to my room, but turn on my laptop. The silver glow of it filled the room and my fingers would begin to fly across the keys.

At that time of year in Berlin, of course the night did not begin until at least ten. As darkness lengthened, a race would begin, to get as much from the night as possible – before the birds woke at 4, sometimes 5am, and the light would start to slip in from beneath the blinds. An hour or more passed, the others would start to move in the house. The shower would run, a downstairs toilet would flush. I would smell coffee. This is when I would be forced to my bed. I’d hit save, gently close the lid of my laptop. Eye mask on, earplugs in, and try to pretend it was much earlier in the night than it was, and desperately hope again for sleep.

My early days in Berlin were clunky. I was unable to find work. Friends wondered what I did with my days. Frankly so did I. I rolled thick round German words over my tongue, and rode the trains around. I built the map of Berlin in my head, day-by-day, station-by-station. I got out at Friedrichstraße and walked all around, trying to work out the borders, where the wall went, and which building held the Tranenpalast – the palace of tears. I went to Zoo station and read a short story about it written by someone else, while I ate a bratwurst on the street. It made me want to write about Zoo station too. The short story I mean – not the bratwurst.

My new friends in Berlin welcomed me warmly. My German crept along, as we blew the dust off their English. An old friend I came to be with was kind and patient as she translated so much between me and everyone else. We drank Radlers, and moved from one plate of Spargel to the next. We walked and walked. We drove laps of Kreuzberg looking for new and interesting cafes, and I looked longingly at Görlitzer Park – wanting a day with a book in the grass. But waking in the afternoon and moving blearily through the week made any kinds of outings seem too much. Tomorrow I’d say, and then wouldn’t go.

Sunlight streamed down upon Unter Den Linden. Tourists rumbled over it, many with no sense of it. I would see them with their cameras and my mind would fill with black and white images of women picking vegetables in this very place. Back when Pariser Platz fed a starving city. Back when the zoo animals roamed the streets. I wondered what music people played when the wall came down. It’s always urban, pop music, bouncy and joyous in my imaginings - music for dancing and squealing to. But then I read about a man with a violin, how when the wall came down he played for the people, tears streaming down his cheeks, and I imagined this was in a less graffitied part of town.

The nightlife in Berlin was elusive. It was there, all around me, but I strolled hesitantly on the sidelines, unsure of unspoken rules, wondering if they’d let me in. Friends invited me
to a bar for singles over 30. There were a handful of people there. The DJ was under 25. I
ordered a white wine spritzer and shifted weight from one foot to the other in enormously
high shoes. Bar staff offered complimentary shots of Schnapps. We left to another bar, and
then another, then ate Haloumi burgers dripping with garlic sauce at 2 am in Friedrichshain.
There was chatter and laughter from a night that was just okay and I tried hard to navigate
cobblestones in stilettos.

With a brief visit to us from the elusive summer sun, a trip to Wannsee was planned. My
friend and I rode our bikes to the station and talked all the way from Hohenschönehausen
to West Kreuz, where we changed trains. We nearly lost all we carried as we struggled with
the bikes on the escalators, changing platforms to make the next Potsdam train. We got
there and the sun folded us up into itself as we stepped out into the street at Wannsee,
pushed a foot down on the pedal, to mount our bikes and let the warm breeze be with us.

The lake sparkled, the boats danced, and nobody really spoke English, except for one
old sailor who worked for the US air force for 30 years. He had welcomed dignitaries and
talked about many red carpet events, and fabulous soirees. Now he waters the grass at
the boat club, cleans his boat and drinks beers with the other members. We were young
and sun kissed in comparison. They grumbled at our arrival then we woke to fresh warm
bread rolls they bought for us, and discovered the coffee was made. They thought we were
backpackers. We explained that our combined age was more than seventy, which made us
older than them, and that our hostel days were long behind us.

The first month in Berlin passed and then the next and I started to get used to the sandy
feeling in my eyes, the groggy sensation through my afternoons. There is a strange transit
place between travel and residence, which I lived in. My nights were spent on other
people’s sofa beds, and I longed for a fluent English conversation. The more time passed,
the less control I had over language – mine and theirs. I made strange sentences that
affected my personality and meant I was different here than how I was at home. This
happened effortlessly, and without intent. I wanted people to laugh at all the funny things
I said but I would misjudge German humour, the meaning would be lost in their translation
and the moment became awkward. I was treading water, waiting for a wave of some kind
to carry me to solid ground.

Germans are really impressed I have come so far; from a wondrous land with stunning
landscapes and deathly wildlife, that it seems every German dreams to visit but doesn’t
because it really is just too far. It was this that stirred my discontent. Constantly. If only
they would stop reminding me just how far away from home I am. Nobody can believe
I would have left such a place for Berlin, and they were really pleased that I could speak
any German at all. I am still unsure why I am here, but the instinct to stay outweighs all
concerns. Being a writer is a life to be spent in Paris, or in an artsy corner café in London.
But London was wrong, and Paris seemed too much – too flouncy, too pink, too much the
‘city on display’. Berlin was where people just lived life and men played the tuba while
walking down the middle of Kastanienallee on a drizzly Tuesday afternoon.

I took two trams and a bus to an address in Moabit but the bookshop I was looking for was
no longer there – not even a trace of it. There was a hair salon in its place, and the smells
and movement of Asian Europe hung in the streets. I went to Dussmans bookstore’s English section in Friedrichstraße and knew that unemployed people didn’t buy books there, so only browsed, afraid to put fingerprints on the glossy new publications. I wondered if they might have a job for me but was intimidated by the stern faced Frau at the information desk, so didn’t ask.

I remembered the free lunchtime concert I planned to go to at the Berliner Philharmonie and wondered if I could get there in time, if I could stay awake through it. I decide I couldn’t do either and got the U Bahn to Mehringdamm instead. I walked around streets, stumbling across a 2nd hand book store, full of glorious books in my language. It was like the cousin you don’t see often, who always looks unwashed, and wants to borrow money, but who everyone really likes. I stepped inside and smelt what I had been looking for. Stale carpet, old warm beer, and the collective skin cells of thousands of hands, rubbed off by lamplight in bed, onto pages and covers and spines. Broken backed books, with a light layer of Sunday-by-the-Spree on them, or the gentle crush that comes from being stuffed into already full bags, to bounce around in the basket of a bike, or to be rolled and stuffed into a coat pocket as a coffee is ordered and a quiet table in the corner chosen.

Berlin begins to seep into me, but the yearning for a sense of belonging is all consuming. I realize it will be years before this happens, and I don’t feel I have that much time spare. Day by day I make plans, and then new plans, and then more plans. Berlin wakes and sleeps and I continue to stumble and bounce from one decision to the next, from one moment of longing to another.

I’m on the S-bahn at dusk, surrounded by strangers. Language restrains me from fully engaging in this world. All I can do is feel it and move through it. I can only hope instinct will help me survive the months of uncertainty ahead, and the long cold Berlin winter. The train curves around a set of buildings. The sun is yellow and gold at once and in a sudden display of dazzling glory, the Fernsehturm appears. My heart swells. We roll into Alexanderplatz, over the bustle of Hackescher Markt. The Spree appears, Museum Insel and the lush leafy tops of Tiergarten. We glide into the sparkling hub of Hauptbanhoff and I prepare to step off the train. Any day now it will pass. I will look up to find I have come out of my Berlin daze. But that day has not come yet.
No direction home: Race and belonging in a frontier town
Glenn Morrison

In 1984, author Xavier Herbert packed his Landrover and a purpose-built trailer fitted with solar generating plant for a last trip to inland Australia. He was going back to the Territory to write a book about Alice Springs. Herbert had started visiting the Centre after his wife Sadie died five years earlier. He’d felt something special in the desert, so special that when he arrived in Central Australia he said: “I’ve come home. This is my country and I don’t want to be anywhere else.” Herbert died that same year, but before he passed away he told historian Shirley Brown: “I’ve never been happier in my life since I’ve been over here.” Australian author Nikki Gemmell calls Alice Springs her “great good place”, a term she borrows from writer Henry James. She explains the phrase as “a cherished place that brings you to stillness and calm.” Travel diva and “camel lady” Robyn Davidson revisited the Centre in 2005 from her home in London, aiming, she said, to “lay to rest the ghost of Australia”. Instead she discovered the Red Centre was still in her blood.

What was it about Alice Springs that so affected these writers? Elsewhere I have written of my own experience arriving in Alice Springs in 1998, and an overwhelming bodily sense of coming home. Walking the hills that so warmly embrace the town only cemented this strange notion, until, as I climbed to the top of a giant slab of quartzite I later learned was called the Heavitree Range, I wondered why on earth a working-class white musician from Sydney might get such a strong and inexplicable sense of homecoming. Seemed to me Aboriginal people had walked these hills for generations before I had; surely it was their home. Fifteen years later — and in the meantime having made Alice Springs my home — this question still puzzles me: What is home? How do you know when you belong? And who has the right?

In 1949, the French philosopher Simone Weil wrote that to put down roots is “… perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” Over the years, this yearning to belong has emerged as a matter of deepest concern to some Australians, and, in particular to Central Australians — black and white — for whom a sense of belonging is a fraught matter from day to day. In the aftermath of colonialism, the Land Rights struggle, the history wars, and numerous reconciliation marches in Sydney and elsewhere, there has emerged a framing belief that black Australians have a stronger sense of belonging to this land than whites. As anthropologist David Trigger points out of Australians generally “just who has rights to place and nature, in what ways and with what degree of a sense of autochthonous indigeneity is a contested matter.” Many Australians find the question of a ‘moral right’ to belong deeply offensive: it threatens their sense of birth right. Such arguments prompt brash and provocative articulations of the issue, such as that of poet Les Murray, who coined the phrase “not indigenous, merely born here.”

Colonialism arrived in Central Australia with explorer John McDouall Stuart, who walked through the region in 1860 paving the way for the Overland Telegraph Line, cattle,
settlement and a frontier period in which an estimated 500 — and perhaps as many as 1000 — Central Australian Aborigines were shot. The frontier period ended, some argue, with the massacre at Coniston, roughly 200km north-west of Alice Springs, in 1928. The episode falls within living memory for some Aboriginal people of the Centre. Others believe Alice Springs is still a frontier, and it is frequently represented as such in literature, media and film. Through an analysis of the region’s extensive literature, historian Mickey Dewar and others have linked the craggy red spine of the West MacDonnell and this same frontier narrative to representations of an Australian identity. Given the region’s mythic status, it is disturbing Australians are still nagged by this existential itch, an unsettling irritation over how to deal with a past from which more and more stories emerge of colonial violence against Aborigines. Take author Paul Newbury, who agonises “I reach out for a sense of belonging because I do not want to be forever an immigrant in Aboriginal land.” Newbury asks how he might acknowledge history while getting on with the business of living with some sense of righteousness in a land once not his own; alongside Aboriginal people, not instead of them. Historian Peter Read would call this a “moral sense of belonging.”

In a 2011 government study aiming to address Alice Springs social woes, community engagement specialist Jane Munday asked residents what they loved about the town. Central Australia is memorable for its scenery, so along with “economic opportunity,” it was not surprising the most common responses embraced community, landscape and spirit; in other words, a sense of place. Non-indigenous apprehension of this landscape is, however, heavily mediated by technology. One has only to walk through town on a hot day to notice Aboriginal people sitting under the shade of trees when most whites have scrambled for the air-conditioning. Nevertheless, landscape is an important part of a western sense of Alice Springs. Yet ask a local and they will find it hard to articulate exactly what the attraction is. Some defer to Aboriginal culture. A recent dinner guest of ours offered: “There is still a lot of Aboriginal ceremony practised here. Could that be having some effect?” Sense of place is an elusive term, and in my experience the easiest way to convey it is via its most resonant manifestation: a sense of home.

The Macquarie Dictionary defines ‘home’ as a house or other shelter, the fixed residence of a person, a family or a household; a “place or region where something is native or most common”. Everything begins and ends in the home; it is the start and finish of every journey. When one does not have a home, one is cast into the void to become what geographer Edward Relph calls “placeless” like Bob Dylan’s Rolling Stone, with no direction, no orientation toward meaning. The notions of sense of place and belonging are closely allied and Weil entwines them as “rootedness”: “A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain expectations for the future.” Local Akarre woman Margaret Kemarre Turner puts it this way: “When we’re on our own country, we feel really at home. Not only at home, but we really relate to the place itself, to the country. Because the country is part of us, part of the generations . . .”

I recall being lost as a toddler at busy Paddy’s market in Sydney’s Haymarket area, and have since associated this childhood memory with the feeling of “being uprooted” and “placeless”. There came a paralysing alienation; I was in limbo, disconnected from surroundings which only moments before were an adventure: where Italian grocers juggled gleaming tomatoes, feathers flew from a squawking chicken as it leapt from cage and keeper, and spruikers touted cheap wares from every direction. When my mother disappeared from view, however, those same spruikers and vendors became a danger, enemies to be mistrusted. In my mind, home is a safety zone, even if it is portable and
takes the form of your mother.

In my community engagement work of the past three years, I have often enjoyed the company of giggling Aboriginal children on the Alice Springs town camps. Yet there are times I feel they find themselves in the same predicament I was in at Paddy’s market: fearful and lost, no direction home. I am told Western notions of home are nothing compared to the traditional Aboriginal concept. The anthropologist W.H. Stanner wrote as much when he said: “Our word ‘home’, warm and suggestive though it may be, does not match the Aboriginal word that may mean ‘camp’, ‘hearth’, ‘country’, ‘everlasting home’, ‘totem place’, ‘life source’, ‘spirit centre’ and much else all in one.” Such linguistic inadequacy, according to Stanner, left us “tongueless and earless towards this other world of meaning and significance.”

I remain unconvinced; we are all humans, Aboriginal and non-indigenous, doing what humans do: making a place we can live. In David Malouf’s retelling of Plato’s story of Protagoras he defines the relationship between man and nature as one of “unrest” or “restlessness”, sketching man as:

man the maker, whose peculiar gift is craft or techne, the capacity to forge, shape, fashion; to take a world that had no place for him and make it his own. To turn wilderness into a fruitful landscape and lay down roads to move on...

The key is here: “to turn wilderness into a fruitful landscape and lay down roads to move on”. Westerners have long perceived the Aboriginal sense of place as dependent on a ‘primitive’ positioning as part and parcel of nature: the mythologised ecological Aborigine, at the mercy of, and yet in harmony with the environment. Historian Bill Gammage argues the converse, that Aboriginal people consciously engineered pre-colonial Australia through a co-ordinated and precise firing of the landscape for hunting and grazing by native animals. Says geographer Lesley Head: “Far from being wilderness across which hunter-gatherers wandered aimlessly leaving little more than footprints, this is home: country named, known, curated and ordered” While it appalls many that western modernity is usurping an emplaced and ecologically masterminded hunter-gatherer lifestyle, this does not negate the fact that the same basic intent permeates both points of view: to make a place in the world. This, I realise finally, is my search: for resonances, linkages between worldviews, and perhaps a counter to the constant argument and white noise of difference. Such commonalities are found in the writings of the German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, especially his notion of “dwelling”; for as geographer David Seamon notes: “as human beings, we cannot fail to dwell, for dwelling, ultimately, is the essential existential core of human being-in-the-world from which there is no escape.”

In her delightful short story Spirit Gate (2010), author Ali Cobby Eckerman imagines an Alice Springs in which all the Aboriginal people have left. Eckerman’s protagonist Trevor has been called back to Alice Springs on cultural business. He arrives to a town deserted by his countrymen. Streets are largely empty, many cafes have closed. Only whites are left, and they have lost not only a sense of purpose, but the basis for their economy. Some unemployed Centrelink workers have taken to public drinking; police are arresting those who have turned violent in a protest outside the courthouse. Here Eckermann turns upside down a notion that is heard from time to time in Alice Springs: that the best thing for Aboriginal people in the town would be for all the whitefellas to leave. The result throws into starker relief the question of why non-indigenous people live here.
There is humour in Eckermann’s analysis; her story reinforces that it is important for a community to laugh at itself. Yet clearly there exists a more concrete sense of place among the whites of Alice Springs than her narrative implies (which is that blacks are the only reason for whites to be here). This is true of some, of course, and it is often said the town runs on the Aboriginal dollar.\textsuperscript{31} But it is not true of all, and whether such motivations are all bad anyway is certainly open to question. Furthermore, rejecting one group in favour of another is, at the very least, unproductive. Elsewhere I have argued Alice Springs is a litmus test for Australia, a bold proving ground where black and white must learn to live together on the same red dirt.\textsuperscript{32} But prerequisite to this is the acknowledgement that both groups have a right to belong. To imagine anything else is to doom the town to failure.

When poet Barry Hill was writing the biography of anthropologist Ted Strehlow he realised Central Australia had gained a hold on him.\textsuperscript{33} Eventually he married there and returns regularly. Hill argues his bond with Alice is not all about transcendental matters; it’s about social geography, and, importantly, the place he was married.\textsuperscript{34} For a sense of place and belonging comes through our lived experience, as well as, Hugh Mackay suggests, what might be called “whitefella sacred sites”.\textsuperscript{35} White Australians have their own “places of mystical significance”: the local cenotaph, the Gabba, the WACA. Who could forget the pathos with which Paul Kelly declared his sense of place in \textit{Leaps and Bounds}, when he sang “I’m high on the hill, looking over the bridge, to the MCG”\textsuperscript{36}

This is not in any way to deny indigenous Australians their long-standing close cultural association with the landscape. But if, as my dinner guest implied, it is ritual that connects people to place, \textit{any} people, then, as Stephen Muecke points out “this happens not only with traditional ceremonies, but with modern ones.”\textsuperscript{37} Media academic Willa MacDonald argues sense of place and belonging in a landscape is all about the narratives we tell ourselves.\textsuperscript{38} North American nature writer Barry Lopez\textsuperscript{39} concurs with Native American author Louise Erdrich\textsuperscript{40} in arguing it is time and history which count in developing a considered sense of place. Meanwhile, historian Peter Read argues Aboriginal place consciousness should be the yardstick for measuring anyone else’s sense of belonging.\textsuperscript{41} Yet some Aboriginal people question the rights of other Australians to feelings of emplacement, indeed whether any sense of belonging they might acquire “would be morally inferior.”\textsuperscript{42} Stanner’s phrase “Whitefella got no dreaming” — indicating, roughly speaking, that settler Australians lack a cultural narrative with which to articulate their landscape — speaks to this question. In the struggle for a sense of themselves, the identity of Australians has become bound to this question of “nativeness”.

From such disarray emerges geographer Jeff Malpas, who argues a sense of belonging in place is tied to neither ownership nor length of residency, rather it is “an existential opportunity that presents itself to all.”\textsuperscript{43} Of course, this would make belonging independent of origin: the Asian migrant, the fifth generation Australian or the Arrernte woman from Central Australia all have equal right to a connection with the place they choose to live. In fact, this is reflected in the cultural openness of the Arrernte themselves: A strong advocate of Aboriginal law, the late Wenten Rubuntja has said \textit{all} children born in Alice Springs, \textit{both} Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, are spiritually connected to the Ayeparenye Caterpillar Dreaming.\textsuperscript{44} Even though Alice Springs was once a restricted area for Aborigines, he understood the town “as both an Arrernte place and a ‘white’ place.”\textsuperscript{45} This is not to imagine that migrants might have any right of claim, but such flexibility points a way forward. And it would seem to substantiate Dianne Austin-Broos’ assertion that contemporary Aboriginal society is not so much embracing a modernist worldview, as updating the traditional hunter-gatherer worldview, giving meanings to the objects of modernity they now find
In choosing a place to call home many Australians look for the best prospects for support, success or a good life. Yet there are other places, as author Don Watson suggests “where people live for the light and the breezes. They are addicted to the sensations of the place. It’s a physical, psychic or emotional attachment before it is anything that can be measured.”

Rubuntja’s openness, Watson’s breezes and Malpas’ hopeful philosophy would seem to argue for a more humanistic appraisal of place and belonging. And it is with this suggestion I conclude: that sense of place and belonging are phenomenological before they are in any way political. Whether one subscribes to a ‘settler’ or ‘invasion’ narrative of Australian history, it is important to acknowledge a sense of place as important to a healthy life, and in a way that honours both Aboriginal and non-indigenous groups. Central Australia is certainly pivotal in shaping a narrative of Australian identity, but beyond any soundings of nation there remains this physical feeling in one’s bones, a bodily knowing that begs questions of a human experience of environment. As MacDonald writes “human beings are connected somatically to our environments and discounting that primal connection is done at our peril.” Many argue a sense of place takes generations to develop. My experience suggests it can happen in a blink: sometimes the place claims the person, rather than the other way round.

Endnotes

4 The reference is to Henry James’ short story The Great Good Place first published in Scribner’s Magazine in 1900. James’ protagonist George fantasises about a ‘great good place’ to which he might escape his overworked existence. The story is retrievable here: http://www2.newpaltz.edu/~hathawar/goodplace.html
5 ‘Nikki Gemmell’ in John Marsden, (2004), I Believe This, Random House Australia p.100


11 Autochthonous has the solid ring of geology, indigenous certainly, but formed in situ, rather than descendant from migrants, invoking an unquestionable moral right to be in the place of your birth.


15 Rubuntja, W. with J. Green (2002) The Town Grew Up Dancing Jukurrpa Books: Alice Springs p29: Green notes that as many as 105 Aboriginal people died at Coniston, in what was the last recorded Australian massacre. The party responsible for the killing acknowledged 31 killed, yet all members were later exonerated by a government inquiry.


19 Read, P. (2000) Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P6: Read examines his own sense of primal place, developed in the places of his childhood – the “deep sandstone country north of Sydney”, in particular at Cowan Creek, which he first visited at age ten. Nearby is the site of an Aboriginal massacre, prompting him to ask: “How can we belong in places of our own intense pleasure but other’s intense pain.”


22 Weil S., (1949/2003:49)

30 Ali Cobby Eckermann 2010 ‘Spirit Gate’ in *This country anytime anywhere: an anthology of new indigenous writing from the Northern Territory*, Alice Springs: IAD Press
34 ABC’s Rachel Kohn interviewed Barry Hill, Peter Read and Robyn Rowland Sunday 3 October 2004 for a Radio National program entitled *Inspirited Landscapes*. The transcription for the interview can be retrieved here: http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/spiritofthings/inspirited-landscapes/3428368#transcript
35 Social commentator Hugh Mackay writes on this for *The Age* newspaper in Mackay, H. (2005) ‘A sense of place’ *The Age* October 15
36 Leaps and Bounds first appeared on the album *Gossip 1986* by Paul Kelly and the Coloured Girls; recorded May 1986, Trafalgar Studios / Trackdown Studios, Sydney, released through Mushroom records.
38 MacDonald, W., Op.Cit.
42 Trigger, D., Op.CIt
43 Malpas J, 1999 *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge
44 Rubuntja, W. and J. Green Op.Cit. p 175
45 Of course for part of its history Alice Springs was a restricted zone for Aboriginal people (See Rubuntja and Green 2002:73). Nevertheless Rubuntja saw the town as a domain for both peoples (Rubuntja and Green 2002: 50).
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James, H. (1900) *The Great Good Place*, retrieved here: http://www2.newpaltz.edu/~hathawar/goodplace.html


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A Desert Turned Into a Desert: 150 years of whitefella influence on the Central Australian landscape

Michael Giacometti

I didn’t expect it to be so green! is a fairly common comment I have heard from new arrivals to Alice Springs. Some expect a red Sahara. Many are surprised by the scale and extent of dry grassland and low scrub, where the only bits of red dirt evident are the straight-line scars of bush tracks extending into the outback.

But this is not the true nature of the Central Australian landscape – it is an invented one that has taken only 150 years to effect. The current view, of apparent lushness and greenery, of buffel-carpeted flats and blackened scrubs is not the ‘true’ landscape; nor is that of the early-1960s, of duststorms and red-dirt without a blade of grass; the former is a reaction to the latter, the latter a response to earlier trials. To appreciate how much the landscape has altered, we must go back to first contact times, the 1860s and 70s, and then step through wave upon wave of excess and their effects.

A landscape of desire

The European explorers of inland Australia had but two needs of the landscape: feed for their stock, and water. Their journals abound with the privations they experienced in what was, from a European sensibility, a landscape of desolation. There are many passages that could be quoted, but this, from Eyre in 1840, will suffice:

‘The very stones lying upon the hills looked like the scorched and withered scoria of a volcanic region, and even the natives, judging from the specimen I had seen today, partook of the general misery and wretchedness of the place.’

Rather than being a hostile barrier to endure and overcome, the very same landscape was where Aboriginal lived in relative comfort for thousands of years. They moved from water to water as required without exhausting the availability of meat and vegetable foods, which were plentiful. They cared for the land as an extension of themselves, and the land cared for them. Some areas, such as the well-watered gorges of the MacDonnell Range, were off-limits, thus providing sanctuary to plants and animals.

And in moving about their country they burned. European explorers of the Centre continually reported the presence of Aboriginal hunting fires. Fire cleared the ground of spinifex and other grasses, making it easier to walk and hunt, and created a patchwork of vegetation age. The spinifex grasslands were never of a homogenous density. The Walmajarri of the Great Sandy Desert region have five distinct names for spinifex country, ranging from newly burnt with fresh green shoots, through several years of growth, grass
density and difficulty of walking, to that which is unburnt for many years—impassable, with dead grass accumulating.3

The first European to reach the Centre was John McDouall Stuart in 1860. In his journal he often commented on the rich native grasslands he rode through, where the horses could feed without the need for water, such as near the Hugh River and Waterhouse Range:

‘… the country between last nights camp & the range is a red sandy soil with a few sand hill on which are growing the spinifex but the vallies [sic] between are broad & beautifully grassed, also a little mulga scrub but not thick … ’4

Stuart had already passed through some dense stands of mulga that shredded clothes and saddle bags, and Ernest Giles tackled many such scrubs in his 1870s expeditions. Mulga thickets were epitomised in the Rock Wallaby Song of the Arrernte, translated by linguist TGH Strehlow:

What a tangle of timber, what a tangle of timber!
This dense mulga is just one impenetrable thicket!5

I do not mean to suggest that the landscape of Central Australia was a paradise of meat and vegetable food and water. The land was provident but unreliable, with an average annual rainfall of about 30 centimetres and evaporation rate at ten times that amount drying any surface waters within days or weeks or months. It was a land that required an intimate knowledge of every rock and hill, every plant and animal, and the almost undetectable palaeo-drainage systems (visible only from space) that could only be intuited by a change in termite mounds and vegetation type, hinting at a concentration of nutrients and water, and so, good for burning and hunting.6 It was a landscape where flora and fauna responded to the cycles of dry and wet.∗ It was a landscape of adaptation, one that necessitated a nomadic lifestyle.

So how much could the landscape change in 150 years since Stuart, the first European, described it?

A landscape of need

Ten years after Stuart finally crossed the continent in 1862, enterprising pastoralists herded thousands of head of cattle north along the almost completed Overland Telegraph Line to take up leases in Central Australia that were larger in area than European nations.

In consequence of Stuart’s description, Owen Springs Station was one of the first. But unlike Stuart who passed through, these new Europeans stayed. They stopped beside the most reliable waters with the best grassland—and gave it all to their cattle. They built houses and fences. They conducted stern reprisals for spearing stock. They had papers for the land; the waters were now theirs to control.

What the pastoralists sought was some consistency and reliability from a landscape whose
reliably unreliable cycles did not marry well with their ever-increasing needs. One or two good rain seasons could be followed by up to ten years of very marginal conditions (to which the native flora and fauna had adapted), but the pastoralists needed a consistently regular supply of water and grass feed in order to be profitable. This unreliability of rainfall and the need to drought-proof the land led to the sinking of wells throughout their property. As such, surface water was made available in places where before there was none, bringing birds and kangaroos to these newly-created oases.

A severe drought, a plague of extinctions

In the 1920s, ‘… kangaroos, rock wallabies, and many smaller marsupials abounded in these ranges, emus still wandered about in considerable numbers across the plains,’ commented TGH Strehlow. ‘Bush vegetable foods were also plentiful. … the berries, fruits, river yams, acacia seeds, and yelka bulbs … grew so profusely in the Centre.’ But through several inter-related acts, it suddenly changed.

“Our country has been turned into a desert by the senseless whites”, many of the older Aranda* used to tell me thirty years ago,’ Strehlow commented in the late 1970s, ‘as they pointed to a land sadly reduced from its former state of fertility by years of unprecedented drought and overstocking, and by millions of introduced rabbits. They commented bitterly on the swift destruction of the natural food plants and the almost extinction of the formerly abundant species of marsupials."

In a mid-1980s study, zoologist AA Burbidge and others ‘… estimated that over one-third of mammal species of the central desert has vanished in the last fifty years.’ Older Aboriginal people across the central desert region, many of whom ‘still retain a profound knowledge of the mammals’ were shown museum skins of native mammals collected by zoologists between 1894 and 1955. They were asked if the mammals were ever found in their country, their names, and whether they were still alive or finished up. From their investigations they concluded: ‘The mammal fauna of the central deserts was richer and more widespread than generally believed, but the area has suffered a massive and sudden loss of species, probably unparalleled in extent elsewhere in Australia."

Confirmed extinctions were many, and mainly of small mammals: Western Quoll, Numbat, three species of Bandicoot, Lesser Bilby, two Bettongs, Central Hare-wallaby, Crescent Nailtail Wallaby, two Stick-nest Rats. Several mammals presumed extinct were reported alive in isolated and vulnerable pockets: Mulgara (Dasycercus cristicauda), Red-tailed Phascogale (Phascogale calura), Rufous Hare-wallaby or Mala (Lagorchestes hirsutus). And others that were once common and widespread were now severely reduced in range and vulnerable: Common brushtail possum (Trichosurus vulpecular), described by Baldwin Spencer of the Horn Scientific Expedition in 1894 as ‘ubiquitous’; Greater bilby (Macrotus lagotis) ‘extremely common’; Spectacled hare-wallaby (Lagorchestes conspicillatus) ‘far from uncommon’.

Burbidge concluded that this mass of extinctions and loss of habitat range (from country that was not run as cattle stations) was due to a combination of factors: predation by feral
animals (mainly cats\textsuperscript{15*}, but also foxes); competition for grazing with feral animals (rabbits, and also cattle in settled areas); and most importantly, changes in the fire regime (from small patchwork fires that produced a mixed vegetation of different ages to infrequent but extensive fires depriving the land of a diversity of habitat, food and shelter for native animals) brought about by the forced removal of Aboriginal people from the land into missions and settlements in the 1940s and 50s.\textsuperscript{13}

And it is not just native fauna that has vanished or become vulnerable to extinction. John McDouall Stuart remarked several times about the abundance of native cucumber (\textit{Cucumis melo}) in his 1860 expedition journal. But according to botanist Peter Latz, this annual creeper which produced a nutritious and highly sought fruit by Aboriginal people, is now rare and restricted in range. The fruit is a favourite of the emu and cattle. Emus pass the seeds in scats completely undigested, symbiotically allowing their spread in ready-made fertiliser; cattle, however, are able to digest the seed, so it does not regrow from cattle grazing.\textsuperscript{14}

At the height of the rabbit plague in the early 1950s there were an estimated six million rabbits in Australia.\textsuperscript{15} They had entered the Northern Territory from the southeast in the 1890s, and by 1910 were at the Tanami goldfields.\textsuperscript{16} ‘Moving masses of rabbits ring-barked the young trees and nibbled at the roots of the perennial fodder plants’\textsuperscript{17} causing devastating erosion by leaving the topsoil exposed to the effects of wind and rain. In Central Australia this was exacerbated by cattle in competitive grazing, leaving a completely barren earth. The release of the Myxoma virus severely reduced the rabbit population\textsuperscript{18} but the land was unable to recover before long-term low rainfall conditions returned to the Centre, lasting from 1957 to the mid-1960s.\textsuperscript{19}

The miracle grass

With severe drought strangling Central Australia, Strehlow noted in 1965 that ‘The modern Central Australian landscape has changed for the worse to an unbelievable degree … [the result] partly of the vicious overstocking of the country by white station men … partly of that long series of mediocre rainfall years’\textsuperscript{20}—the drought of the 1920s, and more severely, that of the 1950s (which was unbroken at the time of his writing). Images from the early-1960s depict a red dirt plain completely devoid of grasses and small shrubs.\textsuperscript{21} Severe dust storms ravaged the region as there was no ground cover to hold the sand and soil in check, causing greater erosion.

As a result, government agencies (including the CSIRO) and cattlemen released the seeds of Buffel Grass (\textit{Cenchrus ciliaris}) on many NT pastoral stations (from Mongrel Downs to Argadargada, to New Crown and Mt Cavanagh, and especially around Alice Springs) in 1961, and continued seedings of buffel varieties for a decade.\textsuperscript{22} Jim Brown, the owner of White Gums Station just east of Alice Springs wrote of that time from the perspective of the economic potential of the land:

‘Trying to reclaim the land … [from] utter devastation … in the midst of a drought would break most people. The only tool that they had to hand was buffel grass …
It was not until some 15 years later that their work was fulfilled. They changed the landscape from hopeless poverty to promised prosperity.23

The introduction of buffel grass was a qualified success. The severe dust storms have not recurred24 and buffel can provide good feed for cattle25 because it is drought and fire resistant.26

Buffel is a strong, deep-rooted perennial grass27 that prefers sandy and sandy loam soils28 such as on riverbanks, plains and foothills. It is dormant during winter, but recovers quickly with warm weather. It can flower most of the year, usually after rain, and spreads its seeds by wind and water. Buffel is now endemic across all of Central and Northern Australia, and is still spreading.29 In some areas it has completely taken over from native plants, as can be seen in the thick buffel-carpet around Alice Springs, or along major streams, such as along the Hugh River at Owen Springs.

In 1860, Stuart described what he eventually called Owen Springs as ‘a splendid hole of water … large and deep with rushes growing round it’30 adding when he returned the following year ‘… good feeding country all round with a small strip of salt bush on the banks, splendid gum trees in the creek’31. On investigating this site in 2012, I found profound changes. The gum trees still line the creek channels, and the waterhole is ringed with rushes and reeds, but the sandy creek bed, banks and floodplain are choked with knee high couch and buffel grass. There is no evidence of saltbush, or of good native grassland.

In the West MacDonnell National Park, 57 introduced plant species (weeds) have been recorded. Of these, ‘Buffel Grass is recognised as the most significant threat to biodiversity values … due to its capacity to change fire regimes by increasing the intensity and frequency of fire.’ The ‘highest concentrations [of buffel] occur along watercourses’ which provide avenues of seed dispersal. ‘In the last 20 years it has spread rapidly, despite the considerable resources expended on its control’ and is ‘spreading’.32

The other major environmental weed displacing native flora is Couch grass (Cynodon dactylon) which grows in and chokes the sandy river beds and flood channels. It ‘has altered long-term fuel loads in most rivers and many swamps’33 because it grows much denser than any of the displaced native species.

Which brings us to the flip side of the buffel miracle—fire.

Fire has been integral in shaping the vegetation communities of Central Australia, mainly through traditional Aboriginal burning practices. ‘The sheltered gorges, dissected terrain, low grazing intensity’ by kangaroos and patchwork burning of spinifex and native grasslands ‘have enabled many fire sensitive habitats to persist.’34

And fire continues to shape the landscape, but with possibly devastating consequences. Buffel grass is fire-resilient (i.e. it is not killed by fire) and encourages fire for regrowth. I have seen the scorched earth of a buffel grassland fire where, within a week, the blackened ground is dotted with new green buffel grass shoots. It can regrow, flower and set seed so quickly that it is ready to carry fire again the following year.35 It is this vigorous regrowth
that allows buffel to spread so quickly, displacing native grasses which are lighter, softer, and grow less dense. Consequently, with the spread of buffel, fire now affects areas where previously it was not part of the established ecosystem.

In the natural landscape, sandy creek beds act as firebreaks, but along buffel-infested creeks the opposite occurs. The creek beds become ‘channels for spreading fires rather than stopping them’. And these buffel-fuelled fires burn hotter, as there is more fuel to burn, and many native plants – grasses, shrubs and trees – are unable to cope with the increased frequency and intensity of fire. You only need to walk along the Larapinta Trail west from Simpsons Gap to Bond Gap to observe the effect: a mono-species carpet of buffel grass beneath dead stand after dead stand of mulga.

With more available fuel to burn, the risk of large wildfires increases, often fuelled by weeds. About half of the West MacDonnell National Park burnt in the extreme fire seasons of 2001-02, and large-scale wildfires raged across much of Central Australia in 2011-12 after the wettest year on record in 2010.

But according to pastoralist Jim Brown there is a solution: ‘The one and only sensible way of controlling the fire hazard that can be created by buffel is to graze it.’ And I repeat: in national parks, Crown Land, pastoral stations and Aboriginal freehold across the NT, buffel grass is still spreading.

**A lumpy problem**

About 12,000 dromedary camels were imported to Australia since the 1850s. They were integral to the settlement and supply of Central Australia from the 1870s until the completion of the railway line to Alice Springs in 1929, and the advent of reliable motorised transport to the Centre in the 1940s. Consequently, most of the camels were released into the wild. And there they thrived.

It is estimated that 1 million camels now roam the semi-arid regions of Australia. That population is expected to double in ten years. Camels knock down fences, foul waterholes, and most distressingly, strip vegetation bare. They do not graze widely, instead focussing on preferred trees and shrubs, such as the quandong tree (Santalum acuminatum) which it strips bare of fruit and leaf. These trees, once widespread throughout the inland deserts, are close to being ‘finished up’ due to camel predation. It is feared that ‘camels could permanently destroy Australia’s delicate desert ecosystem’ within decades.
Some questions and an answer

So how much has the Central Australian landscape changed in 150 years? I conclude with a short, self-directed question and answer session in the manner popular with politicians today:

Has the landscape changed since the 1870s and the arrival of Europeans?

Yes.

Have the Europeans been a direct cause of those changes?

Yes.

Are those changes widespread and irrevocable?

Yes.

With the landscape in its present state, could Aboriginal people return to the way of life they enjoyed prior to the arrival of Europeans?

No.

With the coming of the white man to the inland deserts, with his cattle, his thirst for water, his rabbits, his cats, his camels, his miracle weeds, his removal of the land’s caretakers; his roads and tracks and fences and bores; with everything he has introduced in the search for profit or consistency he has robbed the landscape; and truly, in many acts of strong magic, he has made a desert turn into a desert.

Endnotes

1 EJ Eyre, Journal of expeditions of discovery into Central Australia, from Project Gutenberg, viewed 14 January 2013, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5346,
2 TGH Strehlow, Comments on the journals of John McDouall Stuart, facsim., Library Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1967
4 JMcD Stuart, Fourth Expedition Journal March to September 1860, Whitcoulls Ltd, Adelaide, 1983, entry for 11 April 1860
For example, female kangaroos live in a near-permanent state of pregnancy, but they are able to freeze the development of an embryo until the current joey leaves the pouch. They can also maintain the developmental freeze on the embryo during times of drought, and recommence development when a good season arrives. (Wikipedia Kangaroos 2013)

Strehlow, op. cit.

Strehlow uses an older form of spelling of Aranda which was then prevalent and accepted. The form now in common usage (with some regional variation) is Arrernte, which is used elsewhere in the essay.


Parks & Wildlife NT (Parks & Wildlife Service of the NT 2009) posit that a major cause of these extinctions is the feral cat which has been present in the region since in the early-1800s, having escaped from ships on the coast of Western Australia (Burbidge et. al. 1988).
29 Weeds Australia, op. cit.
30 Stuart, op. cit.
31 JMcD Stuart with W Hardman (ed.), Explorations in Australia: the journals of John McDouall Stuart during the years 1858, 1859, 1860, 1861 and 1862 when he fixed the centre of the continent and successfully crossed from sea to sea, 2nd edn., Dodo Press, 1865/2009
32 Parks & Wildlife Service of the Northern Territory, West MacDonnell (Tyurretye) National Park Draft Joint Management Plan, Department of Natural Resources, Environment, The Arts & Sport, Darwin, 2009
33 ibid.
34 ibid.
35 Weeds Australia, op. cit.
36 Alice Springs Desert Park, op. cit.
37 Weed Management Branch, Buffel Grass: management guide for Central Australia, brochure, Department of Natural Resources, Environment, The Arts & Sport, Darwin, n. d.
38 Alice Springs Desert Park, op. cit.
39 Weed Management Branch, op. cit.
40 Brown, op. cit.
* The same argument is used by the alpine cattlemen in order to return to (their former right of) summer pasturing and fattening of their cattle on the succulent alpine herb grasses of the Alpine National Park in Victoria and the Kosciuszko National Park in New South Wales, especially after the devastating wildfires of 2003 and 2009.
43 National Geographic, op. cit.

References:


camels_or_cattle, accessed 20 February 2013


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Stuart, JMcD, with Hardman, W (ed.), *Explorations in Australia: the journals of John McDouall Stuart during the years 1858, 1859, 1860, 1861 and 1862 when he fixed the centre of the continent and successfully crossed from sea to sea*, 2nd edn., Dodo Press, 1865/2009


Wikipedia, Rabbits in Australia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbits_in_Australia, accessed 20 February 2013
I crept cautiously into a dark, damp alleyway. I may not be real but I can tell you- this place does not smell like roses. I leant against the deep red bricks; it had been a hard day. Time was being a nuisance again, I’ve always wondered what pleasure he gets out of making people late and lessons long. He always was a strange chap. However, I must say it’s not easy being a concept, a figure, a figment of the world’s imagination. It’s not simple being unknown by the human world, being always important and forever more. Without me nothing would be different, nothing would ever change- that’s me, Change.

Over the past few days I have been unfortunate enough to have a taste of my own medicine. After living my life in the blissful ocean, only coming onto land to hand out job opportunities or sudden strikes of confidence, it occurred to me that without being on land I would soon loose access to the humans who need me so. They deflect me so well it was getting harder to spread my “talent”.

So here I am. Alone. Totally alone. That is unless you count Jerry the garbage guy, but he doesn’t talk much. Anyway, I’m alone in a city where everyone is busy and nothing is calm. I miss the sea, its splendid aqua blue water and its peace and serenity. Despite this, the sea would not be the same without my ecstatic friend Happiness. Happiness was always so positive, so “glass half full”. She was the one who would scream happy birthday to me in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and come up with some witty retort when the Hate and the bullies found me. I was always so surprised at how someone so popular and someone so unloved could be best friends. That was a hard goodbye.

On the other hand, days in the ocean were becoming increasingly difficult, what with pollution taking its toll. One minute a turtle would be gracefully cruising along a colourful reef, the next taking its last breaths while losing its life to a piece of plastic. If I ever get reincarnated as anything else it’s going to be the ghost of green peace.

Here in “the City” I live my life as an outcast, feeding on future ambitions and spontaneous decisions. It’s not perfect I can tell you that but there is a certain aura about the places and people that live here. A sort of confidence, which seeps through crevices and under doors. Not the kind that you take into battle, but the kind that lets you know that everything is ok and one day everything will go your way. It fills my heart and head and reminds me of the sea, Happiness and that humans aren’t completely pathetic- strength.

As I lean against that gungy wall, completely invisible to the human world I think to myself. I may just be a concept but a have a life and without me the world would collapse under its feet. I am important, I have to believe it, I have to enjoy it. It doesn’t matter where I am; I’m inevitable, I’m Change.
The Last Thylacine
Morgan Gurry

Cold, numb.
Cruel, twisted wire cannot disguise the chill of day.
Once proud, now lying on a false, concrete floor.
Once fighting, trying to escape.
Now all hope of freedom has slipped through mind like a gleaming fish on its way to Ocean.
Nothing can hold it back.
Feel loneliness possess soul.
Want of a friend is greater than Mountain.
Stare in hatred at the things that dare take lives as puppets, then discard.
Trapped in a cell.
Cannot Escape.
Things that hold colour now dull and grey.
Nothing can comfort, naught can console.
Nightmares drift through mind when eyes are open.
But dreams of memory come trickling back when eyelids flutter closed.
A forest, green, with friends who laughed and played.
Bounding over rusty plains, racing the wind through a place called Home.
Nosing through the bush, hiding like a child with a guilty secret.
Chasing the shadow of Eagle; flying without wings.
Heart calls for Home.

See the flap of Door open.
Food pushed through.
Men crowd around wire, as if watching food be devoured is a great performance.
Ignore them.
Head lifts slightly as a wild wind dances through Cage.
The wind is calling, calling to be followed.
Long to chase it through the forest and across the plain.
Close eyes and feel the wind.
Forever more run through the bush.
Dance over the plain, reunited with friends.
Never again see the cold darkness of Cage.
Forever more chase Eagle through the forest.
See the glimmer of River.
Forever more run free across Home.
Dream Forever More.
I closed my eyes tight, and tried to practice some visualization techniques I had learnt flicking through Sarah's psychology textbooks. I'm floating through the clouds; I am as light as feather. My convulsing stomach seemed to relax a little, until my obviously damaged visualized-self looks down, through the soft, delicate white to the chasm of death we call Earth. Of course, all this talk of clouds and sky had reminded me to look out window, resulting in an up hurling of my cardboard airplane lunch. The lady next to me looked so pleased. If God had made such a distance between the ground and the sky, it was obviously not designed to have airplanes plowing through it.

‘Are you feeling okay sweetie, would you like a bag?’ The flight attendant’s voice was sickly sweet and I vaguely wondered whether her teeth were fake.

‘No thank you’ I replied, but held my answer of how it was too late at the back of my throat.

My feet were plastered to the floor, and my legs, being one of the unlucky few, were pressed against the chair, occupied by a foreign football player. Totally the opposite of having a cute baby you can smile at. My ears were ringing, and full of a thick buzzing sound, similar to that of Ms. Bradebrook’s voice, a monotone slur of x’s and y’s. I still had four hours to fill until we arrived in Melbourne, and speculated why Darwin was a ‘Great Wall of China’ away from anywhere.

Just that morning mum and I had caught brunch at the waterfront, ordering classic eggs benedict; we’re going on an eggs benedict tour of Australia. Mum is an airplane addict, so I’m sure we’ve covered most of it. But I think the real reason she loves travelling is that she believes, one day, out of the blue, dad will turn up for the first time in eight years. I am a strong believer in faith, but for you to fully appreciate the future, you must let the past slide away. Not disappear, and not forever, but slide away. I understand that when you’re old, you let memories rule your life; or as Sarah says, you live in the past. But mum’s only forty and she still has a life to live. And she has me. I may use visualization techniques and believe in faith but the days when we pretended dad had been abducted by aliens or kidnapped to build a time machine are long gone. He left us, and that’s that. I was five years old when he left, so I can only remember hazy sections of him. Like the time he came in to my room at night because I couldn’t sleep and he told me all about the world. How we make buildings, how we make money, how we travel, how we eat food. I still remember what he said to me. ‘If life throws things at you; catch them and pass them back. Don’t ever give up Lucy. Never’

We just sat there and talked for hours on end, until eventually I fell asleep, slumped into his arms. That’s how I remember dad.

After desperately trying to fall asleep with my head propped up by a scratchy pillow, and my legs curled around my body, I gave up, and got my book out again. I was reading a
novel my grandma had sent me from Canberra, about the Crusades. Don’t ask me which one, because I’ve heard there were a total of eight Crusades. War. Apart from being utterly averted to the idea, I also find it ridiculously pointless. I’m all for trading your apple for a chocolate bar in the playground, but trading thousands and thousands of lives for a bit more land or to prove your religion is insane. It’s as if morale, along with virtues and respect for the human life are thrown out the window. It wasn’t until the lady next to me gently tapped me on the shoulder, did I finally tumble out of my war fantasy. ‘Would you care for a refreshment young lady? Lemonade, orange juice- anything you fancy’ the hostess asked, unaware that she was interrupting one of my famous ‘meaning of life’ ponderings.

‘Just tea thanks’ She looked at me and raised an eyebrow, but poured me a cuppa anyway.

I’m a member of a tea-enthusiast family, so it would seem like a travesty not to drink the infused, and surprisingly relaxing liquid. Sipping my tea, I managed to dribble some down my chin, carefully concealed by the swipe of a serviette. Then all of a sudden, the plane began to tremble.

It was only a faint vibration at first, just a slight tickling of my toes. I turned and peered over the back of the chair, only to find the rest of the passengers behaving perfectly normally. Some, tapping their foot to their favourite tune, and others with their noses buried into a book. I figured I might as well join them, as plenty of planes have had mild turbulence before. I reached for my book, my fingers out stretched, only to fall headfirst onto the chair in front of me. Searing tea burnt my left shoulder, and I smashed my leg on the tray table. Pain seemed to pump through my veins, making my stomach clench tight and my eyes water. I could hear the plane erupt with screams, cries, shrieks, and shouts, but my head was throbbing so much, they seemed only that of a whisper. The ghosts of panicked, garden-variety passengers, entangled with my own pain. The plane shuddered again and I prepared myself for another violent turn. Outside, the thunder roared and I could just see rain dribbling down the window. I closed by eyes tightly and stood, rigid and solemn, for I knew what was to come.

The fall was so great, I felt as though my heart, along with my liver and lungs were still up among the clouds. The crash as metal meets water seemed to resonate inside me, bouncing off the walls of my ribcage. I made a wild attempt at raising my arm, but felt the energy drain out of me. It even hurt to breathe. I knew I was slipping away. I could feel it. I wondered if one day they would find me. The corpse of a lonely girl, buried at the bottom of the ocean in a mangled and forgotten airplane shell, not even able to reach a life raft. I could hear them unloading the rafts now, and for the first time I speculated what my life could have been. Friends, real ones. A future, a bright one. Family, a whole one, not pieces that have been reused or big, gaping holes. I was almost ready to depart, when I felt strong, gentle hands scoop me up, carrying me somewhere, anywhere, it didn’t matter; I was grateful.

I awoke to the steady drip, drip of the rain on my face. I still felt like a dead weight, although after coughing and spluttering for a while, I could at least breathe normally. My eyelids felt too heavy to lift, but I could sense I was not alone. It sounded like a man, maybe the one that rescued me? When I listened carefully, I noticed his breathing was awkward and heavy.
I managed to gather the strength to lift myself up, but I still couldn't open my eyes. I sensed the stranger turn to look at me, as he said ‘Sorry, I’m just so sorry’. His voice was croaky and I knew his breaths were very constricted.

‘Come’ he muttered and I assumed that was for me. I lent in towards his voice. ‘Don’t ever give up Lucy. Never’, he whispered.

I wrenched my eyes open, and grabbed his hand, rivers of tears running down me cheek. ‘Don’t go’ I pleaded, but my hand was slipping.

‘I love you’ he cried into the rain, and slipped below the surface.
Month 1:

You’re careful (usually). The bin gets emptied, the cat gets fed, the scars get covered.

The cat scratches, but it’s okay. It knows it’s not your cat, and cuts are easy. The stinging barely registers nowadays, the stinging is nothing after the whip of wind in your face as the car stood still and the whole earth turned at the wrong angle, after the cuts on your neck from the seatbelt and the way your shaking fingers accidentally ground the glass in even further. After everything, blood feels like nothing but war paint, stage make up. Blood that has run, escaped, torn itself from you, stuck in your eyelashes and welled in your throat- that blood washes off.

The basin is pink, the drain dries brown, but it washes off.

Week 2:

It’s the bruises that get you, you know it, you’ve always known it.

That blood under the skin, shattered veins and crushed arteries and burst capillaries. Red is easy, uniform, just red red red and you can deal with that. But your legs are too obvious against the stark white sheets. The bruises aren’t just red, they’re the yellow of champagne and pissed white pants, the blue of your best friend’s eyes and their anaemic nail beds, the purple of musky lavender and lethal doses of foxglove. Bled blood is predictable- follows gravity, smears, runs, streaks (washes off). These bruises, these technicolour stains, these tender manifestations of force, they don’t drain away until they have warped and twisted and throbbed under your skin. They make you want to press down, with your sharpened car keys or glass shards or maybe just your scabbing knuckles, until the pain swells under the force, tightens, and bursts over your freckles. Like exploding. Like an impact. Like one car and another and a hazy white line.

The woman with the pinned-back hair is not used to hospitals, only the sight of slowly dying people. She wants you to explain, and you try, but there is only the truth. She sets you simple tasks. She wants you to take up metaphors, says the similes will gentle the words. You think it sounds like a bad habit, like breathing, like you won’t be able to stop. You talk about how the crunch was like a predator’s bite, how the lights were blinding, how the air was so still and burnt.

Here is your metaphor: the blood is easy, the bruises are torture.
**Minute 3:**

You are a newborn, you are screaming and covered in blood, you have lived three minutes.

The broken bones are already addictive. Oh, oh, your ribs, the way they ache when you breathe, that pull of muscle and tendon and the creak and grind of immovable, lovely bone. You’re alive. You feel as if you are lying over the baking flat of a rock in the desert, or stretched out and chained to the top of a mountain, or caught in a tangle of seaweed and slippery finned bodies. Those are fantasies. Really, you are fractured and flattened on the rough bitumen, the pull in your arms from the seatbelt like twitching wing muscles.

The little clear shards glint against the bitumen like your very own scattered stars.

**Year 1:**

You see a different woman now, in an office.

But when you close your eyes it is the same hospital bed, the same pinned sprawl under the clumsy fingers of the broken dashboard, headlights dancing in the sprinkled glass on your tongue. The asphalt came out of the cuts on your arms, the mud eased from your raw cheeks, but those splintered constellations are there to stay. They worm their way through the membranes of your cells, the thick walls of your arteries, your bleached and brittle bones. Each star is its own little song bird, migrating to your lungs from the rest of your wintered chest. You cough into your morning coffee, and those slivers drop from your lips like pinkie promises, like love letters, like cold and useless wedding rings. You drop your pills into the cup with them, for variety, but the hollow jingle is the same.

You are so tired. You swallow it all back down with the dregs.
The End