Northern Territory Literary Awards

2010
DYMOCKS ARAFURA SHORT STORY AWARD
Winner Karen Manton *Susannah*
Finalists Michael Giacometti *The Uncoupling of Eduardo Martinez*
Jennifer Mills *Look Down With Me*
Jennifer Mills *The Opposite of Peace*
Karina Brabham *The Wedding*
Natalie Sprite *Kissing Craig Belman*

DYMOCKS RED EARTH POETRY AWARD
Winner Leni Shilton *Thoughts of the Desert*
Finalists Leni Shilton *Sea Diary*
Barbara Eather *Burial*
Collette Livermore *Tennant Creek*
Jill Pettigrew *Top End Transitions*
Heather Bryce *Supermarket*

CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY BOOKSHOP TRAVEL SHORT STORY AWARD
Winner Kathleen Epelde *Learning to Read*
Finalists Barbara Eather *The Polish Woman*
Barbara Eather *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*
Kate Shannon *Cowboy Culture, Argentina Style*
Elizabeth Hutchins *Tanami Tourists*

CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY ESSAY AWARD
Winner Glenn Morrison *Two Towns Called Alice Springs*
Finalists Bruce Hocking *We Need to Heal Too, Mr Rudd*
Michael Giacometti *The Dead Heart Walkers’ Club*
Jane Leonard “I couldn’t get to class today - my clothes got stolen again….”

DYMOCKS ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WRITERS’ AWARD
Winner Renato Marocchini *Guilty*
Finalists Derek O’Keefe *Outback Kingdom*
David C. Curtis *I’ll Get My Mate*
KATH MANZIE YOUTH LITERARY AWARD
Winner Kierra-Jay Power *Familiar Strangers*
Finalists Stephen Encisco *It Hurts*
Kierra-Jay Power *First Sign of Madness*
Sean Kelly *Last Chance*

DARWIN FESTIVAL SCRIPT AWARD
Winner Mary Anne *Butler Dragons*
Finalists Lee Frank *Our Story*
Rohan Wightman *Plastic Revolutionary*

BIRCH CARROLL AND COYLE SCREENWRITING AWARD
Winner Jane Hampson *Between the Lines*
Finalists Mark Bowling *Dead Man’s Beach*
Mary Anne Butler *The Lift*
Christine Wilson *Cave*
Levin Diatschenko *The Clock Watchers Guild*
The Wedding

Karina Brabham

My sister was to be married. Then The Wave came. You can’t hold back nature, no matter how strong you think you are.

Our Pa was a strong man. I could never escape his bear hugs. His arms would lock themselves around me and though I’d kick and struggle they wouldn’t budge from their grip on me. Now I’d give so much to feel the hair on his arms tickling my chin as he traps me in his arms.

Our Pa wasn’t strong enough for The Wave. It swept him right up and carried him faraway. They say his body was found out near Old Man Tony’s farm, where we used to get our eggs. Old Man Tony’s is a half-day cart ride from our place. They wouldn’t let us see his body. It was burned the same day Uncle Mill identified it from the lines of corpses, laid out, waiting for someone to find them. Ma had screamed and clawed at Uncle Mill when he came back with the news.

“His ashes are scattered to the skies now,” he said.

Ma was angry. She thought maybe Uncle Mill was wrong. Perhaps it was someone else who looked like Pa – Jen’s brother for example, everyone said they looked similar.

“No,” Uncle Mill had replied, and he’d slowly placed Pa’s wedding ring on the table.

Ma had cried a lot in the days after The Wave, but never like that day. She’d sunk to the dirty floor and rocked and wailed. I’d closed my eyes and pretended I was at the shore at sundown, waiting for Pa to pull in with the day’s catch. There would be a breeze and I would wrap my shawl around me tighter, and smile at the burning sky like it was a lamp to warm me. On the horizon would be the dark shapes pulling in, closer and closer, until I would know which was our boat. Soon after I would even know which dark figure heaving at the oars was my Pa. And that noise, that screaming, was just the seagulls aching for the fish scraps the men would bring in. But the gulls choked to silence, and in my head the sky had lost its fire, it filled with darkness. Night never came this quickly, it never swallowed the clouds.
as it rose up from the sea, like a giant wave, and the men in the boats, why were they shouting? Why did some jump from their vessels and swim madly to the shore?

Then the vision was gone, as my sister placed her cold hand on my shoulder, and was leading me out of the kitchen, the only part of our place that still stood. She took me out to the makeshift bedroom Uncle Mill had fixed up for us. I wondered if that was what it had been like when The Wave came. If it had been a looming shadow in the sky that crashed down so suddenly on our men, our town, that it would have been useless to stand against it. I hadn’t been there when it came. That is why so many of my family still live. It was all because my sister was to be married.

We had gone to City. The wedding was three weeks away. Nell’s promised man Jave had returned from the mine work he’d taken to set themselves up. We travelled the two days ride inland to meet him, and to pick up the rings. Jave’s father had been a diver. The trade had killed him, but it gave him his son’s inheritance – a beautiful, small and round pearl. Jave had wanted it set in a ring for Nell. “Here’s my real pearl,” he’d said swinging my sister into his arms when we’d gone for the rings.

Nell had been so happy that day. She’d jigged about like a crab in the pot on the way to City. She hadn’t stopped till she’d caught sight of Jave’s waiting face at the boarding house we were to stay at. Then she’d cried – happy tears that made her eyes shine bright. Now the idea of crying in joy seems strange. The Wave brought so much sadness. It’s made Nell look so different. There’s no light in her eyes, just greyness. Her blue eyes once shone like the sea on a summer day. Jave gazes at her pain. His arms wrapped around her change nothing. I know that death, the destruction of our village, would make anyone sad, but what hurts Jave the most is seeing Nell so pale, with eyes like a dead fish. I never really knew if Jave was good for Nell, if I was alright with him being the one to keep her from then on, but I was sure now he loved her. Perhaps that was enough to make him deserve her.

* * * *

Today the aid workers arrive. They bring fresh water that we’re all thirsting for. There was saltwater and dirt and dead bodies in our water dam before we pulled them out. Ma sends me and my cousin Lou with
buckets to wait in line. We walk up the street towards the village centre. The road is still not cleared and we must step around crumbled walls and shattered trees uprooted from some unknown place. We come to Zazin Rober’s house, or what remains. Zazin Rober was the richest man in our village. He owned three boats and had been court judge for nearly thirty years. His house had been so big, all his children had had a room all to themselves, but now there was hardly a room still standing. Lou and I walk past in silence, our heads bowed to the ground. It feels wrong to gaze upon the naked wounds of that house. We both pick up our pace, and I feel like someone watches us.

“Till! Till Harver! And Loulyn Crest,” Zazin Rober’s wife calls us. I have always been afraid of her. She is the type of person who looks you straight in the eye and tells you exactly what she wants – and then you do it. To get on the wrong side of her is a terrible thing.

Both Lou and I pause. Slowly we turn towards her. She is sitting leaning against the collapsed wall that separated kitchen and welcome room. She is stroking a dog – her second eldest son’s dog. It is dead, crushed under the heavy stones. For a moment I think I am wrong about Ma Zazin. She is not to be feared, she is just a little old woman in her black widow’s dress whose face is wrinkled deep with the loss we all feel. Then she glares at us with her sharp green eyes.

“Bring me a bucket of water,” she demands of us steadily. She clenches her mouth and then looks down at the still dog’s head beside her. She strokes it gently between the ears. We nod, and hurry on quickly to the village centre.

* * * *

The village square has been cleared of most of its debris, and I almost wish it hadn’t because it looks so empty. The aid workers are set up on the ruined steps of the village hall. They’re all dressed in white, and it shimmers brightly in the sun. Lou looks at me.

“I would laugh Till, but it’s not really funny.”

I know what she means. Those aid workers stand out crazily in their white jackets and pants. Us survivors wear black or grey or the darkest bit of clothing we’ve got left. We’re all in mourning, just like the village with its
dirty broken walls. None of us pretend. Despair, grief, pain. It’s all there, written on our faces. But these aid workers, they give us fake smiles and reassuring pats on the back. They hide their own shock at how few of us fill the square.

Lou and I do not wait long for our buckets to be filled. A short, bald man serves us. He gazes at us through his spectacles as the water runs into our tin buckets from the large keg he has propped up on the steps.

“Who are you then?” he asks.

“We are Till Harver and Loulyn Crest,” I reply.

He continues to look at us, and I can see the sadness in his eyes.

“I am Gustin Ferrow, a Man of God, and there is hope Till Harver and Loulyn Crest.”

“We had a Man in our village. He was called Davin at the Cross because he prayed at the foot of the cross so often. He is dead,” I respond.

“That is sad indeed. He sounds like a faithful man. I’m sure he was gone to our Father above,” Gustin Ferrow replies.

I narrow my eyes at him. “They say when The Wave came and stole the sun he was at the foot of the cross praying. Only he was crying and pleading. He was begging God saying ‘Please Father, please! Save us, Father, save us!’, and when the water crashed down and swept him away, people say they could still hear him and he was screaming ‘Save us, Father, save us’.”

Gustin Ferrow cannot speak. He just watches us. Before he can find some other words of comfort I snatch our buckets away, and the water splashes. I have to pause and breathe a little, before walking away slowly, more careful now not to lose our water. I hear Lou behind me. She whispers something to Gustin Ferrow that I cannot make out, before following with our other two buckets.

We make our way back in silence, and even Ma Zazin does not say a word to us when we leave a bucket with her. She just stares blankly down at the dead dog, whose head she still strokes.

* * * *
The next day Gustin Ferrow comes to our shattered house. Us women are in the kitchen. Ma rolls dough salty with tears, Nell sews material scraps together to make a mottled, strange shaped sort of blanket, Aunty Den is washing and untangling my hair without sympathy. Lou shivers close to the fire with a thin towel around her, and her long stream of wet hair drying out in its searing warmth. Gustin Ferrow knocks lightly on the door frame, and steps in to our small, crowded kitchen.

“Good day,” Gustin Ferrow begins. “I am Gustin Ferrow, Man of God.”

He waits, as if expecting some response. He only gets the red-eyed stares of five women, tired with weeping. Gustin Ferrow continues uncertainly.

“I, I am here, to offer my services –” he stops. He is staring at the dress hung carefully on the wall. It is Nell’s wedding dress, and the clean white fabric of it glows with a strange luminosity in the gloom of our kitchen.

“Who is to be married?” Gustin Ferrow asks.

“We are.” Jave enters into the kitchen, his skin slick with sweat from clearing rubble, and squeezes past Gustin Ferrow to stand over Nell’s chair. He looks at Gustin Ferrow, daring him to speak. And he does.

“When is the wedding to be?” he asks slowly.

“It is not to be.” Nell is hard-faced.

“Might I ask why?”

“Things are different now. There has been death.” Jave tightens his hand over Nell’s as she speaks.

“But is there not life as well? Shouldn’t you have a reason to celebrate?” Gustin Ferrow’s blue eyes twinkle, and this strange piece of hope he wants to inspire us with hangs limply in the air.

Nell stands slowly. As she turns into Jave’s waiting figure she says flatly “Please leave us.”

Gustin Ferrow sighs in defeat, and begins to leave dejectedly. Another family he has not been able to convince of their own fortune, I think.

“Wait.” There is a hesitant force in the word. It is Ma. “Give me something to smile for, Nell. Please.”
It is the most words we have heard Ma speak since Uncle Mill brought the news.

“Ma?” Nell’s voice cracks.

“Please Nell.” There’s a desperation in Ma’s voice, and I know its killing Nell to hear it, because it’s killing us all.

“For you, Ma. I’ll do it for you.” Nell is sobbing, and pulling at Jave’s shirt, as he clings to her, pulling her tighter, closer. Then Ma is with them, and they’re a hugging crying mess, and you know that’s love, that’s real pain-aching love.

* * * *

The aid workers have cleared the steps, and now they’re covered in flowers. They shine bright and colourful in the grey of the village centre. Aunty Den made Uncle Mill ride until he found them, because Aunty Den wasn’t going to have a wedding without flowers. Gustin Ferrow is perched up on the top step trying to look serious, but he keeps screwing his white little face up into a grin, because he knows people aren’t sad. Not today. They all just seem nervous. The crowd is tense with waiting, with wanting this wedding and wanting to mourn. Jave is shuffling about on the steps next to Gustin Ferrow and he keeps glancing our way. He can’t see us, hidden behind the crumbled wall that was once the Postmaster’s house. I glance behind me, and Aunty Den is still fussing over Nell’s hair. It is bound up all fancy, with flowers in it, with wispy curls falling out all over the place. I know she’s unsure whether this is the right thing to do. To marry a man when so many have lost theirs. But Aunty Den won’t have any of it.

“Look at me Nell.” She clutches Nell’s chin, and forces Nell to fix her gaze on her. “You look beautiful, you’d make your Pa proud. So make him proud. Make us all proud. Make us want to laugh again.”

Then she’s gone, hurrying away briskly to her place next to Ma in the crowd. It’s our time now. Lou steps out first. She’s grim and solemn, clutching her flowers tightly. Her dress, like mine, is made from aid worker uniforms, scrubbed shining white and patched into shape. Around her left arm, like all of our arms, is tied a black ribbon.

I step out next, and my heart is thumping like a fish in a net, trying to get out and away. The eyes on me, I’ve known them my entire life, apart
from the aid workers. They’re blues and greys and greens and browns. So many colours. They’re sad and sorry and pitiful. I falter on Ma Zazin’s gaze. It’s fierce, and it seems to accuse me of how we could do this at such a time. Then the strangest thing happens. Her eyes go soft, and the light catches on gathering tears. I realise she’s no longer looking at me. No one is. They’re all looking at Nell, and I can see wonder and awe in their faces. I glance behind me, and it stuns me too. Because Nell is really, truly beautiful. She’s glowing with the sun on her white white dress, but it’s not just that, it’s her face. Her face is bright, it’s full of the gentle exuberance that always made you want to be around her before. She’s looking straight ahead at Jave, and that love she’s got for him is shining out the hurt of the village, it’s warming the cold empty shells of broken hearts and houses.

Someone nudges me softly, and I remember to walk on up to the steps and out to the side, as Nell follows, to meet Jave. They clasp hands, and the way they look at each other. Oh, it’s the sort of thing you know is worth living for.

* * * *

My sister is married. She and Jave are hope and wonder. Our village draws in a breath, a slow, brave breath. And when it lets it out it’s the softest, quietest thing, but it makes us smile. Because there’s a whisper on that breath, and its telling us there’s something stronger, something stronger than a wave.
The Uncoupling of Eduardo Martinez

Michael Giacometti

1.

Midway through the afternoon class, the police constable, cap in hand, tapped lightly on the schoolroom door and entered without waiting for a reply. He closed the door quietly behind him then stood, facing the class, shifting his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. Between him and the ragged pupils, the aged schoolmaster stood, leaning his wiry frame against the front of his desk. On the faded blackboard behind the schoolmaster, chalked in his neatest script, was a single underlined word: ‘GENEALOGY’.

The schoolmaster was unaware that someone had entered the room – only the eyes of his few students, drawn to the rocking statue of the uniformed visitor, alerted him. As he turned, the schoolmaster concluded the spoken lesson about the transference of dominant and regressive genes during selective breeding:

“So, by carefully selecting the parent animals or flowers for specific qualities, we can produce an offspring that is a hybrid, a new strain, one that is genetically different, superior even, to its creators.” As he spoke he signalled to the constable to come forward, and as the final word echoed through the hollow room, the constable’s mouth whispered into his ear.

Less than one minute later, the constable, cap on head, was striding out the school gate, closely tailed by the young student Eduardo Martinez, who had to alternately walk, skip and trot to keep pace. They traversed the major avenue busy with cars, buses and laden trucks, all heading elsewhere: to the airport, the city, everywhere but here.

The other side of the avenue was a wasteland of desert and low scrub. In the distance, shimmering in the heat haze, lay the metal tracks of the railway. Neither spoke while they crossed the desert, like a priest and his disciple in tow, walking back in time, to re-enter the town by its ancient heart, the railroad.
2.

Eduardo Martinez was conceived during the impatient coupling of his virgin parents, eager to consummate their minutes-old nuptial vows. Here’s how it happened.

As the priest concluded the ceremony the new husband raised his bride’s veil. Their toes touched, their hands joined, and their eager lips made a moist connection, completing the circuit. Holding hands, not breaking the pulse of energy which made their eyes glow with unrestrained passion, they signed in the ruled columns of the centuries-old leather-bound marriage register. Then, while the priest spread blessed sand to dry over the couple’s signatures, the newly weds drew each other to the nearby ante room and closed the door. In the darkened room, the heat of their desire made them glow like an aurora, giving light to their love-making. A cacophony of sound encased the room and the chapel. The rhythmic pounding of flesh into flesh against the wall kept tempo with the joyous clapping of the guests; the breathless soprano and tenor merged with the angelic chorus of the choir. As the final ‘Hallelujah’ soared through the roof beams to the heavens, a burst of white lightning shot from the husband’s blazing eyes, and the soul of Eduardo Martinez swam furiously upstream.

The blush on the love-bride’s cheeks soon blossomed in her belly, and within months (or so it seemed), a son was born. Eduardo: the latest in an unbroken line of first-born sons of the Martinez family, all with the same un-numbered name.

But it nearly didn’t happen that way. Eduardo Martinez’s paternal grandmother, Maria, wanted her headstrong first son Eduardo to marry Maria Cassi, the sturdy but not unattractive daughter of the fettler. She had recently met with the fettler and his wife to discuss the terms and conditions of the union. In her mind, she was continuing the tradition of the Martinez family, marrying the first-born Eduardo with Maria, the second-born José with Abril, and so on. But Eduardo Martinez had fallen for the wilful beauty Eliza, the shopkeeper’s fetching second daughter. When finally he overheard his mother’s scheming, he abruptly broke the silent secret of his love.

“What’s wrong with Maria?” asked his mother.
“I don’t love her,” he said, exasperated. “I love Eliza. I want to marry her.”

Shocked at her son’s sudden confession, Maria stood open-mouthed. “But, but,” she said, stumbling over the words, “you don’t have to love her. Maria is a good match for you. And she will bring a grand dowry.”

“Mother,’ said Eduardo Martinez slowly and clearly, not wanting to be misunderstood. “I don’t want a promised bride; I want a love marriage. I love Eliza. I will marry her.” Eduardo Martinez turned, and with a new conviction, walked up the corridor and out the front door.

Without her husband to back her up, his mother relented. “Well, can’t she change her name?” she called after him. But Eduardo Martinez was beyond hearing, already rehearsing his proposal to Eliza.

Eliza: the three syllables made his tongue move in new ways.

3.

Eduardo Martinez, the husband of Eliza, worked as a signalman in the railway switching and shunting yard of a small town at the junction of several lines. In fact, as far back as the records and folklore went, Eduardo Martinez had always worked as a signalman at the railway. “For centuries! Just like The Phantom,” his father used to joke. “Immortal. Same name, same job, but a different person behind the mask.”

The life of Eduardo Martinez was close to a repeat of his patrilineal ancestry of first-born sons. His father died when Eduardo Martinez was one day shy of his thirteenth birthday. As the first-born son, it was his inalienable right and responsibility to inherit his father’s terms of employment. So one day after his father Eduardo Martinez’s internment, and three days after his fatherless introduction to manhood, Eduardo Martinez began work as a signalman at the railway switching yard. He would work as a railway signalman like his fathers before him, just as his father’s brothers and their father’s brothers before them worked and died at sea.

At nineteen he married (Eliza, not Maria), and within a year a son was born: Eduardo. The heir. Now in his early thirties, Eduardo Martinez had worked for more than half his life at the railway. He was two years older than his grandfather lived, one year younger than his own father, at the median age of the Eduardo Martinez longevity.
From the moment that Eduardo Martinez left the schoolroom he had held a conversation in his head with his father. He already knew the words his father was waiting to say to him. The play for two players, dying father and first-born son, was ingrained in the family DNA. The script called for him to make an honourable response and stand by his father’s side in readiness for the handover, but the words caught in his throat, making him dry retch, just like when he tried to swallow the oversized fish oil tablet that his mother said was good for him.

The constable and Eduardo Martinez crossed one line of standard gauge tracks. They continued towards the shunting yard, where a long line of carriages attached to a lightly-smoking locomotive stood. As they rounded the caboose, they came across the last person in a long queue which filed its way beside numerous freight carriages. Eduardo Martinez stopped in his tracks. The constable continued, unaware.

Who are all these people? thought Eduardo Martinez. He stepped forward, slowly, not looking ahead, but gazed intently at each person that he passed. The words of his family’s melodrama faded, the nameless faces in the queue became unfocused. He found himself just inside the front door of his family home, at the head of the long corridor, the corridor that connects the front door to the back door, dividing the house neatly in half. The walls of the corridor are lined with portraits. Many times a day he has walked along this corridor, in full or in part. And every Sunday since he could walk, his father led him through the portrait gallery.

“This is history here,” his father began every week. “Your history. It is more important than anything that schoolmaster can teach you.” Every Sunday for almost a dozen years, his father had taught and tested him – in front of every painted face, every photographed profile, the images of first-born sons: the sacred lineage of Eduardo Martinez. Standing at the head of the house, the corridor seemed to stretch endlessly.

The first portrait in the sequence of Eduardo Martinez began on the left wall. Eduardo Martinez filed slowly, funerally, past them. He had never met his paternal grandfather – he died years before he was born – and yet he felt as if he knew them all intimately: the names of their wives and children, the age at which they passed on, their quirks and habits, their
nicknames. From the first portrait through to the last he could follow the familiar curve of chin, the colour and spacing of eyes, the ever-so slight hook of nose, the cowlick no brush could flatten, and the dark hair that never aged enough to go grey. Although they all looked so similar, Eduardo Martinez had his favourites, to which he gave his own nicknames. In front of these he stopped.


Portrait number fifty-eight: ‘Encajone Cabeza’, Boxhead. Painted in cubist-style by the cousin of a semi-prominent artist of the time; now regarded as an illegitimate fraud. Even so, the distinctive family features are prominent. Wife Maria. Eight children, with two sets of twins. Age 37 years.

Number ninety-eight: ‘El Spectro’. Hand-held self portrait taken in low light, or after drinking too many pisco sours. The print is slightly unfocused, underexposed. He died within days of hanging the photograph and his young son (‘El Lechero que Sueña’, The Dreaming Milkman) was barely off the teat when he replaced him in the signalman’s box. Wife Maria. Two children. Age 19.

The final portrait, number one hundred-nineteen: ‘Pa’. An overexposed black-and-white photograph of his father, eyes closed, hand on forehead, gripping the smouldering butt of a cigarette between index and forefinger. Wife Eliza. One child.

To the right of Eduardo Martinez’s father’s portrait, on the right wall nearest the front door: an empty picture frame.

The railway was one of the nation’s prized jewels: a valuable necklace that transported much needed coal, timber, copper and gold from the nether regions of the state to the cities and ports. As signalman, Eduardo Martinez regulated the flow of freight from several remote lines. He imagined himself a valet to the Queen, personally choosing which jewellery she was to wear for each occasion. After consulting the diary of today’s appointments, he picked out one of his favourites in the royal
colours: emeralds from the Deep South interspersed with rubies from the volcanic plains, all set in a yolk of gold the colour of corn-fed chicken eggs. He clasped the jewels around her fine neck as he descended the steps of the signalman’s box and strolled into the shunting yard where the weekly XXY Limited Express was soon due to pull in to add some freight carriages to its load of human cargo bound for the capital.

Most of the time, Eduardo Martinez remained in his lofty perch, overseeing the goings on about the rail yard. But one brakeman was ill, the other lost a finger a few days ago, so Eduardo Martinez had volunteered to cover them temporarily. Walking into the shunting yard, his mind on the Queen’s jewels, about to couple the rolling freight stock to the passenger carriages of the XXY Limited Express, he had no idea that he was taking his last steps on earth.

The XXY Limited Express was the oldest in the fleet, the only on-line relic of the railway’s glory days. The carriages were coupled old-style, using the link-and-pin. Simple and effective. An oblong link made from a solid steel spike connected to one carriage was inserted into a tubelike body on the other carriage. Once together, a metal pin was inserted into a hole in the tube that went through the link and out the other side of the tube, holding the link in place.

All the men at the railway had seen the devastating effects of the link-and-pin coupler: severed fingers, amputated hands, men dragged under carriages that were being driven too fast. For their own safety, the brakemen were issued with a heavy club to hold the link in position. Most of them left it in the brakemen’s box, preferring the sport and skill of quick eyes and hands.

So too did Eduardo Martinez. He directed the locomotive and carriages in slowly, slowly. When they were about two metres apart, he raised two arms to the distant driver and stepped into the breach. He had about three seconds. He lifted the heavy steel link near the tip from below with his right hand, grabbed it with his left near the base of the link and slid his right hand back there too. Two seconds. He checked the line of the advancing tube. Good. One second, the crucial time: once the head of the link entered the tube he had to quickly release his hands or lose a finger. One second. His gloved hand slid. The link fell. He stepped forward to pick
it up, stumbled. He raised the link as the final passenger carriage rolled back to couple with the freight stock.

6.

Young Eduardo Martinez was not sure how long he had been staring at his reflected image in the glass of the empty picture frame. He blinked. When his eyes opened, the harsh light of the afternoon had softened. He closed his eyes, held them closed. The chanted conversation came back to him. He repeated it, again and again, as if by repetition his father’s words and his silence could create something different. When finally he opened his eyes, this is what he saw:

Three men standing on the gravel before him, only metres away: the constable on the left, the priest on the right. On either side of them, carriages of a train. Extending from the right, a slow moving queue of unknown people paying their respects to the middle man, his father, whose chest was crushed between the sixth and seventh carriages of the XXY Limited Express.

Eduardo Martinez stepped forward and replaced the constable.

Although he was experiencing great pain, Eduardo Martinez continued to smile and attend to the many people that came to him. He knew he would die. The doctors had already told him there was nothing they could do, then left. As soon as the carriages that held him suspended like a child’s puppet were parted, the toxins from his crushed chest would overrun his body, killing him instantly. He could live only as long as he remained the coupling link.

7.

Throughout the night, the queue of townsfolk seemed to continue for miles. Torches were lit around the trinity. Hawkers walked the line selling hot food and cold drinks. Buskers sat in the breezy alcoves of the joined carriages, their jolly music lending a carnival atmosphere.

Finally, as a thin sliver of sunlight appeared over the ridge, the last in line was received and sent away with a blessing. At last, with only the priest as their audience, Eduardo Martinez grasped his father’s hand to play the final act of the family drama. The dying signalman, Eduardo Martinez, played Eduardo Martinez, his son and heir played himself.
“Eduardo, my first-born son, all that was mine is now yours.”

In rehearsed silence Eduardo Martinez kissed his father on both cheeks, released his hand. Without a solitary word, without looking back, he deliberately walked the length of the train and boarded the locomotive. He picked up an idle coal shovel and bent his weight to the new task.
This was exactly the kind of night that Susannah disappeared, Rider thought, fumbling with the padlock on the gate as the rain drove down. Mud squelched up his boots. The house was surrounded by a moat.

Bloody Power and Water, he was thinking, digging up the sewer and making a mess of the place.

He stepped up onto the verandah. It looked like a tip. Damp and mouldy armchairs. A concrete laundry sink he’d make into a frog pond one day. A large, rusting candlestick from the aforementioned Susannah. Fishing rods that needed attention. A rotting cane laundry basket. The washing machine that was stuck mid-cycle as usual. A shelf full of junk – jars of nails and bike parts, wet laundry powder, bits of rope, rusty hedge clippers that twit of a girl Robynne had bought when she thought she’d move in and tidy up his life and garden. A soccer ball, a rarely-used shovel and brush.

Draped elegantly over the shovel and brush was the velvet tail of a small python. She was suspended down the back of the shelf, head poised, waiting for prey to scuttle past. He couldn’t resist stretching out a finger to stroke the soft, patterned skin. An indignant serpent’s head rounded the soccer ball. Rider stepped back, all admiration.

The steady patter of Bligh’s paws came along the hallway. He shoved his nose against the broken flywire door, large jowls hanging, sorrowful eyes staring. Rider laughed to see him. The man obliged the dog at the fridge, retrieving bones, a few chicken wings, a pork hock. The power had gone off the day before. Everything had to be eaten or buried. Bligh wasted no time in downing the favour. Rider took a beer from the dark recesses of the fridge hoping it might have a little coolness about it.

The verandah was the place to be for a storm. Lightning was tearing its way across the sky in thick, jagged lines. Clouds lit up in response and thunder cracked. Bligh pushed open the door. He loved a good storm when Rider was near. He let out a great sigh as he sank down. A fat, black, studded collar sat around his neck. This hulk of a creature with saggy tiger skin looked like a lamb, but heaven help the pig that caught his eye. In
days gone by Rider dressed him in leather armour for hunts. Susannah would have flipped if she’d seen it.

Now the collar was all that remained of Bligh’s outfit. And Bligh was all that remained of a pack of dogs – seven in all – that had run the house in times past. One by one they’d gone – a car accident here, a pig accident there, a cane toad, a snake, a neighbour’s gun. The last pup was taken out by dingoes. Bligh had survived them all. There was a time when he nearly took a bullet for being a mutineer. Always stirring up trouble, never heeding old Smithy who was blind but still boss. Rider laughed about it now. Should’ve known Bligh would outlast the lot.

Rider shifted from the chair, which stank, into the hammock. He was still thinking of the night Susannah disappeared.

* * * *

That night rain was falling in sheets that left your eyes disoriented. Thunder shuddering to the ground. Lightning zigzagging between the rocks, looking for one to split, felling trees in its wake. It was what first alerted him to the freakiness of that night. A bolt of lightning exploded blue and cut through a tree right next to him, igniting it. Nearly took the clothes off him like wet skin. Left him on the ground, trembling, wondering if he was about to see God. Where the hell was Susannah was the question.

He went out in it all to find her. Lightning lit up her car nose-down in the creek. The vehicle was full of water, but no woman. How she could have thought she’d make a crossing he’d never know. She knew better. The water was running way too high, way too fast. A fool could have seen that.

* * * *

He sipped the not-cold-enough beer. Bloody Power and Water. Bloody Susannah. Disappeared, just like that. Her bike was amongst the junk on the verandah. It’d taken him three months to ride it. Used to keep it in his bedroom, just in case some intruder got it, he told himself. The spare bike parts she’d left were rusted, the gloves disintegrating in their box. They were up there on the shelf the python was visiting. He couldn’t throw them out. It was seven years since Susannah left but Rider felt sure she’d
come back one day and if there was any hour most like it, tonight was the night.

Here on the verandah, engulfed in rain with just Bligh for company, he could admit to himself that he’d always been looking for her bones. He took goggles with him to waterholes, kept a look out on tracks when he was walking the dogs.

There were a number of theories. She’d walked out into the bush and got disoriented, got lost, died of dehydration. Been bitten by a snake, died. Bones never found. Been taken by a croc while resting exhausted by the creek which was swelled to a river and which she was following just hoping she’d come across a road again. Been kidnapped, raped and murdered by a bunch of yahoo fishermen or the creep a few blocks away who was psycho on crystal meth and slaughtered wild horses and stray cattle with screams and shouts and gun shots that sent shivers up the spine. The dickhead was in jail at the time, it turns out. There just wasn’t any telling or understanding what had happened. It was like she’d up and walked across the escarpment into the sunset.

Rider went back to the fridge for another of those beers. A knife fell to the kitchen floor. Strange how the atmosphere shifts things when you least expect it. An errant breeze came through the window, unsettling the pile up of dishes. They collapsed into the sink. At his feet the blade of the knife glinted back clean as a question. He picked it up.

Rider was a man who knew about knives and he sharpened each in his collection with care, especially this one. He kept it wrapped up in a special cloth. Susannah had given it to him and he’d rebound the handle several times. If any theft were to ever upset him, it would be the taking of the knife. He used it to cut up meat and fish, finely chop garlic, cube vegetables and clean up a dog’s wound. He’d accidentally sliced through his finger with it, threatened a thief with it, and took it with him if he left the house for long. It was a knife with a thousand stories. It was the knife from her.

Rider placed his beer carefully on the arm of the chair and pulled out an envelope of photos from the sagging bookshelf behind him. The images were blurred, every one. He loved them. It had been a night. Drinking, smoking, clowning around with her new camera. She was in the hammock
and he was clicking away. Flash off. The light of the lamps the only illumination. A swirl of movement and colour. The take was so swift there was no time to pose. She didn’t like pictures of herself. Said no-one ever took them right. She’d protested when he picked up the camera but she was slow moving and laughing, not quite able to get out, trapped in the netting of the hammock. In the end she’d surrendered and let him capture her. She seemed airborne, marvellous to him that night, swinging the hammock with a reckless and lovely rhythm he adored. The images had always appealed to him, as if they’d caught out a spirit mid-flight.

Rider got out of the chair, jumped down the steps to the grass and walked out into the darkness. Beyond, in the deep shadows, was the escarpment.

Ah, Susannah, where are you my lovely? He called out softly. And as if to signal her, blew a few smoke rings. Two things his father had taught him. How to sharpen a blade properly and how to blow smoke rings. It made him feel as if there was something of the magician about him. Susannah had seen it. That is what he’d loved about her – the ability to find magic. Is it wrong, he thought, is it selfish, to love someone because they see the excellent in you? It was not a one-sided vision. He’d confided in his acupuncturist one day that he’d found the perfect woman.

A real gem, he’d said.

Then you must polish your gem carefully, the doctor had replied.

Hardly a day went past when he didn’t chastise himself for neglecting the gem. It had slipped between his fingers, vanished away into a rainy night.

She could be anywhere, he told himself for years. Even now he played with the idea. She’s decided to play a trick, being the ultimate practical joker. She’s up and gone to work in a war zone. Didn’t want anyone to know, to worry.

Worry is catching, she used to say, I can’t stand it. My mother pours it into me like wet concrete.

She had gone without notice. To be free. Because that is what she had yearned for, and that is what she could not find. Not with him, not with anyone. Not with herself, maybe.

She’d done a runner.
Do you know Susannah Field, the policeman had asked.
Yes, he replied into the phone, wanting to add, you idiot. But he held his tongue.
When did you last see her?
At the Cycad Café, two weeks ago now.
She looked unusually radiant that day, he’d thought. She was laughing with patrons. Her hair was lit up in the sunlight. A blue dragonfly hovered at her wrist. There was a lightness in her step. A knowing beauty in her face.
He would tell her, he would tell her that night, he’d told himself, pondering the loveliness of her.
The policeman cleared his throat.
She gives shiatsu massages there, is that correct?
Rider was still with his thoughts.
Sir? The policeman cleared his throat again.
Yes. She has a gift.
And you are a close friend?
Yes. Very close.
Has she ever had concerns about anyone?
No. She’s well liked.
Is it just massage she offers?
I hope you’re not insinuating anything.
No. Just asking. She’s officially a missing person…
Look I’m quite aware of that. I know her better than…
Sir we realise this is very distressing. We’re just trying to get any information we can.
Right. Well I can tell you what happened. I went for an appointment. She didn’t turn up. I waited and waited and waited. Eventually I left.

I see. And did you notice anything about her recently?

What do you mean?

About her mood, conversation. Did you see her anywhere else that week?

* 

He did. But he wasn’t about to tell the man on the phone.

How radiant she had looked. Despite the fight they’d had.

The river was running fast. The waterfall booming. He’d climbed between two rocks to watch it. The sheer volume of water falling took his breath away. The power of it was mesmerising. He stared at it until his eyes ached and the rest of the world seemed an illusion.

Hello, a voice behind him said.

He nearly jumped out of his skin. Susannah was standing there, hands against the boulders, face dripping with spray as was his. Her eyes were strangely bright, ecstatic.

I love it, she said of the waterfall.

It’s magnificent, he agreed.

She pondered his blue eyes deeply and put her mouth to his cheek where a tear was falling. He wanted to hold her and never let go. To end the comings and goings. To seal their hearts together and speak the simplest of truths. But she pushed past him and dived into the treacherous deep. Above him a warning sign leaned. Misty spray passed over the eddy she left. His heart lurched. She emerged seconds later, spouting water.

Come and get me, she called.

You lovable goose, he replied. See you at my place.

He would tell her tonight. He would tell her.

But he never did tell her.

Because he never saw her again.
So, said the policeman, ring us if anything comes to mind.

OK.

And still when he hung up he was thinking, She’s just gone AWOL for a while, needs some time out.

* 

Her sister rang.

I’m wondering if you can look after Susannah’s bike.

Her bike?

Yes. She left a list… she asked for you to look after the bike.

Look after it?

You can’t own the possessions of missing persons until two years have passed.

Uh huh. Do you want me to pick it up?

The sister’s voice cracked. If you could that’d be great. I don’t think I can deliver any more of her stuff.

Sure, he’d said.

He held the phone in his hand for some time afterwards, dial tone droning away underneath his breath. So this was it. Missing. Indefinitely. She’d put him in limbo. With her bike.

What kind of joke is this, Susannah? He asked, gazing out to the new car with its cables bedraggled on the ground like sorry intestines having been chewed by the dingo, and the motorbike with its flat tyre waiting to be changed. He’d have to go in the old ute that was a bastard to start. A pushbike. Ridiculous. Just the kind of ironic trick she’d love to play. Town was 12km away. He’d take all day getting there on a bike.

It’s scandalous, she’d said, when you live so close. You could easily ride. You’d get fit.

I do ride, he said.
Ha ha, she replied, though she was partial to riding pillion around the curves on the Daly River Road. At sunset, when the light sifted quietly through the trees and made the world seem luminous.

There is something else, the sister said, as he wheeled the bike across the empty lounge room. He was thinking there was a kind of cruelty in all this, to hand him the bloody bike when he would have given anything, anything, to look after her. He paused by the door.

The dog... she said awkwardly. I'm a cat person...

Bligh saw his chance, pushed past the door and leapt into the ute.

* * * *

So here they were, Bligh and Rider, doing time on the verandah, watching lightning. Wondering what the devil happened to Susannah. A punching bag swayed gently beside Rider. He tapped it absently.

It was then that the pig came in, dancing and squealing and rattling behind it a long curl of barbed wire caught on its flank. Bligh was suddenly all limbs and jowls and growls. Rider was up and running after the weird figure in the rain. Cane toads lumbered into nearby leaves. From the branch of a mango tree a tawny frogmouth watched. The pig’s trailing wire was collecting palm fronds, a rag, the head of a fallen garden torch and the tie-dyed mosquito net hanging in disarray over the clothesline. Bligh was confused by the pig-come-Chinese-dragon-on-speed look. Rider was screaming at him to leave it alone. The last thing he wanted was a bit of fence with a pig at one end and his dog at the other. And in the chaos he was thinking he must get the gun because here was Bligh’s meal led to the door like a gift from heaven and it would be a devilish shame to miss out on it. Just then he glimpsed Susannah’s leather cycling gloves.

Rider got hold of the wire. The dog was wildly excited but the pig got itself free, leaving a bit of flesh on the discarded fence. Rider could hear Susannah laughing in her strange way, like a pack of kookaburras from down south. He came to from the daze and went for his gun. Armed at last he ran to the ute, calling for Bligh. And so they went hooning off into the night after heaven’s dish. Not a hope in hell of finding it.

* * * *
The engine was running shakily. Rider and Bligh were both still panting. No pig.

Let’s go to the falls, Rider said to Bligh, and reversed the ute back up the muddy hill to the road. Rain was pelting down again. The windscreen wipers screeched out their song. From the side of the road a tawny frogmouth watched them pass.

Rider and Bligh stumbled down the steps to the call of the water thundering down in all its naked wonder. Dog and man stood before it in awe. Before he knew it Rider had dropped to his knees on the wet black rocks and was calling out her name into the thunderous water and spray, across the dark pool to the boulders that rose around. He could hardly hear the words coming from his mouth above the sound of the water, though he was yelling with all his might. The dog paced around the man, agitated, until the wailing and the tears and the fist beating the rock seemed part of the rush of the river and the roar of the waterfall and he sat calmly to wait for the torment to pass.

They returned home. Rider collapsed into the hammock. Bligh slumped underneath. The candle blew out. There was a flurry of wings. The tawny frogmouth alighted on the verandah railing. Man and dog were already asleep.

The bird watched them both, unblinking. It would stay there through the night.

A feathered angel, wide-eyed in the dark.
Look Down With Me

Jennifer Mills

There’s one swinging tonight, but only one; it’s all they could catch. In the stable I water the horses and I take my time about it.

I stop with Queenie, I want to cut the sores from her hooves. She lifts them for me when I think it. I scrape pieces from her feet with the sharpest knife and check her shoes are all intact. When I’m finished I touch her side, gentle, and she puts her foot down. Horses trust me. I fold the knife and put it in its place on the beam above the horseshoes and the brands.

There’s a wind up, a chill from the south, and it moves the branches, but the sack hangs limply, as if it has been painted onto this picture. Painted blue from the moon, which is swelling to full like the gut of a dead kangaroo filling with maggots.

The moon will burst when its skin gets too thin and all the flies will spill out of it. They will come down out of the sky and crawl all over us. They try to get in at the mouth, the ears, the eyes. I can squint, dig my pinkies into my nostrils and my thumbs into my ears, but eventually I have to breathe.

The house is full of troopers and syrupy air smelling of port wine, fat and tobacco. There aren’t enough chairs so the troopers stand against the walls and my sisters seem to take up all the rest of the house. They seep out of it like honey poured into a sack. I want the men to leave so I can get in and embed myself in Mother’s lap and hear her say, look at this boy, to Father, the way she says about the sulky dogs.

But they won’t go until they catch them.

I want to paint the swinging sack out of the night but it peeks in at me from every gap and crack in the stable which is only a shack no better than a lean-to, and gives splinters wherever you put your hand.

I put my hands down on the horses. I lean into a neck that leans into a basin of water. I put my nose into the place the mane starts and smell horse sweat like rotten straw. I stay there until Queenie finishes and lifts
her head and then we lean against each other, saying nothing. Neither of us could speak even if we wanted to.

I could stay all night and sleep standing like these animals. When the stable is full there’s a space the right size for me. There are four of ours brought in tonight and the four the troopers came with. I’ve watered them all now. Tomorrow they’ll be taken out again, taken by those troopers and the two trackers who are resting on the porch on the other side of the house, tobacco for them and a little fat but no port wine.

I hear my father’s voice and I can’t stay. He says Alfie and just as loud where is that idiot boy. They all know I know my name, but they think because I don’t speak I am deaf. I touch the horses in the loving way of a mothering mare, wiping my hand down over their eyes like their mothers licked them at birth. It calms them like it calms me to bury my face in my own mother’s skirts.

I step out of the stable and move toward the house. My feet as silent as my throat. I walk slowly across the dark dirt yard looking at my quiet feet. I walk in my own blue shadow. If I don’t look up I won’t see it and it won’t be there.

But it is still there. When I reach the porch the tree creaks. The sack will be turning.

The trackers see me, they are watching. They’re only cigarette ends under hats in the shadow but I can feel their eyes on me. I go into the house, wanting to press myself into its warm honey.

Alfie will have watered your horses, he’s so good with them. Might have made a trooper himself, Mother tells the policeman with the white moustache. There is a space where they think about what I could have made if only. The moustache twitches but the lips don’t move. He’s troubled by me, so I give him my reassuring idiot smile. I know she means to tell them I am good, so I don’t mind that she talks like I’m not there. They all do this, and also to the horses.

Long day tomorrow, says Moustache, and tips the sweet red liquor into his mouth. The glass looks tiny in his hand. He pats the barrel of a rifle which leans against the wall like a stiffened snake.

* * * *
The troopers sleep in my room, I sleep on the porch with the trackers and the dogs. Mother and Father offer their bed to the men but are refused. My sisters sleep in their own room. They file into bed like obedient children but I know they will dream of troopers riding, dream with their delicate honey-hands pressed between their legs. I’ve seen them like this before. They whimper gently in their sleep like dogs.

I can move as quietly as a snake in this house at night on my mute feet.

I slip into the hammock that’s hung on the stable side of the porch. I can hear the horses snort themselves to rest and the troopers snoring in a rhythm. I close my eyes and make myself still and small and shapeless.

The tree creaks. The tree creaks and the sack will be turning. The moon is bright over the edge of the roof. I can see the painted-in shadow of the hanging sack. I can hear the dogs breathe, alert, knowing they’ll be called to hunt. The tree creaks and sleep won’t come.

I slip out of the hammock and pad barefoot to the stable.

I walk from stall to stall and touch each of them on their eyes, and when I have seen that all are held fast by sleep, I stop and lean into Queenie and I take my knife from the beam. I return to the beginning of the line and start with the troopers’ horses.

I keep one hand over the horse’s eye. I press hard, expecting thick skin, but the knife slices easily through the soft place under the chin. I am calm and I stroke each of them like a mother and they do not bark with pain. Blood slips over my hand, warm and thick, warmer than my own. It smells good, like wet metal.

Queenie is last in line. When I reach her, I think I should just let her go. They will only catch her again. I look down the row of stalls, at the steam rising from the floor, and through it, through a crack in the wall, I catch the movement of the sack. I know what to do. I wipe the knife on my sleeve, and I work it into Queenie’s neck. She sighs as she slips and falls.

I don’t fold the knife. I have one more sinew, one more thread to sever. I step out into the chill night, walk across the dark dirt yard on muted feet. I hear the tree creak and I face the sack.
It is not a sack at all, but a man. I feel the man-sized weight of him as I stand close. The knife slices through the rope and I let him fall.

*Look down on his body, meek against the earth with me, moon,* I think. But the moon doesn’t answer. Its belly is beginning to split.

I fold the knife and go to my hammock. The tree doesn’t creak anymore. I sleep sound through the night, until the flies wake me.
Dear Miles,

By the time you read this, your father and I should be well on our way to the other place. It’s not personal, darl. Would you let Katie know that we wanted to see her before we left but your father is too tired. He’s sick of being sick. ‘I’m sick of bein’ sick,’ he says. We realise there are all sorts of rules against it these days but figure they’re not going to catch us; burn this and tell ‘em it was an accident, there’s a dear. Tell ‘em it was the dementia, stirring the wrong thing into our tea. Oops-a-daisy, as they say.

All our love,

Mum and Dad

PS. The safe key’s on top of the fridge, under the mug tree.

* * * *

When I find the note, my parents are still breathing, though very shallowly. They are lying on the ground with teacups in their hands, arranged as for a film, their fragile bodies almost translucent against the carpet. I stand over them, frozen for a minute, holding the note, my keys and a bag of groceries in my other hand. I put the keys and the plastic bag down on the bench before I ring the paramedics. Then I ring Katie in Perth.

‘I’ve just rung the paramedics. Mum and Dad have both collapsed,’ I say.

Katie says ‘Both of them?’ as if I’ve done something. I don’t have time to explain.

‘They’re okay. I have to get off the phone,’ I say.

‘I’ll call you back in a minute.’

The note is on apricot stationery. I am reminded, with the reflux of unbidden memories, of trying to copy my mother’s handwriting to get out of sports days forty years ago. When the doorbell rings I fold the note into a tight square and push it into the pocket of my trousers. I’m
covering the pocket with my hand while the uniforms take over, as if they can see through the fabric. As if they care. There is no room for me in the ambulance. I note which hospital and tell them I have to lock up. Then I start putting the groceries away.

Katie rings back. I read her the note while I restock the fridge with milk, six eggs, and twelve individually wrapped lite cheese slices. The old don’t seem to eat.

‘Don’t burn it, whatever you do,’ she says when I have finished. ‘I thought something was up. What’s in the safe?’

‘I haven’t looked.’ I pull the old milk out, shake it, drop the carton in the now empty plastic bag. Hanging the bag from a door handle, I find the key under the mug tree on top of the fridge, which is holding dusty pottery, some of Aunt Holly’s creations. My mother’s sister has been dead for ten years, but she has left an endless legacy of craft. Each item seems indestructible, and my mother never throws anything away.

The safe referred to in the note is not a safe but a locked toolbox kept under the stairs; the key is to a padlock threaded through holes drilled in the galvanised steel. My father made a point of reminding me of it only two or three months ago. My hands are shaking faintly as I fit the key, opening the box with the phone still cradled in my ear. I can hear Katie breathing thickly and my ear warms as though her breath is right there.

‘What’s in the safe?’ she asks again.

‘Nothing.’ There is an envelope, an off-white, A5 envelope tied with a little white cotton thread. Inside there’s a will.

‘Nothing?’

‘There’s a will.’ The fallen surprise in my voice meant there is nothing personal – no photographs, no mementoes or precious trinkets. It is an empty space my father has carved away from his wife’s hoardings. Inside the envelope are also the deeds to the house. I don’t read the will. I know they are giving Katie and I everything, fifty-fifty. My father showed me this two years ago, when he was diagnosed. It’s not the sort of thing you forget.

‘Thank Christ,’ Katie says. ‘They haven’t changed it have they?’ she adds.
'No. Listen, I have to go to the hospital, so …'

'I'll call you back.'

I stand in the middle of the room. I put my hand against my side but can feel it drawn to the note’s knot in the pocket, its shape pressing into my groin. I feel horribly abandoned and yet close, as though nothing separates me from my mother and father. As though nothing of significance has happened to me except being born, and anything I might have achieved since was just a form of suckling.

***

At the hospital I am told that both of my parents will live. They have ingested something that can be pumped from them. Unlike the cancers that are eating at my father’s organs, the toxin can be flushed out with a little warm water. Medicine seems so primitive up close.

They are being held in separate wards, which seems like a schoolroom punishment. My mother wakes first. I am at my father’s side when a nurse comes to tell me she is conscious. I follow the nurse down the corridor, past the wash station, to the zone of old women.

My mother blinks her frail eyelids a few times and then squeezes my hand. The woman is usually unbearably upbeat – she wrote *oops-a-daisy* in her final note, for crying out loud – but now she looks disappointed. Her cake has been ruined.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she says.

I just pat her hand and offer my feeble relief.

The nurse puts her head inside the curtain and calls me by my full name. She herds me out into the hallway, carrying my parents’ charts.

We go through the medications they are already on and the allergies. They know my father’s case well but my mother hasn’t been ill much at all. The nurse writes all this information down. I am alarmed that it fits on two pages. At the bottom of the second page her pen pauses. She makes a professional attempt to meet my eyes.

‘I have to ask you – were your parents depressed?’
I look at the wall behind her. There’s a bright sign giving hand-washing instructions.

‘I don’t know,’ I say. It hollows me, the little I know of their feelings. It should be obvious, wanting to live. But I don’t know this for certain about myself, or most of the people I love, and the answer makes no difference. What you want is immaterial. Especially to a man like my father who has already set a date with death. All he’s done is rearrange his schedule.

‘Did they mention anything to you about plans? Any self-harming?’

I snort and try to make it look like a sob. I have imagined my cheerful mother conducting teenage bleeds in her yellow bathroom. My phone’s insistent ringtone has never been so welcome. More welcome still, the nurse moves silently away, signalling that she has finished with me.

‘Katie,’ I say.

‘Are they okay?’

‘They’ll live, apparently. Mum’s awake, do you want to speak to her?’

‘How is she?’

‘Weak, but – you know. Mum.’ We both expel a small packet of air.

‘All right, put her on.’

But when I re-enter the ward, my mother is not in her bed.

I glance toward the bathroom, which is open and empty. Then I swear into the phone and walk out into the corridor. Disoriented for a minute as to the right way to run. Toward the handwash station and then left, into the men’s zone. I am still holding the phone to my face and can hear Katie huffing and puffing as if she’s the one that’s running into my father’s room.

‘Miles! What’s happened?’

‘No,’ I say. My mother is standing over the bed. Her hands are on my father’s face. My instinct is to back away and void my guts. I feel like I’m witnessing the primal scene again.

‘Miles, if it’s not a good time…’ runs Katie’s voice.
‘Mum,’ I manage, and hold the phone out. The light seems to shine through her like an x-ray, emphasising the bone. She lifts her face to mine and the eyes are bare, scraped out by suffering. But her mouth is set with will. The woman has been stripped down to a basic form.

It’s my father whose sunken skull has all the frailty. When death happens slowly we don’t see it coming. His breaths are inconsistent, ragged, strained. Even though he’s sleeping, his breathing is the opposite of peace.

‘It’s Katie,’ I say, and press the phone into my mother’s hand.

She gives me a grateful look and murmurs into the handset. Her words make a shape in the air over his body. She holds the phone to my father’s ear and nods to his unconscious form.

My mother holds her breath. She holds until he exhales, then exhales with him, drawing the sound out to the extent of their belonging. The woman who can’t throw anything away waits, and exhales again. And I am lost, a small boy in the wilderness, full up with the bitterness of separation.
In May, we moved into the yellow house by the river and Dad got a girlfriend. I got braces. The Dentist’s name was Dr Simmons and a year into my treatment, he committed suicide. After psychiatrists, dentists have the highest rate of suicide of any profession. I think it’s because everybody hates them. I didn’t hate Dr Simmons, but I didn’t like him much either. It’s hard to like somebody who is always hurting you. Also, he had very large and hairy nostrils. The hair was black and kinked like pubic hair. I spent hours with my mouth wired open and nowhere to look but up those nostrils. Dad said I should be grateful. One day I would have a Lovely Smile. I wasn’t grateful. I didn’t want braces. They cut the soft inside of my cheeks. Food stuck in the metal and everybody at the new school called me Train Tracks.

Except Craig.

Craig had braces too and Sharon Peterson said if we kissed, we’d get stuck. We met on a football oval in the middle of a sports carnival. He had fine high cheekbones and liquidy eyes but Sharon said the wires would get caught. She said there was an Italian couple who pulled up at a set of traffic lights in separate convertibles. They leant across the space between their cars to kiss and their braces got stuck.

“They had to be cut apart,” she said. “With a welding iron.”

* * * *

On my first day at the new school, I stood in the hall outside the classroom with Lisa. Lisa was new too. She was short and solid with long white socks that came up to her knees. She was from England and had dimples on her knees.

On the other side of the door, the teacher was saying, “We have two new students today.”

She had barely finished speaking when the boys started to yell, ‘Girls! Girls! Girls!’ They banged their knees against underside of their desks.
In the corridor, where Lisa and I stood, the noise was enormous. I looked at her and she smiled fast and horrified, then looked at the floor.

Then the girls started, ‘Boys! Boys! Boys!’

“Settle down, now,” said the teacher. Nobody settled down. She opened the door anyway. “Please welcome Lisa and Grace.”

The boys whooped with winning.

We walked into the room and, abruptly, the whooping stopped. A disappointed groan rose up and washed over us like dark water.

The teacher ushered us to a double desk by the windows. The desk was wood and engraved in blue biro. Delia is a slag and RB 4 LN 4 eva and Mr Evans sucks cock.

* * * *

At lunchtime, we sat together on a newly painted bench outside A Block where we could see the river.

“Do you want some banana cake?” said Lisa.

The banana cake was wrapped in paper, neat as a present. She unfolded the paper, broke the cake in half, carefully.

I looked in my lunch box. “Do you want half a Vegemite sandwich?”

She looked too. The sandwich was squashed into the corner of the plastic lunch box. One side flattened by my apple. “No thanks.”

We looked at the river, then. The water was grey blue, murky, full of toxins from the zinc mine upstream. You couldn’t eat the fish. A small scallop of beach, grey and pebbly. A metal fence.

“Do you want to go to the Library?” said Lisa, “We could do our homework.”

“It’s not due ‘til next week,”

“Still.”

I looked at the metal fence. “Okay.”

* * * *
My mother is cooking scrambled eggs and talking fast. “I met a man,” she says. “Not like your father, nobody’s like your father, but he’s nice, he’s a nice man. He’s big. He’s a big man. He’s from New Zealand. Do you like Claire? Do you think your Dad’ll stay with her? Does he love her, do you think? Oh god, he’s not going to marry her, is he? Do you think he’ll marry her? Oh god, I don’t think I could bear that. I bought a new car last week, did I tell you, it’s not a new car, but new to me, as they say. It’s a Mini. I’ve always liked Minis.”

We stay with Mum every second weekend. Her talk is like the wind that comes off the southern ocean on bad weather days. If I stand facing into it, it pushes all the hair straight back from my face. Press at my skin until my features shift like plasticine.

“I gave a him lift the other day. His name’s John. You’ll like him. He’s from New Zealand.” She’s cooking scrambled eggs as she talks. “Oh, it’s was the funniest thing, ‘cause he’s so big and the Mini is so small and he can hardly fit into it. The whole side of the car leans when he gets into it. He’s going to help with the shop. Your Dad thinks it’s a good idea. I’m going to call it Katie’s Korner. The man from Coca-Cola said they’ll paint the sign if I let them put their logo up.” Her voice is a high scratch of metal. A train. She talks faster and faster and the eggs are burnt, but they are always burnt. She scrapes them up off the pan onto toast which is cold and also burnt.

Tom and I eat leaning over our plates, not saying anything.

When we’ve finished dinner, she is still talking. I take her hands and touch them one at a time. Stroking them slowly from the wrists to the ends of her fingers.

She sighs when I do this. The long streak of words slows and stops and after a moment, she says, “Why doesn’t he want me, anymore?” And then she is crying, leaning into me, until my neck and shoulder is wet.

I stroke my mother and wonder if she’ll give us dessert. Or biscuits. But then she rears back suddenly, eyes red, nose wet, “Whatever else you are in life, don’t ever be dependent on a man.” She looks into my face, holding my jaw, until I can feel each dent of her fingers. Across the table, Tom sits on his hands, watching us with eyes wide as a possum.
Mum starts to cry again. “Don’t end up like me.” Like a mantra she says this, over and over, until it moves like blood inside my body.

* * * *

Craig spends his lunch hours in the library too. I don’t talk to him, but I know he’s there. He sits at one of the triangle-shaped laminated tables with a dictionary in front of him. He’s reading it all the way through. He’s up to G when we kiss.

Lisa labours over her lined notebooks, struggling with algebra and trigonometry. I sit with her sometimes and show her what I know.

Othertimes, I go up the back of the library. There’s a rubber-topped stool, round and tiny. This is where I sit, curled like a shell and reading about other countries and other people’s lives, building a secret future for myself. A shining and glorious place where I will wear sleek dresses and silver jewellery and go barefoot and bare armed and live where it’s always warm. I will be a poet or a pilot or a queen. I will be Amelia Earhart or Simone de Beauvoir or Sarah Bernhardt. I will have lovers instead of a husband. I will be brilliant and talented. I will be beautiful.

* * * *

In the new house, the ceiling is low, white painted plasterboard with white cornices and yellow sunflower wallpaper. I lie on my bed, on top of the doona. A louvred window by my head. The light falls through the louvres in strips across the bed and the skin of my arms. The louvres are green glass and give a pale tint to the light, stripes on my arms, stripes on the bed.

Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh! OH! OH!!!

The first time, it happened, Tom leapt out of bed, sure that Claire was being murdered. I heard his door bang and intercepted his panic in the hall. “It’s okay,” I said, slowing his rush to rescue. “It’s not that.” We stood together, then, on the wool-mix carpet, listening to her sounds quieten and then stop and then start up again.

* * * *
In the morning, she made us scrambled eggs. They were light and fluffy and perfect.

Tom sat in his chair and scowled at the plate before him.

“Come on, Tom,” I said, looking at Claire, wanting the blond princess to love me. “They’re beautiful scrambled eggs.”

“They’re NOT scrambled eggs.” He pushed at them with his fork.

“Scrambled eggs are dry with brown bits. THIS is NOT scrambled eggs.” He put the fork down and hunched low inside his own shoulders, and even I could see he wasn’t ever going to eat Claire’s perfect scrambled eggs.

* * * *

Sometimes, after school, I caught the bus into town and bought cream cakes. White and airy and beautiful as brides. I ate them at the empty bus stop or sitting on the low brick wall beside Franklin Square. Whipped and melty in my mouth, the soft, sweet powder of icing sugar on my tongue and the corners of my mouth.

‘Hey slut! Suck my dick!” A purple Torana, screams past. Two boys with shaggy hair hang out the windows. “Dog!” They yell at me and then they bark and howl.

I swallow the rest of the cake in one uncomfortable bite. The Torana disappears up the road. It starts to rain, cold rain with ice in it. Thin silver lines razor from the dark sky. The black road shines. I bend my face against the rain and walk up the grey pavement until I reach the shops.

I missed having a mother. I thought Claire might step in, but she wasn’t having a bar of it. “I can never replace your mother,” she said early on, “and I’m not going to ever try to.”

I could have wailed with disappointment.

The Torana drives past again, slowing as it reaches me. I keep my face down, walking quickly with the rain on my head.

The water has soaked through my jumper and my skin is cold and wet. I step inside a newsagents. There’s a three-bar heater mounted on the wall. I stand in the orange shadow of its heat, the wet smell of my jumper steaming around me. Beside me, on the floor, sits a pile of newspapers. I
stare at the front page. A man has killed his wife. A doctor. He lived in a
good suburb. After he killed her, he chopped her into little pieces and put
the parts of her through a meat-grinder then flushed her down the drain.
That’s how they caught him. Somebody found a finger in the sewers.

* * * *

“What are you going to do, when you finish school?” The teacher bends
her face into mine.

“Leave.”

She laughs. “Leave? What do you mean?”

Her breath smells of Juicy Fruit chewing gum and she has a tiny pearl in
the centre of each earlobe. She takes us for English Comprehension and
her name is Miss Lavender and because she has such a beautiful name and
because she really seems to want to know, I tell her. “I’m going to Europe.
As soon as I’ve got enough money, I’m leaving.”

She straightens up, folds her arms and cocks her head like a bird. “Why on
earth would you want to do a thing like that?”

For a moment I want to tell her, I want to tell her everything, but then I
see the way she stands, how she is shaking her head so that the tiny pearls
catch and lose the light, and that she is not waiting for my answer, but
looking at me like I am broken.

* * * *

I am in the kitchen stealing cheesecake in the nude. Well, almost in the
nude. I’m wearing a pair of undies and a pad. The pad is a centimetre
thick and sits in the crutch of my undies like a notebook. I put one on for
practice every now and then, hoping to encourage some blood, but so far
nothing has happened. Sometimes I worry I might never get my period.
The phrase I use is Barren Womb. What will I do if I have a Barren Womb?

At the end of year eight, we had a special class for the girls only. A woman
from the Health Centre came to talk to us. She gave us all showbags. They
weren’t very good showbags. Mostly they only had pads and tampons in
them. Some leaflets and a free biro. Our parents had to sign a consent
form for us to go and Lisa wasn’t allowed to. Sharon Peterson said it was because she was Catholic and the Catholics don’t believe in periods.

Sharon Peterson was the biggest girl in the class. She was as tall as some of the teachers and you could see they were a little bit scared of her. I was a little bit scared of her. She wore her jeans so tight you could see the shape of her labia. Although nobody said labia. The boys called them fanny flaps. Although never to her face.

At recess, we shoved our showbags into the bottom of our bags and talked in clusters at the edges of the science block. Except for Sharon, who gave hers to the boys. One of them stuck a pad up on the blackboard and when we came back from recess, Mr Green was very annoyed. “I’m very annoyed,” he said, and pulled the pad off the blackboard and put it in the bin.

“Eeyewwww,” said the boys. The girls, sat collectively pink in the face, not saying a word. Except for Sharon, who laughed. She had nice teeth. Very straight. She never had braces. They just grew like that.

* * * *

Inside the fridge is the Sara Lee cheesecake that Tom and I are not allowed to touch. Cold air falls down the front of my body. I take a large knife from the draw beside the sink. It is a lemon cheesecake with a biscuit base and strawberry topping. I press the thin sharp point of the knife into the centre and slice off the thinnest, smallest, most minutest sliver, let it fall into the open plate of my palm and step away from the fridge. The suck of the rubber seal as the door closes behind me. I eat the cake from my hand and then lick the cream from my fingers and from the knife too, sideways and slowly, careful of my tongue so close to the silvery blade.

* * * *

“Your mother’s moving to New Zealand.” It’s Dad who tells us, but Mum is there, bright and sad. Katie’s Korner has gone bankrupt. All the money she got for the settlement went into the shop. And now it’s all gone.

“There’s a resort and they’re going to give John and I jobs. It’s a great opportunity.” She says, “You could come over for holidays. There’s hot springs. There’s even mud baths.”

Tom doesn’t say anything.

* * * *

Lisa’s uniform comes to her knees and is crisply ironed. My uniform is not ironed and one day Lisa isn’t allowed to be my friend.

“Because you come from a broken home,” she explains. “It’s not me. It’s my mother. She thinks you might be a bad influence.”

“But I haven’t done anything.”

“I know.”

“I help you with your homework.”

“That’s what I said. She said it doesn’t matter. You’re from a broken home.”

I don’t know what to say. We are sitting on the green painted wooden benches at the front of D block.

I look at the river. It’s an overcast day and the water is grey and white with wind. The wind blows my hair into my face.

A broken home. A home that is broken.

She gets up and I eat the rest of my lunch alone. My braces clog with bread and my lunchbox smells of bad oranges. I look at the poisonous water of the Derwent River and eat my sandwiches too fast.

* * * *

I kissed Craig McCarthy because he had braces too. We stood on the side of the oval at sports day. The grass was bright, bright green, like plastic. And people were running and his skin was brown and his teeth were large and white.

“Can you flick your bands?” He asked me.

“Yeah,” I said, and pinged one with my tongue to show him. A green rubber band flicked across the air between us. A duller green than the bright of the grass.
“When do yours come off?” He had olive skin, smooth as a apple, and lovely full lips, like a girl’s.

“Another year.”

“Oh.”

“What about you?”

“About eight months.”

We looked back towards the game. It was a long way away. A scurry of white ball in the short-stop’s glove. The scrape of legs too late on the plate.

“Did you have to have teeth taken out?”

“Yeah. Four. After that I couldn’t feel anything. My whole face was all rubbery and numb.”

“Yeah, me too. I couldn’t even talk.

“Just dribble.”

We laughed and then stopped and I wondered what to say next but then he lent over and kissed me. It was a clear, bright day and I was cold in my sports uniform. I wasn’t expecting him to kiss me. It was a small kiss on the lips without tongues. We didn’t get stuck. Maybe if we’d used tongues we might have, but I don’t think so.

It only happened once. It was sweet and careful. I didn’t think about braces, or the softball game, just the silk of his girl lips and the way they pressed against me.
Attention, shoppers!
Please finalise your choices,
And make your way to the checkouts,

And continue your smug and smiling ravishment
Of our own dear Mother Earth.

Hurry, shoppers!
Fifteen minutes left to satisfy
Your grossest grocery wish.

Get smelly seafood from the deli,
Processed by peasants
Who scrape slimy molluscs from polluted shores
Six thousand k’s
And a thousand worlds away.

Look up, shoppers!
Drag your glazed gaze
From the bright brands
Vying for your love.

Look around, shoppers!
You’re in a vast and soul-less shed
That dulls and programs
Your poor, conditioned minds.
The supermarket!

The symbol, the emblem
The icon.
The symptom, the cause,
The warning … of what is rotten
In our rotten state.
Make way, shoppers!
The bride beams and marches
Down the aisle
To where she hopes she might find
Fulfillment
And value.

Caveat emptor!
Beware of what? OF BUYING!
Attempting,
Ridiculously,
To feed
To stuff
To gorge
To fill
The emptiness
Of your soul
And your life.

I judge you!
I judge you!
I judge you by the contents of your trolley!
I pity you for the misery symbolised by
24 litres of diet coke,
14 frozen weight-watchers’ meals
And a guilty, lonely doughnut in a greasy paper bag.

What do you know, shoppers,
Of consumption?

A new sickness
A new old sickness
Once, consumption killed -
Bright red spots on a white hanky,

Pure white background with a red symbol.
The monotonous chorus of beeps...

Am I alone, shoppers?
Maybe I’m the only one
Whose heart breaks in time
With the tinkly muzak.
Watch out, shoppers!
The carpark outside is peopled
By yobs in utes
Thickly encrusted with rust and hatred.
And wobbly-wheeled trolleys full
Of louts.

Inside, the destruction continues.

A skinny Indian once said:
“There is enough on Earth for everyone’s need, but not for everyone’s
greed.”
This is a good aphorism because it rhymes.
And also because it is true.
Burial

Barbara Eather

Today I dug a grave
shallow and narrow
for my pet hen
whom I’d found stiff and quiet
one eye dead white
the other stuck to the ground.

I slid on leaves
heavy with slime
as I shovelled and groaned
for digging a grave is work
while she lay taut under the newspaper
so the guinea fowl could not stare at her.

I once shared a house with a woman
we planned hypothetically
to dispose of a body
we decided to bury it in the bush
somewhere out in the Bad Lands
where it wouldn’t be found.

We didn’t have a victim
nor a method of slaying
but we thought it would probably be a man
a large man who deserved to be buried
somewhere out in the Bad Lands
where he wouldn’t be found.

At the hardware store
we would ask for a trolley
suitable for carrying a large dead man
and ropes to tie him on
so we could take him away from the tracks of cars
so later we wouldn’t be asked to explain.
And we’d ask the hardware store
for containers
suitable to put water in to drink
while we dug a grave
because we supposed that digging
out in the Bad Lands
would be thirsty work.

When the shop staff laughed at our plan
we’d laugh back
If they alerted the police we’d exclaim
they don’t like us there
because we make fun of their tools
who’d be mad enough to say what they say we say?

The hen had been liberated from a battery farm
I named her Eveready
she gave two years of eggs and excrement
and pecked bugs off my kitchen floor each day
I buried her with thoughts that we’d both enjoyed her second life
and a packet of batteries for the next.

If I smoked
I could have lit a cigarette
and watched its pyre tendril up
taking her with it
leading a path
to somewhere beyond the dank earth.

Instead I melted into a splurge of sweat
drank two cups of coffee
contemplated life without real eggs
felt as though I’d dug a grave
on a November morning
smeared in humidity.

For grave-digging is thirsty work
even for a small hen that’s run out of charge
in a garden bed nowhere near the Bad Lands
where subterfuge is not essential
where the dirt crumbles into your hands
and reminds you what you have to look forward to.
Tennant Creek

Collette Livermore

I

Silent channel of silent burning sand
Rimmed by arching gums
Spotted trunks white and brown
Roots exposed clinging to rock.
A lightning flash heralds water in torrents
Dry channels resurrected.
Trees alive with the corroboree of cicadas and the chorus of birdsong,
Creeks teeming with tadpoles.
The crimson desert rose opens her heart.
As water is to land, Love is to people
A resilient love that withstands the drought
A love whose roots run deep
Surviving the onslaughts of time.

II

Shadow across the land
An orphaned child cries in a coolamon.
Her mother murdered.
Her clan massacred.
Rescued by Caleb
Carried hundreds of miles to Ngukur
She survives and becomes Helen’s grandmother.
The war, relocation, hunger, cold
A boarding school in Alice forge a strong woman.
A grandmother herself now rearing grandchildren for whom she is mother
Building around them a protective circle of elders and stories
To protect them from drink, violence and rape.
To guide them to learn, to live, to lead.
Our country, community of peoples,
One land, many cultures, many stories.
The past cannot be undone.
The future is ours to forge.
Top End Transitions

Jill Pettigrew

Exams over, decisions deferred, mind detached. Scooters and skateboards litter the front yard, credit card statement unopened. Nothing short of a cyclone can spark a spasm of anxiety in this lazy zone between Christmas and New Year.

A monsoon squall pushing towards the Gulf ripples the atmosphere. Pulses of air, more sensual than human touch caress sweat-soaked skin. A kiss of cool skims off ribs, glides over hips. In the delicious pre-dawn hours sleep seems wasteful. Cycads sway, intersecting leaves crosshatch the sky, moon and stars play noughts and crosses until the sun sucks up the breeze.

A pinstriped caterpillar, a baby butterfly noiselessly munches lemon leaves. Insects and frogs noisy in nocturnal reproduction slide into somnolence. Rain soaked January sloughs the dry skin of December.

Back to work and the new year stings like a March fly bite.
Thoughts of the Desert

Leni Shilton

I
When the thick heat
smacks its spikes
into my face –
it’s not just heat I feel.

A smell rises
from the bright earth
like it’s alive,
mixed in the soft clouds
of dust around my feet.

The heat arrives,
stays for months,
like a longing I wish
I didn’t have.

Out west, I picture my son,
living in another desert –
so vast,
it stretches past
the edges that a mind can hold.

II
In the glare and flashing lights,
of a city stacked with concrete –
the loss of the desert
is here too,
closed in a part of my brain
where the red dirt lingers.

I am trying
to write the desert
out of my body
but my body won’t let it go.
Try leaving it – 
and the mourning aches, 
lingering like the memory 
of broken bones.

[Signature]
Sea Diary - Aireys Inlet

Leni Shilton

The sea is clearer than the sky
and down in the valley
blue paint has been poured into the river.

I climb from my desert skin
let the salt touch me –
weave its way in.

I unfold, unwind and open.
The sun makes me soft and hard by degrees.
I abandon my usual skin care,
I lift my face to the sun,
lie for hours in the brightness –
look out to sea
without blinking,
like the view will hold the answers.

Here, the sand that sticks,
that pours from our clothes
is white
not red.

I lose my comb,
stop worrying about grey roots,
my hair lightens.
The blotches of my skin join up,
I darken.

The children start to feel the rhythm:
wake; eat; beach; eat; sleep,
this sameness,
day after day.
They swim in the still river, 
grow braver – 
wander further, 
their growing bodies bent over rock pools, 
the ocean just over the rise. 
Its constant sound a backdrop, 
lulling us into sleep 
and rocking through the days.

It swirls like a mass off the coast 
as if waiting for the moment 
to come ashore.

My psyche is 
parched by the desert, 
I struggle to let go. 
The adjusting takes all the time I have.

Each day I edge deeper into the coast 
and slowly 
let my shape curve 
like the coastline, 
always keeping my eyes 
on the sea.
I don’t like the look of the Polish woman, although right now, I don’t know that she is Polish. But I know that she looks grim. I don’t like the look of the smug couple from Brisbane either. They wear identical quick-dry trekking clothes and eat their cereal out of light-weight collapsible bowls. The Polish woman and I munch on bread and jam. Our crumbs scatter across a plastic table cloth at the pilgrims’ alburge in Azofra.

True, I am unsociable. It is autumn, in northern Spain. It is dark. In half an hour, when it will still be dark, I will be evicted from the alburge so that it can be made ready for today’s influx of pilgrims. Now about to start my twelfth day of walking on the Camino Francés, one of the pilgrim routes across Spain, my sense of fun has been nailed to the cross. I am over shared dormitories and communal bathrooms. Each day I panic as I search for the yellow arrows that mark the way to Santiago. I know only seventeen words of Spanish. My pack has rubbed sores on my back. I have covered them with tape. Every couple of days I sniff at the dressings. I hope that I am not taking maggots on pilgrimage too. The Iberian sun sears me. Rain chills me. My feet swell as I trudge over hot rocks. Blisters form under calluses. Temperamental front-loading washing machines conspire against me in pilgrim laundry facilities. And bread and jam, for breakfast, is no way to holiday.

There is nothing to keep me in Azofra. I heave on my pack and walk. By a miracle – and torchlight - I find the correct path out of the village. Simultaneously I am robbed, held up at claw-point by a black and white kitten that winds its way around my legs until I hand over a tin of sardines. I evade a howling ginger cat that hurtles out of the gloom. I lull myself into a steady pace until a piece of farm machinery forces me off the track. I plunge deep into the grass, deeper than I expect to. Enveloped in feather-top seeds, I tell myself that I could have been injured. Back on the trail, I overtake a fellow Australian. Other pilgrims have told me that a compatriot is not far ahead. By the time I find her, as the sunrise haemorrhages across the sky, I already know her name.
After two hours I stop walking. I should have covered ten kilometres but I have not yet reached Cirueña, a little over nine kilometres from Azofra. I want to make as much distance as I can before my ankles contract rigor mortis. I need a sugar-hit. I drag a slab of chocolate con almendras out of my pack. I peel back the silver foil. I sense someone approaching. I look up. There, striding toward me sternly is Grim Face from breakfast. It is too late to avoid eye-contact. Attack is the best form of defence. I call out,

‘Hola! Chocolate con almendras?’

Within seconds I learn that Grim Face is grateful, not grim and Polish, not poisonous. Like me, her pilgrimage began in St. Jean Pied-de-Port, on the French side of the Pyrenees. Unlike me, she plans to walk all the way to Santiago, where the bones of San Diago, Saint James the Apostle, are said to be buried. At the twenty kilometres a day pace I manage, I now know that I only have time to make it to Burgos, all up three hundred kilometres. Compared to the eight hundred kilometres that she intends to conquer, I feel as though I am a failure.

The Polish woman thanks me and strides off. Outside Cirueña a, we wave to each other as she rests on a cement chair. Cirueña appears to be a ghost town in reverse, with a golf course, many townhouses under construction and only a few old buildings. I count a dozen pilgrims on the trail ahead. More pass me. Although I don’t notice, one of these is the Polish woman, for when I enter the first bar I find in Santo Domingo de la Calzada, she is there.

The bar is filled with the aroma of freshly ground Arabica beans. At first the Polish woman and I only sigh. We have been rained on for the past hour. Once restored by coffee and cake, I speak.

‘I know a man from Poland. He lives in my city. He plays the flute. One Christmas he went back to Poland and sent me postcards from Krakow. Beautiful city – with beautiful buildings.’

Some of those buildings had been used as torture chambers during the Second World War, but it seems impolite to mention that.

‘Ah yes,’ says the Polish woman, ‘beautiful buildings.’

‘And beautiful trees - with snow on them,’ I add.
‘Ah yes, beautiful – and with the snow,’ she sighs, puts her head in her hands and sobs,

‘At last someone who understands my English.’

I reassure her, ‘Your English is very good. You should hear my Polish. Terrible!’

We leave the bar almost at the same time. She goes to the cathedral where a rooster and a hen are kept, symbols of one of the miracles that the Camino is famous for. I power on. Granon is seven kilometres away. I want to stay there tonight. My feet hurt. It will be a slow seven kilometres. The rain has stopped, but puddles flood the road. On the bridge crossing the Rio Oja, truck drivers pull over so as not to splash me. Their kindness makes sneaky nasty tears sting my eyes.

A salvo of barks from three tethered dogs heralds the arrival of the Polish woman. She is almost running as she comes alongside me.

‘Those dogs!’ she gasps.

‘It is okay. They are on chains.’

I imitate a snarling hound pulling at a tight leash, gurgling as I make-believe choke myself. We laugh as she paces on ahead.

Granon is surrounded by sunflowers. If my feet weren’t pulverised, I might appreciate the beauty. The church is at the highest point in the village. The alburge is in the attic. The only place higher than the church attic is the bell tower. I am better than Quasimodo – everything is hunched as I haul myself up the steps. I stumble on the narrow stairs and wedge myself crucifixion-like across the stairwell so I don’t fall. I open what I hope isn’t a broom cupboard and burst into the alburge. The two hosts, ecclesiastical Italians, welcome me – after I take my muddy boots outside. I find a mattress on the mezzanine level. The Polish woman is there, snuggled in her sleeping bag. I nod. She waves. After a cold shower, I find the village bar. The smug couple from Brisbane is there. They have formed a pompous quartet with a smug couple from Toronto. The señora a behind the bar converses with me – in my seventeen words of her language. The pompous quartet talks at the señora – loudly in English. When she doesn’t understand, they roll their eyes and ask me to translate. I shrug my shoulders and anaesthetise myself with vino tinto.
That evening I eat boiled sausages and poached eggs with thirty-nine pilgrims, the two hosts, a local woman who is a volunteer and two workmen who are restoring the church. Everyone helps with the washing up in a precision rotation. Non-compulsory prayers in the village hall are cancelled because it is raining heavily. The church volunteer says,

‘You will not thank me if I take you outside and get you wet.’

During the night the roof leaks on an Italian woman. Her squeals wake half the alburge. I hear nothing.

The alburge at Granon encourages everyone to sleep in. Breakfast is bread and jam. Two old men in a beat-up car point out a shortcut to the start of the pilgrim trail. I detour across a field. Mud sticks to my boots and weighs me down. I find a pile of rocks and scrape my soles. The mire of Spain is very sticky.

I walk for hours with a New Zealand woman. Where the trail follows the motorway, truck drivers toot encouragement occasionally. In Vilamayor del Rio, starving cats surround us. We dole out piles of tuna so that the smallest eat without being beaten up. But the cats swarm across the picnic table. One pilgrim snaps at them. Another pilgrim snaps at her for snapping at them. We move on. You can tell a lot about people by the way they treat their animals. This is one spooky shuttered village that I am glad to put behind me.

I make Belorado by early afternoon. I want to push onto Tosantos, five kilometres away. It is said to be like Granon, basic but friendly. I pause in Belorado for coffee and cakes only. At the café, a homeless man from France drinks green liqueur. Each year he follows the pilgrim trails. He pays his way by making jewellery out of wire and performing magic tricks. Sometimes he stays in alburges. Other times he sleeps rough. We calculate that I will be in Burgos by Thursday. He invites me to meet him outside the Burgos cathedral on Friday evening to go off to smoke joints with his friends. I don’t want to be banged up by the Spanish Inquisition. I will avoid the cathedral then.

I arrive, cold and aching, at the wooden door of the alburge in Tosantos. There is a problem. They have no water. But it’s not all bad. They have water for cooking, just none for washing clothes or showering. I laugh this off,
‘I’m from Australia. I’m used to being primitive. No worries. I’ll go to the bar for a while.’

The host tells me that the bar is closed. There is no water in the whole village today. What! No vino tinto to ease my troubled soul? What are you asking of me? Sobriety and filth? But it’s not all bad. At six o’clock the señora will arrive with the key and I will follow her to the church. The alburge will provide supper, after which 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. Then I will be provided with breakfast. There is no fee for this. I will pay what I can.

‘All by donativo,’ says the host.

I agree that I will do all of the above. It’s not all bad. It’s not as though I have agreed to give my left kidney to anyone.

Upstairs the Polish woman is curled inside her sleeping bag. We gasp delighted greetings. We haven’t seen each other all day. I hear a car pull up. What infidel is this? I peer out. It is one of the hosts from Granon. In fifteen minutes he has covered the distance that it has taken me all day to walk. I want to smash his tail-lights. It’s a long cold wait until the señora comes with the key.

After supper the Polish woman tells me that she has a problem.

‘I have only a twenty euro note. Can you change it into smaller money for the donativo?’

Apart from three one euro coins, I have only big notes.

I hand her the three euro.

‘Here, have these.’

She recoils,

‘Not give! Lend! I will pay you back!’

‘Sure,’ I respond, ‘You will see me somewhere on The Way.’

In the morning, after breakfast of bread and jam, the host makes the sign of the cross at me and blesses me in Advanced Spanish. My seventeen words of Spanish don’t encompass,
'May your God go with you.'

All I manage is a feeble,

‘Gracias.’

Out on the trail I meet a group of cyclists. They are from Poland. I tell them,

‘There is a Polish woman up ahead – yellow pack cover.’

The sky snarls at me. I put on my wet weather gear before all I have to look forward to is hypothermia. On the approach to Villafranca de Montes de Oca, the pilgrim trail leads across the unprotected edge of a bridge. Part way across my balance falters. I grasp at a guidepost. It crumbles. I fling myself to the left and somehow don’t plummet onto the teeth of the rocks metres below.

I find the Polish woman in the first bar I come to. The three euro I lent her last night sits on the table in front of her. She says,

‘I wait and I wait and I hope you come.’

‘Sorry I walk slow. And I nearly fell off the bridge.’

I demonstrate how I saved myself. The Polish woman looks horrified. Suddenly I am more scared now than I was out there clawing at the air. Had I saved myself or had I just experienced a minor miracle? A major miracle is said to be rising from the dead or walking on water. A minor miracle is something less dramatic, but to believers, no less real. A week ago, in the dark one morning, two pilgrims walking behind me had called me back when I had overshot a turnoff. The secularist would know that they just happened to be there and saw me blunder on mesmerized. The believer would say that they had been placed on the trail by God Himself! I doubt that I have just been steadied by the hand of God. Surely He is a busy man and should be off stopping famines in Africa? The pragmatist within tells me that I didn’t fall off the bridge because I’d done all those balancing exercises at the gym. I want to believe that it doesn’t all end in a slow ride in a hearse, but I don’t know if I can. But I do know, at that moment, on a grey day, in a bar, at a truck stop, on a pilgrim trail in northern Spain, that I can now better believe why others do.
Steam tendrils from my coffee. The Polish woman tells me that a group of Polish cyclists surprised her by calling out,

‘Hello. Are you from Poland?’

She laughs when I tell her that I’d sent them.

‘Not a miracle,’ I say, ‘just Camino gossip!’

I ask the Polish woman if she has any pets. She tells me she has six cats.

‘I miss them so much,’ she says.

I tell her about my ancient cat and my little black dog who tickles my face with his whiskers when he tries to find food that I have just put in my mouth. Nasty sneaky tears sting my eyes. Rain lashes at the window. I want to be home. I need to walk. Two genial men, Spanish pilgrims call out ‘Buen Camino’ as I reach for my pack. I point my nose at the mountains and move my legs.

I cross the Montes de Oca almost in a single bound. In medieval times, this was a wild unpopulated area, notorious for bandits and wolves. During the Spanish Civil War, it was a dumping ground for bodies left over from overnight reprisals. But today nothing nefarious appears. The weather clears. I eat lunch surrounded by Christmas trees, the earth my table, the sky my roof.

The Polish woman and I enter San Juan de Ortega together. She says she will stay here tonight. I plan to push onto Agés. Inside the bar in San Juan, the smug couple from Brisbane and the smug couple from Toronto greet me. I flee outside, away from the pompous quartet. There I hover over a cappuccino and two cakes like a lion over a fresh Christian. A local man remarks, ‘You like our Madelines?’

I nod, but don’t look up – not even to growl.

Next day, after breakfast of bread and jam in the alburge in Agés, I set off for Burgos. The smug couple from Toronto overtakes me. I don’t see the smug couple from Brisbane. Perhaps they lie dead in a ditch. The last twelve kilometres into Burgos is purgatory’s cousin. The pilgrim trail crosses searing wasteland surrounding the airport. Then it is hard pavements, a lack of yellow arrows to show the way into the city and
trucks that want to kill me. But serendipity prevails. I parasite myself onto other pilgrims and other pilgrims parasite onto me. Together we make it. While I am under a hot shower in the municipal alburge, the New Zealand woman I walked with three days ago leaves a note on my bed. I find her in the foyer. She tells me that the homeless man from France drank too much green liqueur the afternoon I met him in Belorado and fell asleep before he could perform any magic tricks. Together we hobble to the cathedral. Nearby we see a café that serves bacon and eggs for breakfast.

Later, on my way to dinner with a dozen of my newest friends, the Polish woman runs toward me across the cobblestones. She exclaims,

‘Oh you are here. I worry I not see you today and today is your last day on the Camino. I think about you all day. I want to say goodbye.’

It’s almost like in the movies. We embrace. Nasty sneaky tears sting my eyes. The Polish woman says, ‘Let me take your photo.’

I stand against a dirty wall. After she has captured me, I offer to take her picture. She places herself next to the same backdrop. I laugh when I realise what we have ignored. I position her in front of the spires of the Burgos cathedral, gothic splendour from an era when money was spent differently. The spires gleam in the setting sun as the shutter freezes the moment. The Polish woman jots down my email address. She promises to write. I never hear from her.
The Valley of the Shadow of Death

Barbara Eather

When I was a child I had been scared of the dark. Sometimes, to settle me, my parents left a light on. When they thought I had gone to sleep, my father would turn the light off. Often I was awake still and I’d see him flick the switch. Inside I’d be willing him not to do it. I’d be too scared to cry out. The dark might hear me and come and get me. If I was still and quiet, maybe the dark wouldn’t find me in the dark.

Now, lying in the dark, at Everest Base Camp Tibet, I wished that the same logic applied to hiding from altitude sickness. I’d been still and quiet and in the dark for hours, but it had found me again! Was this the seventh time I’d woken? And I was sure I’d stopped breathing. I rummaged for my migraine medication. It nuked altitude headaches. It worked by shrinking my brain, something that I didn’t find reassuring.

Earlier in the night it had been windy and from the raucous sounds from nearby tents, the other inhabitants of Base Camp had been running a casino and were fully-paid-up members of The Shortest Way Out of Base Camp is to Get Drunk Club. No wonder the Russians camped further up the valley because they liked the quiet. Now the wind had died down and so had the drunks and the gamblers. I had been told that most summit attempts start at around eleven o’clock at night, so that the climbers could get up and back before the weather turned foul. I wondered if the Russians or the Koreans or maybe even the solo Japanese woman were up there headed toward the death zone, that part of the mountain where the air is so thin the longer you stay there the faster you die. I hoped that they all had the ‘right stuff’ to get up and back safely. I wondered if the Russians had some sharp pencils with them. I’ve always been amused by the story that NASA spent billions of dollars inventing a pen that wrote in Outer Space while the Russians just packed a nice red HB. Now that the walls of the yak hair tent were no longer wrenched by inhuman gusts, it was so quiet it was spooky, as though up on the high crags a deadly game was being played out that we, down below, conscious or unconscious, were witness to. The lapsed Anglican in me sent out something that dangerously resembled a prayer.
Struggling to keep warm, I rolled around in bed. This was not easy. I had smothered myself with two heavy felt-filled quilts and wore almost every item of clothing I travelled with. And rolling around could easily become rolling out, for my cot was narrow and short, as though part of the timber allowance for its construction had been diverted to firewood duties.

The tent that I and my twelve travel companions had been allocated when we had arrived that afternoon was as large as a shed. At its entrance a sign proclaimed, ‘Welcome to Hotel de California’. Who’d come up with that name – and why? Thoughts gnawed inside my head. Snippets from the lyrics of The Eagles’ *Hotel California* drifted into my mind. Maybe the Shangri-La of James Hilton’s book *Lost Horizon* and the Hotel California of the song were, metaphorically, the same place? Both sounded as though they were paradise with a price – ‘this could be heaven or this could be hell’ – depending on what your head or your heart wanted – ‘some dance to remember, some dance to forget’. And both came with a veiled threat – ‘you can check out any time you like but you can never leave’. Sure, at Hilton’s Shangri-La, set in a mystical Himalayan valley, you could experience great longevity, but if you left, that longevity would crumble like a dead leaf – some choice. Whatever the philosophy of the wee hours, I was a prisoner here, of my own device. I told myself that this was the last time that I would be conned by glossy travel brochures. I hovered on the edge of slumber. It was still dark when I heard yak caravans leaving camp, the melodic clunk of yak bells, the plod of hooves and the creak of harnesses resonating just metres from my bed. Relieved that soon it had to be dawn, I slept.

If I had thought my night had been bad, others had fared worse. My tour companions spoke of being awake for hours and of making numerous visits to the toilet – or a patch of ground masquerading as one – at uncivilised hours. Apart from once, when I had seen a shadowy figure leave and return to the tent, I had been convinced that I had been the only person awake for the entire night.

Jeanette, in the bed adjacent to mine, looked ragged. She said she had spent long dark hours propped upright, gasping for breath and ready to scream, ‘Get me off this mountain!’

But that was not all. During the night she had weaved her way outside to answer a call of nature. There, in the blackness, crouched down, hobbled
by long-johns and trousers, numbed by glacial winds and fumbling from the effects of altitude, she tried not to urinate on her sock-clad feet. Just when she thought she had enough troubles, she realised that she was face-to-face with a very large, very hairy and very inquisitive bovine.

‘Nice yak, nice yak,’ she had gasped, centimetres from its pointy horns, while wondering if she was about to face an undignified death.

If we had all had a night to remember, it was forgotten when Sandra who, now that it was daylight, had ventured to the official toilet – the one with walls, a roof and a slit in the floor to aim through – came back breathless with excitement,

‘Get out there! Everest is clear today.’

We scrambled into boots, threw on wind-breakers, grabbed cameras and laughed as we tried to get out the narrow door all at once. And there she was, call her what you like, Chomolungma, Qomolangma, Sagarmatha, the Mother of All Mountains, shimmering in the morning sun and looking glorious. A great sense of peace emanated from her, reducing us to whispers.

But after photo opportunities had been exhausted, there was not much to do other than stand around and turn into ice statues. Pancake O’clock did not appear to be imminent. To fill in time until breakfast, we skipped flat stones across the surface of the shallow stream that meandered through Base Camp. More often than not our projectiles hit sheets of ice and slid, rather than bouncing, across the water, something that we found immensely amusing – anything to keep our minds off the cold. I now understood why ancient civilisations had worshipped the sun. If Mount Everest had all the solar rays, where we were, deep within the walls of the moraine, it was a veritable Valley of the Shadow of Death. I stamped my feet and paced around, all the while keeping the door of the cook-house tent in my line of sight. I no longer found the phenomena of my breath, dogs’ breath or yaks’ breath forming white ‘clouds’ in the frigid air entertaining.

While a promising wisp of yak-dung smoke wafted out the chimney of the cook-house tent, an agitated traveller stopped in front of me. Something didn’t seem right with him, or with me. I couldn’t figure out which one of us had the problem, for although he spoke to me in a language that I
thought was English, I didn’t understand a word. My new ‘friend’ wasn’t very patient, for when I stared at him blankly and uttered a puzzled ‘What?’ he snarled at me and staggered off, leaving me too confused to be offended. I soon pieced a few facts together. He and a female companion had arrived at Base Camp late the previous night. Unlike our group that had been on the Tibetan Plateau for close to two weeks, they had allegedly, in one day, travelled from Kathmandu, at 1337 metres above sea level to Base Camp at 5300 metres – a suicidal ascent. The fellow, who had spoken to me in Mountain Sickness Gibberish, had been desperately trying to find their driver to take them to a lower altitude. He wasn’t well and his friend had been vomiting and was barely able to walk or talk – too much altitude too soon. I suspected that their chauffeur had, on arrival, joined the Shortest Way Out of Base Camp is to Get Drunk Club and was sleeping off the Chang.

But Buddha be praised. The cook-house door opened and a Tibetan woman appeared carrying a tray laden with pancakes. I followed her into our tent. The fire inside there had been lit, so there was now a possibility of warmth. Some of our group complained about the odour of yak-dung smoke, but I scarcely noticed it – a childhood spent in close proximity to cattle has its advantages. While we settled ourselves on Tibetan carpets, someone produced a tube of chocolate spread. Steaming cups of sickly sweet tea were handed around and we hoed into the pancakes. A small window in the side of the tent framed the North Face perfectly. The Top of the World seemed a very good place to be.
Learning to Read

Turning onto the Stuart Highway south of Alice, I press down on the accelerator and don’t let up until the needle reaches 130. An hour and a half later, I pull into the Erldunda roadhouse, past tourists sitting on picnic tables out front, dazed by all the space. There are Indian women in bright pink saris, looking like exotic lotus flowers that got blown off course. There are Japanese couples in khaki outfits, regarding the world at arm’s length through their cameras. There are Germans sporting brand new Akubras and grey nomads comparing mileage. A few people are clustered near a fence at the edge of the parking lot, looking at emus that turn their flat heads on long, skinny necks, first one way and then the other, to stare back with each uncomprehending glassy brown eye.

Nearby is another fence, this one enclosing faux fauna – two gigantic wooden carvings of an echidna and a frilled lizard. Well, Goulburn has the Big Merino, I think. I guess Erldunda is entitled to an echidna. I walk into the roadhouse, past all the shelves of bush souvenirs. They’ve got everything in here, from tea towels to condoms stamped with kangaroos. Normally, I like to browse, check out the latest kitschy inventory and buy at least a few postcards. My favourite are the kind with cartoonish figures of a scantily clad, buxom woman and a skinny man holding a beer, with arrows out from them identifying essential Aussie lexicon: a woman is a sheila, a man is a bloke, a beer is a stubby, etc. Those are about as low as I go.

But it’s caffeine I’m after today. I buy a can of Coke and hurry back out to the Troopie, eager to beat all the vehicles jammed into this parking lot onto the road.

Out on the Lasseter Highway, there’s a holiday feeling in the air. Almost every approaching driver gives me the Outback Wave – a couple of fingers or sometimes an entire hand lifted off the steering wheel – a sign of solidarity among us hardy folks out here braving the bush. Just about everyone on this road is on the tourist pilgrimage to Uluru, either going or coming back, pulling wobbly caravans or in well-equipped looking Brits camper vans. There’s usually at least one of those Wicked vans too, the kind favoured by backpackers, covered in random text ranging from the philosophical (‘Age is a very high price to pay for maturity’) to the
randy. I get stuck behind one for a few miles that reads simply: ‘Inspect her gadget.’

An hour later, just past the Mt Ebenezer Roadhouse, I spot the sign I’m looking for. It’s not big and brown like those that announce Uluru and Watarrka, but small, like a street sign, a piece of metal stuck on a pole that says ‘Imanpa’. One end of it tapers off to a point that’s angled at a dirt track on the opposite side of the highway. I turn onto it and, fifteen minutes later, enter another world.

Mangy dogs roam the dirt roads that criss-cross through the place, or lie in front of concrete houses that are dark inside with broken windows and rubbish strewn all over the dirt surrounding them. There’s everything from old refrigerators and car parts to nappies, bottles and cans lying around. On the verandahs of a lot of the houses are dirty mattresses and blankets. Looking around, you get the feeling that domesticity does not agree with these people. They seem to have no regard for material objects, those things we whitefellas spend all our lives accumulating.

Every Aboriginal community I’ve been to in Central Australia looks more or less like this. Imanpa, though, is one of the worst; the sense of hopelessness here is almost palpable.

But bathing this whole squalid scene is a light, so direct and strong, it’s dazzling – like pure liquid pouring out of the sky. It suffuses everything – the rusty old cars, the peeling yellow and turquoise paint on the houses, the brown skin of the people – making it glow with radiance. Even the rubbish lying in the soft red dirt looks almost luminous.

I pull up to the corrugated iron building that is the training centre and park the Troopie next to another white landcruiser. These are the signifiers of whitefellas out bush. Like vultures, we cruise around in them, from one community to the next, bearing papers. This one is Phil’s – it says ‘Anangu Jobs’ on the side. I still haven’t figured out exactly what jobs this organisation is training people to do. Like most of those set up to serve the needs of Aboriginal people, the bureaucracy soon takes on a life of its own and whitefellas end up being the only ones employed out here.

Phil looks up from his computer as I enter.
“You should have rung before you left,” he says. “No one’s here. Tuesday is casino day.”

“What, they’re all in Alice?” I wail, visions of Lasseter’s Casino dancing through my mind. There go my ACH – ‘Actual Countable Hours’ – or bums on seats that justify my position.

“No!” he laughs. “Tuesday is the day they get their Centrelink money, so there are a couple of big card games going on. They’ll be over in a while. I’ve got to finish this monthly report,” he says, turning back to a pile of papers on his desk.

I unpack the Troopie, making several trips back and forth, carrying boxes of books, papers, pencils, and laptops for the literacy workshop I’m here to deliver. There are no windows in the classroom. In the corner is a sink, with a kettle, some chipped cups, and tea and sugar. There is a CD player and a few ancient computers against one wall, a film of red dust covering them. And in the middle of the room is a large table covered in graffiti, with ‘Demons – # 1’ and ‘Judy and Justin – OTBL’ (short for ‘only two best lovers’) featuring prominently.

The first student to arrive is Freddy. He is a tall, thin man in his twenties, who is mute. It was never clear to me whether Freddy couldn’t speak or simply wouldn’t. No one seemed to know.

“He’s seen some horrific things,” Phil told me on my first visit to Imanpa. “And he sniffed for a while too, which didn’t help. I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

He never did.

Freddy could hear, though, or maybe he was just proficient at reading lips. And he could read and write at a low level. He always worked diligently, filling in workbook after workbook. But no matter how well he did, I could never pass him on to the next level because he couldn’t do the speaking part of the assessments.

Once, Freddy tried to say something. I was working with another student across the room when a low, wounded sound came from where he was sitting. I looked up, every nerve in my body tensed, poised to rush over and encourage him to say more – a word, maybe, or even a whole sentence.
But he seemed alarmed by all the attention and quickly retreated back into silence. He kept his head down, doggedly filling in blanks with symbols for sounds he would never utter.

I gesticulate a lot with Freddy, provide more than enough animation for two people in our interactions. Sometimes I get carried away. One day, I was rattling papers over my head with a wild look in my eyes in protest at all the paperwork I had to do, and he broke into a big smile. It was like a silent laugh. His brown eyes looked light and happy for several seconds. Mostly they look like those of an old man who has seen too much.

Samuel was the next student to drift in that day. The first time I met Samuel, I walked back into the classroom after morning tea to find him dancing to some rock music he’d put in the CD player, tossing aside what was in there – ‘How to Ask for Directions’ – and cranking up the volume.

He was full of confidence. After he told me his name, he asked me mine. And after that, he always called me by my first name, the only student who ever did.

Samuel was sensitive, too. That same day, there was an awkward moment in class when Freddy had to be passed over as the students played a game that required speaking.

“This guy’s good with cars,” Samuel suddenly announced, patting Freddy on the shoulder. “Anything broken, he fix it!”

* * * *

The lesson for today is on measurements. It’s difficult for most of the students, and I am walking around the room, helping them. When I get to Samuel, I see that he is drawing.

“What’s that, Samuel?”

“A snake!” he says, flashing a smile full of beautiful white teeth.

“Yes, I see that. But what about the lesson?”

“This one, Kuniya. From Uluru,” he says, ignoring my question. I don’t care. I like the way he says “Uluru.” It sounds strong.
“She been away from her country long time. Goin’ back there now ‘cos she gonna have babies.”

“How far will she travel?” I ask in my best teacher voice, trying to get back on task.

“Long way.”

“How many miles?”


I try again.

“So where is she starting from?”

“Over there by Erldunda...” he says, stretching out his arm toward the south-east and shaking his hand in the sideways wave – palm down and fingers together – Aboriginal people use a lot when gesturing in a direction. They never point. It’s always this sideways wave.

“...She gotta go all the way to Uluru,” he says, tracing an arc in the air from the south-east to the south-west.

Once again, I am amazed at the sense of direction these people have. Every time any of my students ever mention a place to me, they always gesture in its direction, and they are never wrong. They read this country like a map.

Later that morning, Phil comes into the classroom with another young man.

“Andrew wants to enrol in the class,” he says.

Andrew doesn’t look like he wants to enrol. He’s glowering at me. I am pretty sure that this has more to do with Phil’s numbers than anything Andrew wants to do. But when I ask the young man if he wants to take the placement test, he says yes.

During the speaking and listening part of the test, he responds to my questions about his favourite TV programs and sport teams with monosyllabic answers, a scornful look in his eyes. When I try to get him to elaborate, he just says, “yeah,” and I feel like one more in a long line
of missionaries and anthropologists, whitefellas always asking questions, always wanting more.

I see from his application form that he has completed tenth grade, an incredible achievement out here. There are no secondary schools on any of the communities in the Central Desert, except for the one college near Uluru that he attended. He’s obviously bright, so I move on to the written part of the test, asking him to write about his goals after he finishes the literacy class. He takes the paper and pencil I give him and moves to the other end of the table. A few minutes later, he hands the paper back:

*I want to be a rubbish collector because I like places to be clean. I like picking up rubbish. Better than just walk around, doing nothing. No jobs, nothing here. Some people goes to the highway, stop cars and ask tourists for money.*

*I feel sick think. I think too much. I always cry to sleep.*

Later, Phil tells me that the boy’s father was murdered in Alice Springs last year.

* * * *

In the afternoon, I work with the women. Linda and Mabel, both in their early twenties, are good students. They are busy reading when the silence is interrupted by the sound of someone running across the tin roof. The footsteps stop directly above us and then we hear a woman yelling and stomping her feet.

Neither of the girls looks up, so I decide to ignore it too. I remind myself that what white people consider shouting is just the way Aboriginal people often communicate with one another. Still, a part of me is wondering why all of this is happening on the roof.

Finally, after a few minutes, Linda looks up and says in the whisper she always uses when she speaks to me, “You better go out there. That woman say she gonna hang herself.”

“*Hang* herself?”

“Yeah,” she says in the same flat tone, and goes back to her book.
I walk outside and look up to see a young woman struggling with a rope. She's trying to tie it onto a piece of steel sticking out from the corner of the roof. An old woman on the ground is shouting up at her in language, and the girl is shouting right back.

I join in.

"Come on, you don't want to do this," I say, sounding ridiculous to myself. The girl looks at me in disgust and jerks on the rope, pulling the knot tighter.

I look around. The Council office across the street is closed for the day – all the landcruisers that were parked out front are gone. Phil has left too – back to the caravan at the Mt. Ebenezer Roadhouse that he calls home. And the nearest police station is in Alice Springs.

I give the old woman a beseeching look. She just smiles at me and waves her hand, as though to say not to worry. Then she shouts up at the girl again, and the girl unleashes a stream of invective back.

The old woman picks up a rock and tosses it up toward the girl. It bounces to the ground with a thud and she walks away. A few people who had gathered for a while to watch also leave.

Taking my cue from them, I go back inside. Neither Linda nor Mabel looks up. Mercifully, a few minutes later, I hear the sound of footsteps receding, back in the direction from where they came.

It’s time to call it a day. I pack up and am carrying things out to the Troopie, shoving a box of books into the back when I feel someone behind me. I turn around and there is Freddy, holding out my plastic file box he thought I’d forgotten.

I thank him and he pats my arm lightly as I take it. Then he lifts his hands up in a sweeping gesture that takes in everything – the broken-down houses, the rubbish, the mangy dogs, the murders, the suicides – everything and everyone lying under that dazzling light, bringing his hands down in front of him and patting the air a couple of times, as though to say it’s all good.

And I drive off, feeling blessed.
When I get to the dirt road that leads back to the highway, my foot goes heavy on the accelerator again. It’s an involuntary reaction. I’m always relieved to leave this place, to flee from all of the sadness here. These people have trauma fatigue. In the words of a nun I know who lived at Santa Teresa for fifteen years: “If we whitefellas had to go through a tenth of what Aboriginal people suffer every year, we wouldn’t be left standing.”

So I’m going at a pretty good clip when I hear a popping sound and then the car suddenly goes wobbly.

I get out and look at the flat tyre. Then I look up at the spare on the roof. I climb up onto the roof and look at the spare tyre some more. Then I climb back down, wishing I had paid more attention in the Four Wheel Drive Training course on the day we learned how to change a tyre. I’ve never changed a tyre in my life. Even if I could figure out how the jack works and get the flat tyre off, I’d never be able to get that behemoth spare on.

I sit down on the side of the road. It’s hot. And quiet. I look across at the dusty mulgas and think, *There’s absolutely nothing out here but dirt and rocks and bushes and flies and…* suddenly I remember snakes. I jump up and go back inside the car to wait.

Then my thoughts drift onto the subject of mythical snakes. This is the country that Kuniya travelled, slithering over it with her eggs, leaving a dreaming track in the sand all the way from here to Uluru.

I’d heard about Kuniya before. Her story is told at Uluru. There are gash-like marks on one side of the rock that are said to be where she struck Liru, a poisonous snake, in a great battle. Near them is a bigger marking, said to be where she threw a handful of sand to settle the forces of her anger, so it would not harm others.

And suddenly, I get a glimpse of what the Dreaming might be about. Or think I do, anyway. Aboriginal people read this country like a map because it is a map for them. It’s one big text, inscribed by the Ancestors in the Dreamtime. They always say that the Ancestors walked across a featureless land – a blank page – writing themselves into it as they went by, leaving parts of themselves to create its features. Their tracks are the vast web of dreaming lines that criss-cross this country. It’s full of writing we can’t read.
And the dreaming is not over. It’s still going on. I think of Samuel, how immediate and alive that story was as he told it. The dreaming is a way of seeing, of knowing, of reading – reading country.

I hear a car approaching, and jump out to wave at a cloud of dust coming down the road. As the car slows down, I see a brown arm waving back and then a head leans out the window.

It’s Samuel. And Freddy, driving.

“Hullo!” Samuel calls out. “What happened?”

I walk over to tell him and then we start to chat. He tells me he’s on his way to Curtain Springs.

“I’m gonna learn how to ride a camel. Take them tourists around Uluru!”

Freddy is already out of the car and looking at the flat. I point up to the spare and back to him, looking helpless. He grins and springs into action, as fast as those Warlpiri guys on Bush Mechanics. He has the tyre changed in fifteen minutes flat.

I try to give him some money but he shakes his head, so I put it away. Then he sweeps his hands out to take in this dry country, the blazing sun, the dome of blank blue sky above, and then he pats the air in front of him a couple of times, as though to say that God is in the heavens, the Dreaming is alive, and everything is going to be all right.

Or maybe he’s just telling me to slow down.
Tanami Tourists

‘Reckon you’ll be the first tourists to cross the Tanami.’ The manager of the Alice Springs Ansett office paused before adding, ‘That’s a bit of a worry.’

A worry? It was nearly a hundred years since the first intrepid explorers had faced terrible trials to open up this vast country with camels, by horseback and on foot. How could five responsible adults and some kids in two four-wheel-drives get into strife in 1967?

We waited expectantly.

‘You’ll have to do a detour out Mongrel Downs way because one section of the track’s impassable after the rains,’ our adviser went on, sketching a triangle, some arrows and a cross on his desk pad. ‘That’ll take you past Balgo Mission – and Father McGuire who’s in charge out there says he’s going to shoot the first tourists he sees.’

‘Oh!’

‘Between the eyes.’

I knew a little of the inspiring story of the German Pallottine monks who had set up a mission over the Western Australian border in just about the most remote spot in Australia in the 1930s. Their successor, the indomitable Father McGuire, still believed that he could protect his Indigenous flock from the ravages of European ‘civilisation’. You couldn’t blame him for trying.

We agreed that we would definitely drive straight past Balgo.

* * * *

Six months after we began teaching in the Alice, my husband Rob and I were seriously addicted to Namatjira scenery, the enticement of untravelled roads and the stillness of lonely gorges. More often than not someone on the staff would ask on a Friday, ‘Who’s heading out bush?’ By 4.30 a convoy of vehicles would head for a nearby gap, a little known waterhole or perhaps an abandoned station homestead. We kept the necessary equipment and a custom-made wooden box of essentials in our Landrover, so that all we had to do was add water, fresh food and a
change of clothes. Each journey was inked on to a map on our kitchen wall.

We had even made a memorable trip alone to Ayers Rock, the Olgas and King’s Canyon, visiting the homes of students and friends of friends. Bush skills honed and now ready for a bigger challenge, we put up our hands quickly when Bruce, our principal, wanted company on a drive to Darwin in September – by a distinctly alternative route. Instead of enduring two trips on the long bitumen highway that links the Centre to the Top End, he planned to head there via Halls Creek and Wyndham.

A geosurvey team had graded the Tanami Track two years previously, and it was reported (by the few station owners who didn’t fly everywhere) to be usable, with new vegetation after recent flooding. I tingled in anticipation of traversing a desert – although the romance did fade a little when we heard that Ansett was planning a bus route across this one to the Kimberley; hence our visit to its office.

After delivering the cheering news about Balgo, the manager was now pencilling some meandering lines on to a distinctly empty-looking map; they headed in a north-westerly direction, crossing a meaningless state boundary. This would be our route.

Fortunately there was also a mileage list to various landmarks, starting something like this:

‘34.7 miles – rocky outcrop.
51.3 miles – bore.
84.8 miles – track divides. Take left fork.’

And so on. If the landmark wasn’t there on cue, you’d have to backtrack and inch along another sandy or deeply rutted ‘road’.

‘Doesn’t sound too hard,’ Rob decided.

As word of our plans got around though, we were offered more advice and information than we needed.

‘Men’ve died taken a wrong turn an’ died of thirst out there, y’ know,’ we were told; but no-one seemed to remember who they were. More recent was the story of someone who had taken weeks to make it back to
his station from the Alice, when the latest severe drought ended. Then, in May, even seasoned desert adventurers Reg and Griselda Sprigg had got badly bogged. (Only now do I know that Griselda, the first white woman to cross the Simpson Desert, later called their Tanami expedition ‘a remarkable desert crossing’.)

‘We’ll be right,’ we told the doubters. ‘We’re getting a transceiver from the Flying Doctor and we’ll take food and water for two weeks.’ Privately I asked myself, *But how will we know when we get close to Balgo?*

With one spare seat in our vehicle, I wrote to my recent bridesmaid Jackie, down south. ‘Feel like an adventure?’ I asked. She responded enthusiastically.

Bruce’s Toyota would be over-filled by his reserved but good-natured wife Irene and their three children, aged between five and fifteen. Little Belinda was shy, while Neville usually avoided my gaze too because he was one of my year 8 students. I liked Russell best – head in the clouds, nose in a book and an eager beaver approach to helping when he did emerge from his inner world.

Our long-wheel-base Landrover was fitted with extra tanks to ensure fuel for 700 miles, and we had installed water tanks in the back too. Packing was taken seriously, top priorities being spare parts, a spade and a first aid kit. We had the food choices down to a fine art. There would be fresh and frozen meat for the first three days while the ice lasted, along with bread, fruit and vegetables. On day four we’d eat cold sausages. Thereafter we would devour any sort of canned food, munch dry biscuits and spread jam on our Weetbix. Condensed milk came in tubes (I soon learned to like my billy tea black!) and of course there was plenty of dried fruit. Should the journey take longer than planned, we would make interesting concoctions from the emergency supply of canned goods.

Irene took only one extra staple – a very large bag of rolled oats!

It is said that planning is half the fun. I only rate it at 30%, but the preparations were indeed absorbing. Eventually Jackie arrived – straight from her last day of teaching in an exclusive Melbourne school. We would be setting off on our adventure at dawn.
‘Will half an hour be long enough for you to get dressed, have breakfast and pack your gear into the Landrover? I asked.

‘Heavens!’ she exclaimed. ‘It takes me twenty minutes on a week day just to put my makeup on!’

To her credit, she was ready on time, and we headed off in buoyant mood to join up with Bruce and family, who were waiting at the Gap. As we left town we briefed our guest on the basics of camping. Everyone shared the chores; we’d get a dish of water once a day to wash with; you took a spade and headed behind a tree or rock (if you could find one) when nature called. And no, we never used tents.

Jackie was looking a bit shell-shocked by the time we explained how we buried the coals from the camp fire deep under our ground sheet, and had the luxury of warm swags even when the temperature was way below freezing. (I didn’t tell her that some of the station kids whom we taught thought we were crazy sleeping on the ground. ‘You should see what might crawl over you at night!’ they warned. ‘Six inch centipedes, scorpions as long as your thumb, huge spiders…’)

Conditions were good for a while, apart from the inevitable bulldust. I never ceased to marvel at the incredible redness of that ancient, worn soil – I keep a glass tube of it to this day – and found myself hoping that Jackie would love it too. I must be starting to belong...

Our first stop was 180 miles away at Yuendemu settlement. (‘Think sheep and a cow – ewe and a moo,’ an old-timer had advised me when I had trouble pronouncing the word.) Here Aboriginal children greeted us eagerly. Alert and curious, they clambered over our Landrover.

‘Where you from?’

‘Where you goin’ to?’

‘You mob been to Melbourne? We went there – in a plane.’

‘I can ride a cow. D’youse ride cows?’

After visiting the school, its concreted undercover activity area and dingy buildings offset by colourful murals, we headed out again along a new stretch of the brick-red road that gashed through plains of tall bleached
spinifex. We would see no strangers for days – a unique pleasure of the bush.

With the passing of many years, the days’ minutiae have blended into each other, with a handful of events and experiences standing out like ant hills. The nights are particularly memorable.

It’s important to set up camp before dusk. You’d think that finding sand in a desert would be easy; but the ground, dotted with inhospitable bindii, was often hard and stony. However, discomfort was offset by sunsets as wide as the world and starry, starry nights. I wish them upon every Territory tourist… Recently I read a report about the setting up of Balgo mission (that name again!), which mentioned that the first people brought in to live there refused to sleep in dormitories because they couldn’t see the stars.

Sleeping under those same stars, on Warlpiri land, we were also invading the territory of nocturnal creatures such as bilbies and marsupial mice. In fact we had a silent visitor that first night.

‘Have you got my shoes?’ Neville came over to ask next morning as we packed.

‘Neville,’ I laughed, ‘why would I want your smelly sandshoes!’ Then we noticed tracks… A dingo had circled each groundsheet, examining us and our belongings before retreating into sparse scrub. Neville found one shoe fifty yards away. The other was never found.

On the second night we stopped at a creek bed and, after dismissing the possibility of unexpected flooding in the night, we settled down for our usual meal around the campfire. The relaxed conversations that always took place could never be replicated between four walls.

When it was time to get our bedding organised we happily accepted Russell’s offer to dig a trench and spread the coals for us. We drifted to sleep easily on the soft, warm sand… but not for long!

Just as I whispered ‘I’m hot!’ to Rob, Jackie, on my other side, squealed! Our ground sheet was beginning to smoulder: Russell hadn’t dug a deep enough trench…
No harm was done, but in the morning we found the varnish on the butt of Rob’s rifle, which he always kept by his side at night, was blistered – and we were the butt of quite a few jokes.

The next two days were slow going, over sections of the track washed out by summer rains and left deeply guttered by heavy vehicles that had pushed through soon afterwards. Spots where someone had been bogged were bypassed by subsequent travellers, leaving a delta of tracks to choose from. Luckily our holdups only tallied one detour to nowhere, a couple of boggings (which involved letting down the tyres, digging ourselves out and laying branches on the mud) and a puncture.

‘There’s something different around every corner,’ Jackie commented on the third day. ‘Did I tell you that people back home warned me that the desert’s incredibly boring?’

Indeed, the vegetation varied from spinifex and hummock grass to shrubby acacias and tall desert oaks. We moved from sandplains to rocky outcrops and low, bare ranges, crossed deep creekbeds and then occasionally encountered a man-made object – the most memorable being a tank in which we had a soapless dip, watched by wary cattle drinking from the adjacent dam.

Different scenery would soon delight us over the Western Australian border, including a salt lake surrounded by red succulents, the frontier town of Hall’s Creek, the fast-developing Ord River Scheme and a surreal landscape of bulbous boab trees and giant anthills near Wyndham. (Anthills crushed by graders carving a roadway become concrete chunks when the sand erodes, providing atrocious driving conditions.)

Meanwhile, people as well as landscapes enlivened our trip. One day Russell, unfillable like most teenagers, ate a packet of prunes. Bruce’s vehicle made several unscheduled stops while Russell scuttled behind acacia or sand hill with spade and toilet paper. Neville’s consumption of a tube of condensed milk was less gut-wrenching; but thereafter his parents scolded him whenever they had to drink their billy tea black.

Then little Belinda gave us a scare when, on the fourth night, she suddenly began to scream and scream. She had burnt her feet in the campfire coals. We waited anxiously to see how they would respond to Irene’s expert treatment. Should we use that two-way radio? Someone nervously
suggested calling in to Balgo, which was now nearby; but Irene eventually calmed the little girl and rocked her off to sleep.

Remarkably, Belinda was much better next morning, our relief providing a second reason to plough past the dreaded mission after passing a group of Aboriginal men on the roadside, with scarcely a sideways glance. Well, real life stories sometimes just have to end in an anti-climax!

Wildlife soon featured again. When we reached Wyndham we had been on the road for a week. Imagine the boys’ excitement as we pulled up on an idyllic, deserted foreshore! They launched themselves towards the waves, shedding shirts and shoes on the sand before plunging into the warm, buoyant swell. Desperate to wash off a week’s ground-in grime, Jackie kept pace with them, and I was not far behind. The others smiled at our exuberance.

It was the quickest swim I’ve ever had! Suddenly a scruffy looking man came belting along the beach, screaming obscenities at us. We got his message – a fifteen foot crocodile cruised along that spot every afternoon at five; and it was 4.55… We didn’t stay to check its length!

My final memories of our journey are of a couple of other potentially dangerous predators and another night disturbance.

The highway from Kununurra across to Katherine was a bone-shaker in those days, both corrugated and stony. But I recall one soft patch where, as we laboured through sand, we met an angry local – a large buffalo that charged our vehicle. It lurched out of the dense scrub, massive mouth open in a sneer, curved horns pointed straight at us and wild eyes totally focused on our driver’s side door.

‘Shut the window!’ I screamed, as its horn practically gouged Rob’s right arm.

The buffalo thumped against the engine on its next onslaught, as Rob pumped frantically on the accelerator, swerving wildly. We took minutes to outpace it.

Hot and weary on reaching the outskirts of Darwin at last, I felt a little deflated, for soon we would become regular tourists again. Tales of pre-cyclone Darwin must remain in my swag of yarns for another time, except for one curious incident in the night.
At 5.30 a.m. the earth moved!

Yes, while the eight of us lay in our sleeping bags, an earth tremor rippled under us. It was only just big enough to make the paper the next day – but a not-to-be-forgotten experience for recent city-slickers like us!

Soon it was time to head south in time for the new school term, much to Neville’s disappointment.

‘Can’t we break down or something?’ he begged.

The Stuart Highway is not fertile ground for travel stories, and there’s no space even to list the interesting people we met along the way. Except for one: the last of our notable Territorian wild creatures, along with the sly dingo, the belligerent buffalo and that unseen croc, was a very stroppy human. Well, we did warn Helen, when she began shampooing her hair in the Katherine River, that the residents wouldn’t appreciate bubbles in their town water supply…

On the first day back at school I overheard someone ask Neville, ‘Do anything good in the holidays?’

‘Nah,’ was the reply. Just more camping.’

* * * *

In the tally of the satisfaction score of a journey (preparations 30%, travel 50%), there is about 20% unallocated. Most of it goes in the memories column of course, for the spirit of the Territory will never leave me, and there’s a sense in which it’s now my country too.

We have dined out for many years on our outback stories. Discussions with ‘grey nomads’ and Google searches show that the trek we took is no longer a pioneering feat. But I imagine it’s all the better for being safer, more comfortable – and properly mapped. You can get petrol along the way, dine at roadhouses and even pre-book a motel room at Hall’s Creek via the internet! Moreover, you can visit a goldmine, the Tanami Desert Wildlife Reserve and the Balgo Art Centre… It must still be a magic experience.

The final 5% or so of the rewards of travel is in the lifelong interests that ensue. This journey in particular eventually led to me to a heightened
concern for the environment, Indigenous people and culture – and to writing.

So it was that several years ago I was invited to the Adelaide launch of four books vibrantly illustrated by Aboriginal children from ‘my’ desert country – including some from Balgo and others from Yuendemu! Watching the young visitors, I thought of the shiny-eyed kids who had greeted us thirty-five years before, and their artwork.

‘I’ve been to your country,’ I told the Warlpiri elder who owns one of the stories. She looked doubtfully at me until I explained; then her tense face lit up and we shared smiles.
“Watch out for the gauchos. They try it on. They take the ladies away on their horses and try to kiss them.”

This solemn word of warning was given to me by a fellow traveller in Buenos Aires, after hearing I was heading to Argentine cowboy country to experience a taste of true gaucho life.

The Argentine gaucho is a mysterious, fabled creature. I imagined them as strong silent vagabond types living nomadic lives with only their steeds as company.

To see if my impressions of these mystical men were true, I joined a tour to a ranch called La Cina Cina in Las Pampas, the fertile plains surrounding Buenos Aires.

The blurb on the website called it a Gaucho Party and the fine print described a day of traditional food, music and gaucho games on an authentic Argentine ranch or estancia in Spanish.

Our tour guide Laura is a local portena, the name given to the people of Buenos Aires. Speaking in perfect English with a slight American twang, she regaled us with information about the city, our surrounds and of course, gauchos.

The gaucho is a beloved symbol of Argentina’s heritage, despite a chequered past which eventually saw their disappearance by the nineteenth century. In those days gauchos were loners, earning money herding cattle and living off the land. They were known for their wild, lawless existences and were often seen as troublemakers by society. Eventually, gauchos were forced to yield to modern farming practices and laws aimed at reining in their wanderlust.

Today, the gaucho spirit, cuisine and culture are alive and well in the many rural estates surrounding Buenos Aires. When flying into the city, the aerial view is a patchwork of paddocks in different shades of green, dotted with grand old houses nestled in thickets of trees. Many of these once-
palatial homes have been converted into guest ranches and opened to the public by their owners.

We arrive at the estancia, which is on the outskirts of San Antonio de Areco, a town known for its gaucho roots. Every November, the town hosts El Dia de la Tradicion, a week-long celebration of the gaucho with demonstrations of traditional games, equestrian skills, craft workshops and huge communal asados, the traditional open-fire barbecues.

As we walked through green gardens towards the house, we caught our first glimpse of our gaucho hosts for the day. There were five or six of them, welcoming us with trays of food and reluctant smiles, and dressed in traditional outfits. This is the typical gaucho garb I was expecting to see – a red scarf around the neck, puffy loose-fitting trousers tucked into long leather boots and a belt adorned with gold and silver coins. Some fitted the lean, laconic vision I had of the gaucho cowboy, with their bow-legged gait and rugged handsomeness. But others, with un-scuffed boots and bellies spilling over their belts, looked like they hadn’t done a hard day’s work in their lives and were playing cowboy dress-ups.

We gobbled homemade salami, empanadas (pasties filled with home-grown beef) and drank red wine in plastic cups, before some free time to explore the estate. I wandered around the vast grounds past a strip of blue pool, a souvenir shop, and a main house with a dining room cum dance hall adjoining it. The central point is the asado, where flanks of meat were arranged over red coals on large stakes.

Some gauchos stood at the bar serving the guests, while others headed off towards a shed and yards area about 50 metres away. Members of our group, including two young girls who I noticed seemed inappropriately dressed for horseriding, swiftly followed.

The gauchos hoisted a few visitors upon quiet, wide-girthed steeds and clip clopped off on a slow plod around the ranch. Others simply sat on the horses and posed for photos. I opted for the cart, and along with four others, took a ride down the main street of the town, passing waving school children who called out to us in English. Our snail’s pace journey offered a close up view of daily life in the town.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, a bell rang to signal our return to the homestead for lunch. A long table was set, laden with carafes of local
Malbec wine, bowls of salad and warm bread. Once everyone was seated, a gaucho tinkered beautifully on a piano, as others started to bring out a procession of courses featuring various cuts of barbecued meat. Chorizo sausages came first, followed by trays of what seemed to be every different part of a bovine’s body, then black pudding and finally chicken breast. It was a carnivore’s paradise, but offered enough selections of salads to satisfy those not indulging in meat. Towards the end of the meal, the trays were still coming, despite guests’ weary looks and loosening of belt buckles. Our refusal to take more meat after many rounds made one or two gauchos roll their eyes at the gringos’ lack of stamina.

Traditional musicians and dancers took to a small stage and performed folkloric dances for us, the meaning of each explained by Laura from a microphone from the back of the room. The cowboy charm was on display once again as I was presented with an offer I couldn’t refuse; to take a twirl with a gaucho. With shiny blushed faces, his from the exertion of entertaining the crowd, and mine from imbibing Malbec, we two-stepped around the floor, along with other guests. He held me tight and told me I was a good dancer, causing me to redden further.

The next item on the Gaucho Party agenda was a demonstration of a traditional gaucho game of carrera de la sortija (the ring race).

Outside, storm clouds closed in on us. Everyone seemed buoyed by the dancing and red wine, and ran to the slight shelter of a corrugated iron viewing area, as droplets started to fall. The idea is for the cowboys to gallop along a race track one by one, trying to poke a tiny pen-like object through a small ring, which dangles above the track. The audience watch on in approval, and the cowboy who succeeds in collecting the ring, presents it with a flourish to a female chosen from the crowd. But we didn’t get that far before the rains came.

With a yahoo and a flourish, a gaucho hurtled past us on his steed along a dirt path, a blur of dust and hooves and rain. We clapped madly as the wind lashed against us, and took hold of hats and skirts. One by one we abandoned the game, and started running for the shelter of the gaucho shed until finally, as the heavens collapsed, we were all forced to retire. Fifteen soggy, grinning tourists huddled in the tiny structure, blinking at each other as the storm descended.
Unable to communicate well with us, the gauchos busied themselves making a fire.

I patted a grey mare’s wet forehead through the fence rails. The horses bunched up together, stoically facing the wind with eyes closed.

As the rain eased, a young, under-dressed Venezuelan girl negotiated a one-on-one ride with one of the more handsome gauchos. He willingly obliged and lifted her up on his horse, climbing on behind her and taking the reins tight at her chest. They galloped off into the mist. We watched on, some in envy, as the couple rode rhythmically toward the homestead, clumps of mud flying into the air. The Venezuelan flopped around like a rag doll, out of time with the horse’s steps. About fifteen minutes passed, and then they returned with bright smiles.

The rain had stopped by this stage, and it was time for us to make our way back. With a well-rehearsed grin, a gaucho extended his weather-beaten, dog-eared hat requesting tips for the show. The group happily gave him plenty of coins, as thanks for the adventurous afternoon. On returning to the house, we sipped mate, the traditional Argentine tea, to warm our cockles before the journey home.

From the bus, I watched the gauchos light cigarettes as they stood dutifully waving us off. The Venezuelan gave a sideways glance as she climbed aboard, and giggled with her friend. Bound for Buenos Aires, the entire bus seemed to sigh collectively with a tired satisfaction that comes with enjoying fresh air, farm life, red wine and food cooked on coals.

I smiled to myself, happy that my romantic view of the Argentine gauchos hadn’t been dampened by the rumours or the rain, and that the magic of this centuries-old legend still exists today.

www.lacinacina.com.ar
What draws adventurers to walk across the Simpson Desert, often alone and without outside assistance? Thirty-five years after Warren Bonython and Charles McCubbin pulled an unwilling 250-kilogram aluminium ‘camel’ across Australia’s dead heart, the author walked solo and unsupported across the desert to investigate.

Welcome to the Club

I felt elated, like a penitent emerging from purgatory, smiling broadly for the first time in weeks. Cresting the final large paprika-red sand ridge, the last of over 1300 that I had crossed (and counted) from Bedourie, an oasis of civilisation lay ahead: Old Andado homestead. The near-empty cart pushed me down the slope to where my wife and disbelieving dog waited. A celebratory beer, a large, bloody steak, and stones from the highly mineralised water that I would pass painfully for a week.

I had completed a 450-kilometre solo and unsupported walk across the Simpson Desert, at the very centre of the driest continent, sand ridges rising up to 30 metres in height, across the 170,000 square kilometre clubhouse of the Dead Heart Walkers’ Club.

One man’s hell is another person’s home

It is ‘the entrance into Hell’ declared Charles Sturt in September 1845. From the top of a red sand ridge extending to the northern and southern horizons, his view west was of a never-ending series of parallel sand ridges. For a day he pushed his small party west, up and over the steep land waves, hoping to find some water, or some relief from the succession of towering sand ridges. Without any sign of finding water, they were forced to turn back to the shrinking waterholes on Eyre Creek.

Although Sturt was the first non-Indigenous person to see Arunta (the parallel sand ridge desert we know today as the Simpson Desert), he was unaware that the region was inhabited. People still mistakenly refer to the region as the ‘dead heart’ as if nothing can live in the extremely hot summers, freezing winters, and low and irregular rainfall.
For many thousands of years, the Wangkangurru Aborigines lived in Arunta. They lived in wiltjas, wooden humpies, in semi-permanent settlements built close to mikiri, wells, which tapped into the Great Artesian Basin many metres below. The Wangkangurru knew the desert country intimately: they were ‘familiar with every dune, every claypan, every swamp … [and] every sand lake, all the bigger sandhills and claypans had names.’2 After good rains, they ranged far into and across the desert, returning to their mikiri when the claypans and soaks dried up. Arunta was not a place to explore – ‘it was simply their home.’3

When the adventurer David Lindsay visited the region in January 1886, guided from mikiri to mikiri by Wangkangurru guides, he found a thriving population of healthy people. Fifteen years later, the Wangkangurru walked out of their desert country voluntarily, leaving grinding stones, spears and other tools by their wiltjas, in readiness for their return. The homes have not been reoccupied and the mikiri have filled with sand.

**Walking into the Dead Heart**

Until the early 1960s, the Simpson Desert remained unvisited. A series of vehicle tracks was bulldozed across the desert during oil exploration and hardy adventurers such as the Leyland brothers helped to popularize travel to the arid region. Nowadays, thousands of people cross the desert in four-wheel-drive vehicles each year, tourist groups walk with camel caravans, and there is an annual bicycle race from Dalhousie Springs to Birdsville.

Along with these exists a hardy band of modern adventurers: the Dead Heart Walkers’ Club, the people who have crossed the Simpson Desert on foot, hauling their own supplies by their own physical effort, unaided by mechanical or animal power, and without caches of food or water. Their number totals far fewer than the number of people who summit Everest annually. Foundation members: Warren Bonython and Charles McCubbin; full (unsupported) members: Paul Sharp, Denis Bartell, Peter Treseder and Keith Williams, Lucas Trihey, Michael Giacometti, Louis Philippe Loncke; and associate (slightly supported) members: Hans Tholstrup, Rob Porcaro.

Bonython and McCubbin achieved a significant milestone in outback adventure on 9 August 1973, completing a 32-day north–south walk across the desert from the Plenty River floodout to the Birdsville Track via Poeppels Corner. Six years earlier, McCubbin presumed ‘it would be
possible to walk across the Simpson Desert if all the water and food you would need could be pulled along with you in something on wheels." 

Experts disagreed with him on two counts: the terrain and the weight.

Those who had driven across the desert reported that ‘the ground was mostly pimpled with spinifex hummocks often so high and so close together that even four-wheel drive vehicles found it difficult to push through … [so] the chances of getting a man-pulled trolley through this terrain were minimal.’

A person would have to take all food, water and equipment for four weeks with them, a weight that Bonython calculated to be at least 180 kilograms. The water alone would comprise over half the weight. Bonython could not contemplate such a weight, thinking it ‘would be too much for flesh and blood to stand’, but he was hooked by the challenge it presented.

Eventually, Bonython settled on a plan to have an air-drop half-way, thus reducing the cart weight by some 50 kilograms to a weight that he felt ‘that a man might just manage’, and then hit upon the idea of combining the two carts into one, removing 50 kilograms of dead cart weight, and hauling the one cart in tandem.

Logistical challenges could be overcome with thorough planning, but what would it amount to in the field where mind, body and equipment would be severely tested? Flying at low altitude over the desert to the starting point of their attempt, Bonython was overawed by the magnitude of their task: ‘I felt a wave of fear when I saw the roughness of the valleys, the stark, raw sand-ridge crests, and the never-ending expanse of which they were part.’

**Self-doubt, slog, and sheer bloody-mindedness**

The hardest question I find to answer about walking across the Simpson Desert is ‘why do it?’ I have no ready response that makes any sense. Some adventurers have a somewhat romantic view of the Simpson Desert, seeing row upon row of red, parallel sand ridges stretching to infinity; others attempt to achieve what has not been done before; all know that they will test the limits of their own physical and mental powers. Like Bernard Faton (who perished during an attempted five-week crossing of the desert in 1976, alone, taking only 16 litres of water, some dried fruit, a small
amount of cheese and a rifle), I felt drawn to it. Faton’s response to the question ‘why?’: ‘I know it is the most dangerous desert in Australia. But I want to do it. I must do it.’

Where is the way ahead? Sweat continually runs down my brow, pouring salt into stinging eyes. Temporarily blinded by the sweat and glare, I reach behind for the large cotton bandana, already sodden and saturated with my salt from days of wiping my face, to repeat the almost useless action. The nearest coastline is 900 kilometres away, but hauling a cart weighing up to 170 kilograms across the steep sandy waves of the Simpson Desert is reminiscent of moving in slow-motion across a large ocean swell.

- extract from the author’s journal

‘I was nervous about making a start and self-doubt swirled inside my head,’ declared Trihey, who began with 160 kilograms of food, water and equipment on his 17-day solo and unsupported traverse from Old Andado’s East Bore to Birdsville in 2006. ‘On paper it looked possible ... [but] how would I cope with the monotony and the unrelenting physical slog? Was I determined enough to keep going when it hurt, when I was tired, thirsty and bored with the food? ... As I struggled to pull my heavily loaded cart up even the smallest sandy rise on the first day, I started to wonder if all the planning and preparation had been in vain.’ I drew much solace from Trihey’s struggles during my own labours. Although he wished me luck before my departure, he also doubted that I would successfully cross from east to west, having to climb the steeper side of the land waves and coming down the more shallowly-angled side. But as I continued to climb and descend the sand ridges, I marvelled at his strength and speed at having gone in the other, reputedly easier, direction. It didn’t look any easier to me.

Porcaro, who in 2004 followed the route of Madigan’s 1939 scientific expedition, entertained similar doubts: ‘There were so many times during the first couple of weeks where I thought I’m just not going to be able to do this. Hauling the cart with 100 kilos of gear on it over dunes was just the most horrific thing I’ve ever done ... I actually made the decision mentally to call it quits [one] day, and just turn around and face the music and say I couldn’t do it, but then I ended up saying [to myself] look, finish the day and recuperate overnight and see how you feel in the morning.’ Porcaro also found the mental struggle to be more taxing than the
physical: ‘[The sand ridges] all look the same ... I didn’t feel like I was making any progress, and that really plays on your mind. That just made everything tougher.’

Treseder and Williams found that it required ‘strict discipline’ to walk day after relentless day on their 1996 unsupported traverse up the K1 Line and Hay River. ‘The three and a half hour haul after lunch was the hardest,’ observed Williams, when ‘the temperature would rise into the high 20s and our sweat attracted thousands of bush flies ... It needed both of us to coax each cart to the tops of the dunes, one pushing, the other dragging.’ Without a partner, I had to do everything myself. For about a week I had to remove two 20 litre water drums and cart them up the larger and steeper sand ridges, deposit them on the crest, then struggle to haul the slightly lighter cart uphill, reload the water then descend. I found that I could haul about 130 kilograms over any sand ridge.

But what gets an adventurer up in the morning and be prepared to knowingly punish themselves on every level: physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually? ‘Bloody-minded determination can make up for lots of other failings,’ Trihey commented. From my own experience, I wholeheartedly agree. ‘I’d been convinced for most of the trip that I was on the verge of pulling out,’ Trihey continued. ‘I was constantly exhausted and the task ahead seemed overwhelming. But when it looked as though I might have to give up I was surprised by how determined I was to keep going.’ The small increments in daily distance and speed as the weight dropped (from water and food consumed), and a sense of seeing a line growing on the map helped transform, as Trihey observed, his ‘exhaustion-fuelled pessimism ... to a cautious optimism.’

I noted everything to occupy my mind totally – I counted every sand ridge crossed, the time marched, the length of my breaks, the degradation of performance over the course of the day – until the energy sapping last suck from my empty water bladder left me atop the day’s final sand ridge, unable to contemplate another. Every evening after dinner, after my mind and body had replenished somewhat, I determined my position, calculated and tallied my statistics, fretted about whether I could make it.

*I am now hauling only my body weight or less, but the going is no easier than when I had twice my body weight to pull. I travel a little faster and further each day, but I still have to haul from sunrise to sunset with few*
rests to give myself a chance of making it across. I am so fatigued. Will it ever get any easier?

- extract from the author’s journal

Despite the apparent ‘sameness’ of hundreds of kilometres of sparsely vegetated sand ridge desert, Bonython observed that ‘something of interest was constantly turning up, the landscape was always changing, and there were so many views of scenic beauty unexpectedly appearing.’

More aware of the subtle changes in the environment, he found ‘many of our nights … in the desert so beautiful, so uplifting, and yet so individually different that camping became a continuing delight. Our cares would be forgotten.’

Porcaro felt otherwise. The relentless sun and sand affected him deeply: ‘I don’t even want to go to the beach [after that].’

What challenges remain?

Recent developments in lightweight equipment and satellite navigation and communication have transformed the mindset of adventurers. Bonython and McCubbin’s specially designed cart weighed 50 kilograms, had numerous punctures every day, and the main shaft snapped; my cart weighed just over 20 kilograms and the mountain-bike tyres got only one puncture (that being on the first day!). Bonython and McCubbin carried a 10 kilogram movie camera, 8 kilogram hand winch (which they did not use and left in the desert), and a hefty HF radio and spare batteries that weighed 13 kilograms; I had a satellite phone and spare battery, PLB (Personal Locating Beacon) and GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) unit, weighing 1 kilogram combined.

Paul Sharp completed an unsupported cart-less walk with a 60 kilogram backpack in 1983, albeit along the French Line four-wheel-drive track. ‘Twenty-five years ago it was considered okay to follow the road,’ he commented over the phone on 1 April 2009, ‘but the preference is now to avoid man-made tracks.’

The solo and unsupported adventures of Trihey, Giacometti, and Loncke – who hauled 210 kilograms north to south from Atula to Lake Eyre over 35 days in 2008 – proved that it is possible to be completely self-sufficient for up to five weeks while crossing many hundreds of kilometres of
inhospitable and untracked terrain. However, that self-sufficiency is finite, limited by the resources aboard the cart. It could be seen as ‘enduring’ or ‘existing’, rather than ‘living’.

Now that all the major routes across the desert have been walked, what remains for desert adventurers?

Loncke would like to test the limits of his endurance further by crossing the width of the desert ‘without a cart, just with water into a big backpack and some food. I think it’s possible to cross the desert in eight to ten days.’ Trihey agrees that this is possible. In a phone conversation on 12 November 2008, he stated that ‘it would be a heavy pack to start with [at least 50 kilograms], but you could walk at night which was near impossible with a cart across the sand ridges.’

Sharp sees the next challenge in terms of speed: a foot race, from Mt Dare to Bedourie, perpendicular to the sand ridges. Competitors would be able to take any route and equipment they desired, as long as they were completely self-sufficient for the duration. Others have already attempted to travel existing routes quicker, to establish the fastest time. I have even been contacted by a father and daughter team, hooked on the idea of walking across the red waves.

Personally, I believe the challenge of future adventurers is to live in the environment. Rather than passing through as quickly as possible, getting a glimpse of hardship, the challenge would be to remain as long as they could, living off the land. They would be true Dead Heart Walkers, just like the Wangkangurru, connected to an almost unchanging wilderness; living within the clubhouse, not trying to escape.

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We Need To Heal Too, Mr Rudd
Confronting our racism in NT health care

Bruce Hocking

“I do not accept that there is underlying racism in this country. I have always taken a more optimistic view of the character of the Australian people. I do not believe Australians are racist”. (1)

John Howard made this astonishing statement in 2005 from the depths of racial hostility that were the Cronulla riots. Eighteen months later he would send an army of soldiers, police and white welfare workers on a blitzkrieg into remote NT Aboriginal communities following the publication of the Little Children are Sacred report. (2)

Kevin Rudd has kept the intervention as Federal Government policy despite cries of foul from the rest of the world. James Anayu, a UN special rapporteur recently said:

“These measures [the NT intervention] overtly discriminate against Aboriginal peoples, infringe their right of self-determination and stigmatise already stigmatised communities.

‘The emergency response is incompatible with Australia’s obligations ... the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination.” (3)

In his speech of apology to indigenous Australians in March 2008, Mr Rudd apparently didn’t notice the glaring contradiction between the spirit and the beauty of his words and the message of his intervention policy. Nor has the country as a whole risen up in protest. Apparently we haven’t noticed the hypocrisy either. Perhaps we too believe we have a responsibility to rid indigenous communities of domestic violence and child abuse with unilateral and aggressive action even though these same crimes lie hidden within white homes as well. We might say we are not a racist country, yet we all know we would never storm a non-indigenous community this way.

So we are indeed a racist country Mr Howard. I remember the fear I felt that first time I walked into a room crowded with black skin and where mine was the only white one. I was eighteen and I had no reason to be
afraid – except that everyone else there was Aboriginal. Where did my fear come from Mr Howard if we are not a racist country? I had no priors with these people.

Did it come from the exclusively white suburbs I grew up in, where Aborigines were just stories? Did it come from the shadowy parklands we skirted as kids because drunken blacks hung out there? They were capable of anything my boy-mind could conjure up. I learned my racism well and now, as a white doctor working in an Aboriginal medical service in the Northern Territory, I must unlearn it so I can do my job and so I can be fully Australian, fully human.

Contemporary Australia was founded on racial violence. This is a fact of our history Mr Rudd. Your apology made that clear. But your intervention also suggests that racial violence is our present too. In 1890 the Reverend Wood, ‘a man of science and the church’ said out loud what most were thinking:

‘The inferior must always make way for the superior, and such has ever been the case with the savage. I am persuaded that ... the cause of extinction lies within the savage himself, and ought not to be attributed to Whiteman, who comes to take the place the savage has practically vacated.” (4)

Do we still think they’re savages Mr Rudd? Was that the source of my fear? Was that why we invaded their lands again?

If we still doubt our racism it is there in blackfella eyes if we look. It can be heard in their stories and felt in the landscape if we are open to it. It can be glimpsed in barely credible health statistics. They live in the ‘lucky country’ too, yet indigenous men born in 2005 – 2007 can expect to live 12 years less than a non-indigenous man born on the same day. This life expectancy gap for women is marginally less at 10 years. The UN has called theirs “the worst life expectancy rates of any indigenous population in the world.” (5)

Diabetes is three and a half times more frequent in indigenous people than in other Australians.
'The 2004-2005 NATSIHS found that Indigenous people aged 18 years or older were twice as likely as their non-Indigenous counterparts to feel high or very high levels of psychological distress…’ (6)

These numbers are only the tip of the iceberg of Aboriginal disadvantage. For more than 200 years we have sat by and watched this crisis of health unfold. We have watched generations of indigenous people die prematurely without feeling our shame.

Nevertheless I thank you Mr Rudd for committing more money to the health of Aboriginal Australians than ever before. The old cry that we whitefellas talk a lot and don’t follow up with adequate resources is softening now. You are telling us to ‘Close the Gap’ in these appalling mortality and morbidity statistics. You are mobilising our health care system to meet the challenge and I for one congratulate you, but even here we sabotage our good intentions with old and systemic racism.

**Racism in health care**

David Thomas (7) has chronicled a history of medical publications whose subject was Aboriginal health. They show that late 19th century and early 20th century medicine had scant interest in improving the health of indigenous people. There was however, great enthusiasm to document a race facing imminent extinction. Medico-anthropological expeditions into Aboriginal lands to gather data continued into the nineteen sixties but few doctors showed much compassion for the people’s suffering or much humanitarian desire to help. (8) They did eventually find one reason to intervene however, when they identified a need to prevent diseases like hookworm and leprosy infiltrating into white populations. Their strategy to deal with this problem was to segregate the sick into non-white occupied territories. I guess it would be silly to expect a racist country like ours not to have racism as systemic in its health care system as well.

In the 1970s, when it was clear that indigenous Australians were here to stay and that we had to deal with their embarrassing health statistics, we invented ‘Aboriginal Health’ and a national indigenous health strategy was instituted for the first time (9). But even in the term, ‘Aboriginal Health’, our racist thinking is exposed. It suggests that there are basic differences in the nature of health of indigenous compared to non-indigenous Australians as if diseases have their own racial populations.
and that their causes and outcomes depend upon a biology of race. This sort of ‘them’ and ‘us’ division is scientifically absurd of course. The human genome project has uncovered no genetic basis for race at all. Humanity shares 99.9% of its genetic material. (10) So, when we go ahead and build our health care practices upon an absurdity like racial difference the system must surely be flawed and we will tend to cement racism into the fabric of health care.

‘Aboriginal Health’ as a racist abstraction

Constructing a health care system around a concept like ‘Aboriginal Health’ does more damage than just divide our approach into black clients and the rest. It takes the lives of real people who are in intricate webs of relationship with each other, with their history, with their environment, with whitefellas and with a rich and ancient culture and turns them into a static and depopulated idea. ‘Aboriginal Health’ is not real. It is a caricature of existence. It attempts to describe the health tragedy of real people in terms of mathematics. Where is the credibility in that? Then we ask it to deliver real solutions.

We end up turning health care into a numbers game. We count how many blood pressures, blood tests, PAP smears and vaccinations we have done and call them key performance indicators. The more we do the healthier people are, or soon will be. It sounds impossibly simplistic and it’s what we do. Then while we stare into our computer screens interpreting graphs and pie charts the real tragedies of people’s lives go by unmeasured (how do you quantify tragedy anyway?) and unheeded. Biological measurements alone can never adequately describe health, nor can we quantify health care in numbers. Everyone who works in the area already knows this, so why do we keep doing it this way? Certainly funding bodies demand statistics but I wonder if there is more to it than that.

Could it be our racism once again that encourages us into this ‘Aboriginal Health’ abstraction? When people consult me about their symptoms I have been taught as a scientist to turn them into biological systems. I am expected to strip them bare of their family, community, spiritual and historical relationships and search what is left for the basic and measurable physical fault that is causing their problems. When I do that to Aboriginal people in the service of ‘Aboriginal Health’ I ignore their poverty and their despair and I overlook the historical context that lies underneath
so many of their diseases. This information is not very relevant to our biological bias. When I refuse to acknowledge our racist history I also allow myself to deny my own racism in the present and I can’t hope to respond appropriately to their health problems. I won’t see racism, mine or anybody else’s, as a contributor to disease. I let us all off the hook and continue to collude with the racism that is systemic both inside and outside the health care system and keep the oppressed sick and on the floor.

It’s not as if our racism is hard to spot either. Whenever we raise an eyebrow in judgement of people who won’t complete their antibiotic course as they were told; whenever we sigh in exasperation at people without clocks refusing to turn up on a specific day and at a specific time for follow-up; whenever we sneer in disgust at people drunk, violent and filthy; whenever we are impatient with people who dare speak their own language rather than ours; whenever health care workers leave the Territory after a few months indignant that people have not changed (why won’t they do what we tell them?) then we are adding to the racist face of health care in the NT. I know because this is what I see in myself.

**The practice of health care as colonialism**

Community controlled Aboriginal Medical Services (AMS) were created to address the issues of ‘Aboriginal Health’ and are now the cornerstone of primary health care delivery to indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory (11). In 1973 the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress was created from a meeting of more than a hundred town and bush people called together to discuss the health needs of the local indigenous population. (12) It was a wonderful opportunity for black and white to meet as peers and come up with creative solutions to the terrible health problems suffered by Aboriginal people. The meeting decided to entrust western medicine with its long history of racism to deliver the health care.

That might have been a mistake because we in western medicine are firmly of the opinion that we alone have a legitimate handle on how the world works. Only we know what makes people sick and what makes them well again. So when our health system took on ‘Aboriginal Health’ we had to insist that Aboriginal people adopt our view of health and health care and jettison their own. We ensured that western health workers would not be obliged to engage an aboriginal paradigm, while we demanded Aboriginal people accept such unbelievable concepts as
germ theory and a molecular basis to disease. We insisted they keep quiet about their traditional metaphysics, otherwise they would run the risk of being dosed up with anti-psychotics. Traditional healers would not to be part of a community controlled AMS. There would be no Ngangkari magic anymore. The new world of health care would be fact, not story.

The more I ponder this attitude the more I am struck by its similarity to that of our colonial ancestors who forbade Aborigines from practicing their traditional spirituality, speaking their languages or living their culture. It was racism then and it still is.

**The world is whole**

Quantum science describes a world where swirls of interweaving and intersecting energy and process lie beneath what we in the west ordinarily see as separate physical things. The truth of such a world is that there can be no ‘them’ and ‘us’. We are all interconnected. We all shape each other’s life processes in complex, mutual interchanges. There are individuals of course and they are like whirlpools in a stream. From a distance a whirlpool can be seen as distinct from the stream, but as we draw closer and closer the boundaries between whirlpool and stream become progressively blurred until we are finally so close that we can only see the whirlpool and the stream as one and the same. This could be a metaphor for our perspective of the world. From a distance the world looks to us like a clockwork of separate objects, but, from the much closer quantum perspective and underneath those objects, there is unity in motion.

This ‘Aboriginal Health’ we do supports and is supported by the absurdity of old science separation. But if we allow ourselves to feel the truth of a quantum world of process and interconnection then I believe we won’t be so tempted to make problems of alcoholism, substance abuse, domestic violence, child sexual abuse, diabetes, poverty, homelessness and the diseases that flow from them the private pathology of Aboriginal people. We will more likely accept the ‘Little Children are Sacred’ report as an admonishment to the whole country rather than just in a small part. We might begin to see the circumstances of indigenous people as the specific in the midst of the stream of a nation.

For as long as we continue to ignore that reality and hang on to the racism that comes from division, our health care system won’t be able
to provide culturally secure health services to indigenous people. While we continue to exclude the spiritual, the historical and the cultural from our explanations of disease, the causes of people’s suffering will remain inexplicably baffling to us and real solutions will remain hidden.

I spent 25 years working as a GP in city suburbs down south. I left in the end because I didn’t think my medicines were healing anyone. I still don’t. But there was healing going on down there nevertheless. I just couldn’t see it till long after I was gone. When I was leaving I felt people’s sadness and I felt my pain too. It was only later that I realised I was leaving family behind, perhaps for good. Yes, we were family in that community. I took those bonds for granted until I chose to stretch them tight enough to hurt and walk away. This was where the healing was coming from. It sort of grew itself from the relationships that criss-crossed our lives for a generation. It was powerful medicine and it didn’t come in bottles or from a scalpel blade. It wasn’t measured by numbers. It came from mutual respect, trust and even, dare I say it, from love.

When we start to acknowledge that Australians are indeed all one, not just as an intellectual possibility, but actually feel it in our bones, we might see more clearly that healing for our indigenous clients depends our doing our healing work too. That’s why we must heal our racism. It’s where healing the whole will come from. If I heal mine and you heal yours we will begin to progress the healing of systemic racism and the nation heals too. That’s the way the world works. It will take time of course but we might gradually come to recognise the value of Aboriginal culture to all of us who walk this land and we might want to ask traditional people to incorporate their way of healing into our way and together discover new and exciting approaches to health care. Everything is possible when we are family.

A good friend of mine who was active in the civil rights movement in the US in the sixties says that dealing with racism is like peeling the layers from an onion. There are many layers of truth to explore. (13) It sounds like an ongoing process, perhaps one without end. But if we are willing to look at ourselves honestly and ask not whether, but how, we are racist (14), and be patient and resolute, then along the way we might create the magic of family, a national family, and together we could add healing to our key performance indicators and really start to ‘Close the Gap.’
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“I couldn’t get to class today – my clothes got stolen again....”

Jane Leonard

Introduction

In a political climate that focuses on ensuring access to mainstream education, training and employment as a solution to both youth and indigenous social, educational and economic disadvantage (Gillard, 2008; Gillard & Wong, 2007; Macklin & Snowden, 2007; Martin, 2007; Rudd 2009; Scrymgour, 2008), there seems a noticeable lack of public or political discourse that explores or acknowledges the reality of challenges faced by marginalised indigenous young people attempting to engage with such accredited learning or training, or the capacity of such approaches to meet their needs and aspirations.

On 30 April 2009, the Federal Government announced that ‘COAG today agreed to establish a Compact with young Australians’ (Rudd, 2009). The media release states that ‘under the terms of the compact agreed today, every Australian under the age of twenty five will have a guaranteed education or training place’ (Rudd, 2009). This development reflects a trend by government policy to promote one-size-fits-all pathways for young adults that emphasise increasing access to accredited institutionalised mainstream training or education, without any acknowledgement of the diversity of backgrounds, needs and learning styles of both individual young people, and those from specific groups, like remote indigenous young people.

Despite numerous federal and state government policies and strategies (Language Literacy and Numeracy Program [LLNP], The Digital Education Revolution, Closing the Ga’ [CTG] of Indigenous Disadvantage Generational Plan of Action and the Northern Territory Emergency Response [NTER]), this author, working in indigenous literacy, educational and community development scenarios, sees little evidence ‘on the ground’ that there are increased opportunities for marginalised young indigenous adults already out of school to engage successfully in mainstream education, training or employment. While improved access
to accredited institutional literacy development or other training can no doubt lead to employment and inclusion for some, some of these approaches to addressing disadvantage seem to be failing to address other possible, more complex obstacles to engagement and ongoing participation in learning for many others.

Based on a deficit model of what learners do not have, measured against mainstream skills, and motivated by a pursuit of statistical equity (Altman, 2009; Pholi, Black & Richards, 2009), most policy strategies and consequently many educational initiatives, do not acknowledge the complex range of barriers faced beyond gaining a ‘guaranteed place’ in an accredited program, or acquiring standard English literacy. Nor do such ‘solutions’ recognise or address the reality of many other challenges faced by marginalised indigenous young people attempting to engage with such formal learning, or acknowledge their complex aspirations, identities and existing competencies.

Supporting these views, this essay presents some of the experiences of ‘Madonna’, one young indigenous adult, as she attempted to engage with tertiary education in regional Northern Territory in 2009. While considerable financial support, and a range of other travel, residential and classroom tutoring support services during the course delivery were provided, Madonna still faced significant barriers to accessing and attending workshops. Despite her enthusiasm to develop her skills through study, and the extra support she was able to access though a literacy and learning program run by the community development project she regularly participated in, she found ongoing challenges ‘too hard’ and eventually dropped out.

While the real name and any details that might identify ‘Madonna’ have been withheld, the anecdotes detailed in this essay are drawn from the experiences of this author’s professional role in supporting her and other young participants with literacy and learning as part of an independent five year arts and language community development project in Alice Springs. In sharing some of these stories, this essay seeks to identify possible strengths and weaknesses in current policy and practice around educational provision for marginalized young indigenous adults in light of their specific needs, backgrounds and learning styles. It also hopes to contribute to discourse that could promote more inclusive and effective
learning opportunities and outcomes for indigenous young people in remote regions.

**Background to Madonna’s story**

Like many of her peers, ‘Madonna’, aged 23, is considered a socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged young indigenous adult. Her regular accommodation consists of living out of a bag and moving between an overcrowded town camp house and relatives in similarly overcrowded public housing. She frequently experiences fatigue, hunger, and though she is not in a relationship and doesn’t drink, the effects of extreme domestic violence and alcohol abuse have impacted significantly on her life. She is also involved in the intermittent care of her grandmother and younger sister who live out of town. She speaks English as a third language, left school at 14 with only very basic reading and writing skills, and describes previously unsuccessful and negative experiences of education and training.

Despite such challenging issues, Madonna is proud and knowledgeable about her indigenous family, language and culture, and keen to contribute to their maintenance and promotion through media forums such as film, story and theatre. She began her study enthusiastically, as part of meeting the obligations set out by her employment agency caseworker in her Centrelink ‘activity agreement’. Having developed considerable skills and built up some professional experience in arts and media through workshops and employment opportunities offered by the non-accredited community development project, Madonna negotiated enrolling in a year long accredited Certificate III program delivered by tertiary education provider specifically for indigenous students that would develop skills in the same field.

Madonna was then substantially supported in her efforts to engage in learning by the delivering institution, which is committed to supporting engagement, access, continued participation and completion of learning experiences for remote and regional indigenous clients through appropriate policy, practice and extensive student support services. The design and delivery of the institution’s courses to suit remote indigenous learners meant that programs were delivered in intensive residential blocks at regional campuses with food and accommodation provided during workshops. Madonna’s course was not delivered locally and
required her to travel by air and bus every few weeks to attend workshops at another campus over 1000 kilometres from her home. Through the institution and Centrelink, Madonna accessed the Federal Government’s Abstudy scheme to cover the cost of course fees, travel expenses and a living allowance while she studied. She also accessed literacy and learning support while attending classes through the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS). Without such support, Madonna would not have been able to cover the costs of attending this program, and would also be excluded from enrolling because her literacy levels were deemed inadequate to cope with the program requirements.

**Significant remaining barriers to engagement and ongoing participation**

**A lack of understanding of individual client profiles**

While Madonna received substantial support as a result of her indigenieity, a factor contributing to many problematic experiences still evident in her case study was a lack of recognition of the individual issues she faced due to her age, educational background and personal socio-economic circumstances. While an awareness of issues faced by indigenous learners has increased in recent decades (McDaniel & Flowers, 1995), literature also suggests this can also be accompanied by a tendency to treat indigenous culture as a monolithic entity, thereby overlooking the needs of individual learners (Altman, 2009; McDaniel & Flowers, 1995). While Madonna faces similar issues to many other indigenous learners, her particular needs as a disadvantaged young person of a particular age and region also require further recognition and individual support by referring welfare and employment agencies, as well as by the delivering institution.

In Madonna’s case, factors related to her specific background, age, interests, motivations and inexperience contributed to making her engagement and ongoing participation more difficult. These included being the only young person in her course, having no peers from the same language region or family group as hers. She also found a substantial amount of course content unrelated to her youth-focused experiences and her aspirations, and the delivery was more academic and text-based than familiar non-formal learning styles she had encountered through arts-based workshops in the community development project. On one occasion
she rang from outside a class expressing she wanted to come home because she felt ‘shame’ and couldn’t understand what was being read.

**Provision of basic needs and resources**

Madonna’s story also indicates that struggling to meet her basic needs (such as housing, adequate transport, means of communication such as telephone and email, food, money, clean clothes and toiletries) impacted greatly on her capacity to engage with education. The most significant of these unmet needs was the lack permanent and secure accommodation. This had many consequences for Madonna’s attempt to study. While the institution provided support and information via phone and email, Madonna had no home access to either. This meant she had to rely on others to access information and to communicate effectively with the educational institution. In this case, she used the community development office phone, fax and computer to communicate with the institution, but if she couldn’t come into the office, or if staff were away, which occurred in some instances, she was unable to receive her travel documentation and consequently missed workshops.

She also missed another workshop due to an ultimately futile public housing appointment. Led to believe that her long wait for a flat with her mother was over, Madonna missed study to seek help through the community development project to gather the extensive list of references and documentation required for this appointment. She was told she needed tenancy references for her application. When she explained she had no permanent address, the housing staff suggested she stay in a temporary accommodation lodge for three weeks and then get a reference from them, but noted that this was not actually possible presently, as all the lodges were currently full.

Madonna eventually secured a reference from when she had toured with a show and lived in a flat interstate for a month. At the appointment, which was simply an over-the-counter check, she was told that there was still a two-year wait, and that she would also need to gather the documentation for her mother, an itinerant alcoholic. When she added that she just wanted a home so she could study and look after her grandmother and ten year old sister, she was told she now needed to be moved to the four-bedroom list which was a much longer wait, and that documentation also
needed to be gathered for her grandmother and sister. They lived on a community out of town and Madonna has no car.

With little immediate chance of secure housing, Madonna also had difficulty in securing her belongings, clothes and personal documents, which caused problems when preparing to travel for study. On one occasion, about to leave for the airport to attend a workshop, she found her ID, required for air travel, had been stolen from the old car body at the town camp where she hid her personal documents. Another time she didn’t want to travel to study because young men sharing the town camp house where she was staying had stolen her clothes ‘again’ and she had no clean or spare clothes to take, nor money to buy more. No permanent accommodation also meant she had no access to an environment and resources that supported her in her home study requirements outside workshops.

In Madonna’s case, a lack of transport was also a major issue, including the prohibitive cost of regularly getting to the airport for travel to workshops. The institution could reimburse her bus or taxi fares (from $20-$40 each way), but could not provide vouchers or cash if she had no money herself. To overcome this, Madonna regularly asked staff at the community development project to take her or pick her up from the airport, relying on the goodwill and availability of staff to do so out of hours and on weekends.

Limited understandings of Indigenous literacy issues

Another significant barrier faced by Madonna at all stages of her journey was her low level of English literacy, and the lack of effective strategies to address this. While at workshops, an ITAS tutor helped her with class work, but this did not address the more significant issue of Madonna’s continuing struggle to read and write beyond a very basic level. This affected not only her ability to understand and complete class work outside workshops, but also her capacity to negotiate many other aspects of study and life that depended on text-based communications. Madonna demonstrated a continued reluctance to engage in formal literacy development, and had previously dropped out of accredited intensive literacy courses claiming they made her ‘too shame’ and were boring. However she would enthusiastically engage in literacy development activities if they were aligned or integrated with activity related to her
own aspirations or interests, for example in less intimidating informal multi-media workshops with other young people she knew.

Research and literature (Cousins, 2003; Kral and Schwab, 2003) suggest that continuing poor outcomes in overcoming literacy issues are connected to widespread mainstream assumptions that the acquisition of English literacy is only a matter of improving access and modifying methodology. Such authors assert that the key to effective outcomes is the recognition of literacy as a social practice in context. Consequently, they claim acknowledging the reality of remote indigenous people’s perceptions, aspirations and practice around literacy, and aligning literacy development to meet these realities, is crucial to improved outcomes. Such views could provide a way of understanding the complexities behind Madonna’s ongoing struggle with literacy.

Buchanan and Egg (2000) and Wallace (2008) suggest training and educational programs should include integrated literacy development, rather than view it as a pre-requisite. Rather than emphasizing text-based learning methods using deficit models, more programs could focus on using learners’ own experience and knowledge to build learning opportunities. Other literature and research (Hull, 2003; Kral & Schwab, 2009; Thompson, Puthoff & Figueroa, 2006; Warlick, 2006) suggest that combining access to new technology, alternative learning approaches, multimedia modes of expression and such broader understandings of literacy, could support and contribute to more effective literacy development and learning for marginalised young people. More widespread support of such approaches and options could offer young indigenous learners like Madonna new ways to undertake educational and learning tasks and to overcome barriers to engagement in learning.

Limited access to holistic support outside of course delivery

To access the support she required beyond that offered by government agencies and the educational institution delivering her course, Madonna sought help from the community development project. This included access to help outside working hours, support in understanding and negotiating written documentation, support in negotiating communication with agencies and institution, help with transport, extra financial assistance, literacy and learning assistance, the provision of a consistent and reliable point and resources to receive, access information
and communicate via email, phone and fax as required by the institution, and help with unforeseen events like the theft of identification prior to travel.

However there are problematic issues with accessing support from such a non-government, independent project. While the flexible organisational structure and social commitment underpinning the project and its learning program allowed for the provision of such support and thereby also contributed to facilitating Madonna’s access to and ongoing participation in education, it is not a permanent organisation and ceased to operate its learning support program before Madonna completed her course. This raised the question of where Madonna, and others like her, could access such support when the project was gone.

While the project is by no means the only provider of support to young people or students, this author’s experience indicates that many other services and organisations in Alice Springs have a much higher ratio of staff to clients, and most experience limitations on resources in either time, equipment, staffing or funding. Many government organisations also have much more restrictive guidelines about what, how and when support is provided. Procedures at some of the larger organisations like the employment agency and housing office also presented language and literacy challenges for Madonna. In her dealings with both she was continually given comprehensive written documentation, despite her not being able to read or understand it. She also found these over-the-counter interviews in English intimidating and uncomfortable. While some support with different issues can be gained through different agencies, there is no ‘one-stop shop’ where Madonna felt she could access all her needs relating to attempting to complete a training program in a comfortable, effective and accessible way.

**Conclusion**

While acknowledging the considerable support provided by institutions and government schemes to overcome some barriers faced by young indigenous adults engaging in education, sharing some of the obstacles faced by Madonna, and highlighting the ‘holes’ in the current provision of adequate support, her experiences also highlight the need to extend that support to more comprehensive, holistic and accessible assistance, and also to expand the understanding of what causes it to be required. Issues raised
indicate that more research and exploration is needed to identify the actual challenges and issues around ensuring young Indigenous people, particularly those living in remote, disadvantaged circumstances, not only have access to appropriate training places and adequate literacy skills, but also to the understanding and support that enables them to continue and complete further education. Exploration of her experiences also suggests that developing and incorporating new approaches to literacy development and learning in education and training programs in post-school contexts could also create more inclusive and effective learning for young indigenous learners.

While this essay is not suggesting the scrapping of the focus on improving engagement participation and outcomes relating to schooling and institutionalised education and training, it does seek to highlight that existing policies and initiatives could be broadened to recognise and address more of the challenges faced by indigenous youth, and to include optional alternative pathways for those alienated, excluded or unmet by mainstream educational trajectories. Such an achievement would serve not only the young people, but also governments and educators facing the ongoing expense of continuing ineffective strategies and poor outcomes.

**References**


Two Towns Called Alice Springs

“The Alice” (as the town … is affectionately known), is … the gateway to Australia’s heart and soul. You can hear the ‘heartbeats’ as you visit Uluru (Ayers Rock), take an Aboriginal culture tour, or glide over the spectacular red plains in a hot air balloon. Just take a moment and you’ll feel the ancient beat.”

Website of Australian Tourism Net

“Alice Springs is in meltdown, its escalating social unrest and entrenched dysfunction on display for international tourists to see in the middle of the town’s mall. The safety warnings on backpacker forums are becoming increasingly hysterical; letters published in the town’s local newspaper beg for authorities to restore order. T-shirts are on sale with a slogan that is no joke: Alice Springs – Stabbing Capital of the World.”

Natasha Robinson, writing for The Australian, December 2008

More than nine years ago I left family new-year celebrations in New South Wales and dragged my soon-to-be wife on a three-day drive across western Queensland through 40-plus temperatures and into the Northern Territory. With as many of our worldly possessions as we could cram aboard, a well-worn copy of E. Annie Proulx’s The Shipping News, and no serviceable air-conditioning, we steered for Alice Springs where I was to take up a position as news reporter with the twice weekly Centralian Advocate. Ultimately I would become the newspaper’s editor. Back then it was all just part of a plan to escape the rat race.

My fiancé didn’t have a job to start when we arrived, nor did I have that much experience in journalism, but we’d heard that wouldn’t be a problem - jobs were easy to come by in Alice. The plan was a full-time writing gig and regular pay packet for me, and a chance for her to try something different, then on to greener pastures. Short and sweet.

But, as it does for so many newcomers, Alice Springs had something else in mind. And, as we drove on through the January heat and turned left onto the Stuart Highway at Three Ways just north of Tennant Creek, we had no
inkling of just how quickly we would fall in love with the place – despite its troubles – nor how long that lover’s embrace might last.

Now, after almost a decade here, friends and family still struggle to understand why it is we choose to live in such a harsh and remote place, plagued by poverty and violence, and so far to the west of the Great Divide. A clear explanation is not always easy to give.

Australians by and large cling to the east coast. For most of us, the Outback – the land of droughts and flooding rains covering most of our island continent – might as well be a parallel universe. And, although we are willing to embrace the outback tradition in a cultural sense, we seem to be in the grip of a sort of geographic agoraphobia when it comes to contemplating an actual life in remote Australia. For those who do venture inward to their country’s interior, Alice Springs – once dubbed Australia’s Outback capital – reveals itself to be two towns, at least on the surface.

The first Alice Springs is a go-ahead tourism mecca, a potential mining hub populated by enterprising go-getters, pastoralists, business opportunists, a veritable army of social workers, anthropologists and health workers, and adventurers after something different from their lives.

The other Alice Springs is an Aboriginal ghetto, a welfare and alcohol dependent society verging on social collapse. This is the picture built from the horror stories we have all read in newspapers and seen on television, the cheerless town once dubbed the stabbing capital of the globe. A place no one could possibly want to live.

One town is linked inextricably – and indeed financially - to the other. But this picture of two towns cast in uneasy co-existence does not tell the whole story. The untold story of Alice Springs – a story one has to dig a little deeper to find - is of a town desperately trying to heal its own divide. It is a story of hope.

* * * *

When we first considered a stint in Central Australia we had to run the gauntlet of advice from those who care about us: “But it’s so hot!” and “Why on earth would you go to Alice Springs? There’s nothing there!” And my personal favourite – “You can only look so many times at a big red
It was the start of an important discovery about many of our fellow coast-bound Australians, whose general knowledge of the outback and the Red Centre specifically, is poor. Even the most stridently opinionated had not been to Alice Springs. This of course didn’t stop them expressing their fact-free views. How could they know of the rugged, prehistoric landscape I had seen on the final approach to Alice Springs airport that first time; soaring bluffs of rust-coloured stone divided by winding, sandy river-scapes and a diverse flora that was just springing to life after a recent bout of rain? There was something about the smell and feel of the air, a timbre in the voices and conversations that I hadn’t heard when waving goodbye to the coast.

I was reminded of my father’s journey more than a half century earlier, when the New Jersey-born former air force sergeant had driven from Seattle to Anchorage, Alaska to find work and a new life. With his story foremost in my mind I stepped in to Central Australia from the plane for the first time in October of 1998, and had the oddest feeling I had come home. And some taut-pulled wire deep within my ribs relaxed a notch.

* * * *

By late 2000 I’d intermittently spent some months in Central Australia, made friends and caught the bug that brings people here from all walks of life. Growing up in Sydney’s south-west, I’d had little experience of Aboriginal people. In Alice Springs I was meeting them, shopping among them and playing music with them. This was certainly a different Australia to the one I knew. Importantly, it seemed, I’d seen the usually-dry Todd River flow three times which, according to Alice folklore, makes one an honorary local.

Home to some 27,000 people, Alice Springs holds a special place at the heart of Australian culture. It is popularly considered a spiritual place, imbued with mystery and a staggering geography that has attracted tourists from across the globe to swim its gorges, walk its trails, experience Aboriginal traditions and visit the nearby well-known landmark of Uluru.

Still, it’s hard to ignore the town’s remoteness: two airlines – one of them just three days a week – and a 1500 kilometre drive north or south to the
nearest major city. As a local comedian put it: “Alice has everything you need, without the burden of choice.”

To this isolated bit of arid zone add descendants of early pioneers and Afghan cameleers, US citizens working at Pine Gap’s Joint Defence Facility and their families, migrants bolstering a workforce clamouring for staff, Aborigines traditional and modern, more lesbians per capita than anywhere else in Australia, and a host of other blow-ins like myself, and you have some inkling of the demographic potpurri that Australia’s once hard-living outback town has become. Perhaps most importantly, modern Alice Springs finds itself at the cutting edge of Australian indigenous relations, in a young country struggling to find an honest and enduring voice of reconciliation.

* * * *

I started at the newspaper on January 8, 2001. It was everything Annie Proulx might have led me to expect from her fictional Newfoundland rag The Gammy Bird – the newsroom characters, the extraordinary tales that reared up to defy their small town roots, a chronic lack of staff and little time for training. There were times I felt very much cast in the role of her main character, the hapless Quoyle.

Rain had drenched the normally dry desert landscape for two years running. So the ranges, which cut an ancient swath through the centre of the settlement – and that on previous visits I had bookmarked as sparsely vegetated – were now covered in a mat of vibrant greens bringing up sharply the deeply weathered reds of the local sandstone. It looked like a rugged mountain paradise, warm and painted in earthy colours spooned from some giant artist’s palette, then splashed right across the middle of my new world. It was a sign, I reasoned: I had arrived at exactly the right moment.

We stayed at first with friends who were kind enough to share their home with us for a few months. Hospitality is something found in abundance in Alice Springs. It’s simply part of the place, like summer flies and red rocks. People depend on each other. But it’s not a burden. It’s just life. We’d stayed for a time with these people a couple of years earlier, including a memorable winter in their doorless back shed when their home was already full with other guests. Night time temperatures that June dipped
to a bone-snapping -5°C. We stuffed our swag with blankets and wrapped ourselves each night into its cocoon, shivering until our bodies warmed us over. Then, spying through the doorless doorway, we’d make shapes from the gazillion and one stars that light up the clear desert skies at night. Our friends’ dog would make her way eventually to the warmth of our canvas and wool bundle, drape herself across the top and little by little we’d all fall into a peaceful slumber.

* * * *

My job at the paper was going well and my fiancé found work aplenty. Half way through 2001 we bought a house, former government stock, badly dilapidated, and started renovating. Our decision was based on buying being cheaper than renting. Still, it also marked an early stepping up of our commitment to the town.

When I first came to Alice Springs, I had, like many before me, reckoned it to be the land of opportunity. The town rang with a sense of freedom captured in the idea of ‘being Territorian’, a people unfettered by the rules to which less fortunate ‘southerners’ were forced to adhere. Open speed limits – an attraction for some – was just one of the benefits. All I really knew back then was that Alice Springs was a bustling tourist hub, gateway to Uluru and the central supply point for a mining industry about to “go big”, as local property investors would tell visitors and new chums at every opportunity. “When it goes mate, you’ll write your own ticket,” was the general consensus. Newcomers took their pick of jobs in a market with as much work as an active job seeker could want.

And seniors got a look in as well. The skills shortage was so pressing that older workers found themselves welcomed rather than shunned, which was often their finding in the big cities where age and experience were no longer valued. It was the Australia of old, the one my parents had told me about, where everyone got a fair go and if you worked hard, you could make good.

But Alice Springs was also the Australia of old in other ways, where many Aborigines were served at the back of pubs and couldn’t get a room at some hostels, where thousands lived in abject and highly visible poverty in the river and camps on the fringe of town, and where alcohol fuelled a culture of violence and despair. Even a short visit to Alice Springs reveals to
the visitor this sorrowful underbelly, an entire community of people living as ghosts on the edge of another.

* * * *

The two towns of Alice Springs are light years apart. Even though the region was first explored a century and a half ago, as recently as the 1980s some Central Australian Aborigines had still not encountered a white person. Change has come for some of these people within less than a generation. More and more, a once nomadic bush people are being forced into town, to a place and lifestyle quite foreign to them. Even for those with longer exposure to a European way of life, or for children left bereft of cultural roots as the last generations of elders is lost, the transition is no less disconcerting.

On current birth rates the population of Alice Springs will, within 50 years, be equal measures black and white. While a growing number of Aborigines fill important roles in the town, a significant proportion remain on welfare, many unemployable owing to a lack of effective education, work experience, poor health, a different cultural outlook, or a combination of all these. Such a situation will prove impossible to sustain. Helping Central Australia’s Aboriginal people to become job- and modern world-ready, or finding some viable alternative, is Alice Springs’ – and indeed the nation’s – greatest challenge.

* * * *

Yet on the smaller settlements, far removed from the town, some Aboriginal people live a more traditional way of life. This is cleverly depicted as providing salvation for the young Aboriginal couple at the centre of Alice Springs filmmaker Warwick Thornton’s award-winning Samson and Delilah. The couple flee the temptations and dangers of town in favour of the isolation of a remote settlement. Is this the only solution?

In 2007 I visited the home of Aboriginal artist and former stockman Lindsay Bird at the outstation of Mulga Bore, about 190 kilometres north of Alice Springs. I was there to report for the newspaper on the launch of a land agreement that hoped to kick-start irrigated grape production in the region. Along with a training centre for the young, the deal held real hope for Lindsay and his community, whose home in the sandy desert –
now touted as prime irrigated horticulture country – might just be their economic salvation.

Lindsay’s a little over 70. With his wife and three daughters, he lived in the tiny community of about 100 in what was, I suppose, a more traditional way than his counterparts in town. Yet his paintings hung in galleries across the globe, including New York and Dublin.

To Lindsay, reconciliation meant finding a future for his children and theirs. He told me that as we sat under the shade of a big tree, batting off flies in the 40°C heat. He wanted the best for those young people. But he wanted them to work for it.

Next to us there was a child’s see-saw, and the community’s little schoolhouse. Beyond, the sleepy settlement dozed fitfully in the mulga as it had done for decades. It was at that moment I knew Lindsay was right. Somehow, he was managing to live in two worlds. And, with calmness and authority, he would bring his family with him into this new era. If reconciliation in Australia was ever to mean anything, I reasoned, it was blokes like Lindsay Bird who would show us the way.

But the economic realities of service provision to support these outposts, scattered so widely across the Central Australian desert, are cruel. On the current trajectory, more and more people from out bush will be tipped into the major centre. Yet the result is the other Alice Springs, a community caught in limbo – no longer able to live in its so recent past, yet frustrated it can neither envisage, nor comprehend, its future.

One could call Alice Springs a social experiment at a grand scale, not reckoned by design of course, but in practical terms a useful analogy. The town is a litmus test, a microcosm of broader Australia, an Australia that is – and by needs must be – coming of age, a nation in which first Australians and other Australians face the realities of life together on the same dirt.

* * * *

By early 2009 it was time to leave the newspaper and pursue other interests. As a family we still believed in the hope, in the town we had come to love, and so decided to stay. It’s not an uncommon thing. Many who remain in the town more than a few months fall in love with the place and elect to stay on.
Something keeps Alice Springs people – black and white – moving forward, milking the hope, believing the work being done is worthwhile. Yet violence, poverty, corruption and fiscal failure still dominate the headlines. And certainly there are political and administrative hurdles to be overcome. These are important stories, which must be told by media; it would be irresponsible to ignore them.

But let us not forget the deeper dimension of the story, the hope on which people here are building their lives, the story the media has little time to tell, yet the story on everyone’s lips. For, despite its pivotal role, the body politic is unlikely to bring together the two towns of Alice Springs. Yet progress is afoot at a more human level. The divide is being healed by the thousands who toil tirelessly far from the argy bargy of politics and clear of the media spotlight, working steadily, forging relationships, one at a time. Slowly, and as is the desert way it seems, many Central Australians believe through these relationships an understanding will be forged between black and white, an understanding that travels in both directions, something no law, government policy or federal intervention could ever hope to achieve.

Perhaps Lindsay Bird and others like him hold the key. Far from the bars and bottloes of Alice Springs where many of his contemporaries are lost in the wash of grog, and farther still from Canberra where the fortunes of Aboriginal people are won or lost in a game of political spin, Lindsay and other traditional men still hold sway on their homelands. For blokes like Lindsay, change must, by needs, come slowly. It’s the desert way.
The shadow of the snappy-gum was stretched by the late afternoon sun and Owen found relief in that. It meant another day was over; even the dust and the flies seem to ease up with this change in the day. Not that the heat, the dust and the flies bothered him at the worst of times; they were nothing compared to the fiery hell of Egypt or the nightmarish quagmires of New Guinea during World War Two.

It was the return from the war that marked the beginning of the run of lousy luck for Owen. Upon returning from the war Owen discovered that his fiancé had run off with some well-to-do ratbag a week before his arrival; apparently she was quite the social butterfly whilst he was away risking life and limb. Good riddance to the tart Owen thought, at the pang of her memory.

A year after returning from the war still found Owen bumming from job to job and hitting the grog. He was headed to become a no-hoper. It was at the suggestion of his good mate Jack Rivers that they should head bush and find work. For a few years they knocked around the bush; mustering, fencing, truck driving and a hundred other odd jobs they took on together. Those were good days.

Yet a familiar story arose; Owen would become drunk one time too many or Jack would end up in a dust-up with the wrong person and they’d have to move on. Jack and Owen parted company in ’49 when Jack was thrown from his horse and killed. He had gone out to bring in a few stragglers on his own, out in the break-away country near Oodnadatta; Owen was too drunk to ride and had stayed in his cot. That was two years ago now and the memory of it leaned hard on Owen; there are some blows where you can’t dust yourself off when you get back up.

Owen sorely missed Jack right about now, and wished he was here. After Jack’s death, Owen made his way to Alice Springs and not too long after he found himself in Tennant Creek. Owen thought he’d try his hand at
gold mining for a while. It was back-breaking work, but the money was good and Owen made some good mates. For 18 months he toiled under the earth without so much as a concern; but it was deep beneath Mt Samuel where he lost his nerve one day. Just like that, the fear of being smothered and crushed to death overcame him. Owen never set foot in another mine.

So he turned his hand back to cattle and found work with Arthur Roberts. Oh, how he came to loathe that name. Roberts was a six-foot-six tower of blubber over muscle, slave-driving crook and stand-over man; whose cattle rearing amounted mostly to poddy-dodging. Owen hated that kind of work, but he needed the money and for several months he stuck it out with Roberts. Until Owen could stand it no more.

Besides Roberts’ mongrelly approach to everything, it had been well over a month since Owen had seen any kind of pay; something that he had been stewing on all day. Roberts was where he could be usually found – in the Goldfield’s Hotel. He was most likely spending his wages, something else that festered on Owen’s mind. He finally made the decision to move on. He gathered up his few belongings and placed them under the snappy-gum.

On his way into town he stopped at Reg Wilson’s place and asked if any work was going. Reg said he had plenty on the go and Owen could start in the morning if he liked; Owen snapped up the offer with a smile and a hand shake. Now all he needed to do was collect his final pay from Roberts.

Owen made his way down the wide dirt road that was the main street; the telegraph line ran right down the centre of town. Most of the businesses were beginning to wind down for the day, though there was still plenty of activity with vehicles and people going to and fro. At the front of the Goldfields Hotel, Owen steeled his resolve before stepping into the place. Once his eyes adjusted to the dim of the room he spotted Roberts seated at the bar; he strode confidently towards him as the mongrel downed a swig from a glass.

Owen sided up to Roberts seated at the bar. As Owen was small and wiry in stature, he looked child-like next to the bulk of Roberts.
“Arthur, I want my wages. It’s been more than a month since you’ve paid me,” said Owen in a firm voice.

“Who do you think you are comin’ in here and speakin’ to me like that?” growled Roberts. “I’ll pay you when I’m good ‘n’ ready.”

“No, I want that money you owe me and I quit> I’m goin’ to work for someone else,” said Owen, pushing the matter.

“I’m not payin’ you anythin’ and get goin’ if you wanna go,” snapped back Roberts.

“Pay me them wages you owe me or I’ll get my mate,” Owen said, making the threat direct and flat.

Roberts eyed Owen for a moment. For an instant Owen thought that Roberts was going to leap to his feet and set upon him with a flurry of fists. If that’s the way it was going to go, Owen was going to give it back with everything he had. Instead, the response was much more placid. Roberts put the palm of his right hand over Owen’s face and pushed him away hard, causing him to move back a step or two.

“Go on, go get your mate!” barked Roberts.

Owen ignored all those who had heard and seen the whole confrontation, including the barman; he turned and walked out of the pub.

He returned twenty minutes later. In his hand he had a small cotton sugar bag that appeared to contain a heavy object. As Owen strode across the room again there were many who were surprised to see him back in the pub, including the barman, particularly as he had returned alone, but all had noticed the determined set in his jaw. Roberts did not realise that Owen had returned.

Owen sided up to Roberts for the second time that late afternoon and the big man still did not see him; most likely because he was too concerned with polishing off the remaining brew in his glass. As Roberts raised his arm high to drain the glass, Owen fished the heavy object from the cotton sugar bag.

Owen jammed the barrel of the ugly black revolver hard into the ribs under Roberts’ right arm. The pain of it had caught Roberts off-guard; he
whipped his head down to see what was sticking into him. The remaining beer in the glass spilled down the front of his shirt.

“WHAT!” Roberts cried out as he instantly recognised the weapon being shoved between his ribs. He also recognised the voice snarling in his ear.

“Are you going to give me my money now?”

“Wha... yeah, yeah, I'll give you your money now,” replied Roberts with his voice bordering on panic.

Roberts fished a wad of notes out of his breast pocket. When Owen spied the notes, his anger must have flared causing him to dig the revolver in a little harder, for Roberts mouthed off quickly.

“Yep, you’ll get all that I owe ya.”

Roberts peeled off from the wad the amount owed to Owen and handed it to him over his shoulder. Owen snatched the notes and stuffed them into his breast pocket.

“I told you I quit,” said Owen calmly.

“Yeah, no worries,” replied Roberts.

“And don’t come looking for me or my mate might have something to say about it,” growled Owen as he twisted the barrel into Roberts’ flesh a little deeper.

“No, no, I won’t,” said Roberts shaking his head stiffly.

Owen slipped the revolver back in the cotton sugar bag as he turned to walk away. He again ignored all those who may have seen or heard the quiet altercation. At the door he paused briefly to make sure the local cop had not been alerted to his little stick-em-up; Owen doubted if the local constabulary would rush to save Arthur Roberts’ bacon anyway.

Owen was a little smug with himself. Maybe things were finally turning around for the better. As he stepped onto the dusty street he could hear that Roberts had regained some of his composure as he was having a go at the barman.

“What the bloody hell are you smirking at? Get me another bloody beer!”
Guilty

Renato Marocchini

My heart is pounding heavily as I wait in the court room. I start to sit. I can feel the condensation gather in my palms. The judge looks down on me, piercing me with his eyes. It is like he can see straight through me. It makes me feel so small. What does he think of me? I don’t know.

I am told to stand up and answer to my charge, but my legs won’t lift. They feel numb. So I force myself. I know this is it. I’m going to be sent to prison for the first time. The Prosecutor starts to read out the charge. So many thoughts race through my mind. I can’t seem to think straight.

How do I plead? Guilty? Not guilty? My lawyer has told me it’s best to plead guilty because the evidence against me is too great. He says I would be found guilty if I fought my charge. He says the Prosecutor will offer me a plea bargain – 25% off my jail time.

Two years is a long time for a young man like me. So I close my eyes hoping that it’s just a bad dream. I try to imagine myself standing on the beach as the warm sea breeze dances around my body. But all I feel is the cold air that blows from the air vents in the roof.

For some reason I can’t hear the Prosecutor. I think it’s my unconscious mind not wanting to be here. All I hear is the ticking of a big old clock that hangs from the wall.

It feels like I’ve been standing here for hours, but it’s only been five minutes.

A faint voice repeats itself.

Is it talking to me?

I open my eyes.

I see the judge frowning at me.

Then I hear the voice.

It’s the Prosecutor.
He repeats his words.
How do you plead?
I drop my head in dismay and I utter the word ...
Guilty.

\[ \text{Out} \]
Outback Kingdom

Derek O’Keefe

One dog is crying and barking with tears.

Two snakes are hiding with dress on and dehydration.

Three emus are running and loaded with powder. Shooting sprints and springs on the old gum tree.

Four galahs are wondering thinking and grinding.

Five snails are spying on the ochre bridge.

Six peewees are perv ing, staring and sharing.

Seven stars are shining gliding and smiling.

Eight eagles are leaving and yarning with their violins.

Nine ducks are mine, I’ll feed them and breed them.

Ten hens fighting for a stolen pen.

Eleven cars on the same lane with creeping crooks around the creeks.

Twelve arrow plains with rhythm and bows; They shook us with shock in a dark sewerage drain.

Thirteen blokes stroke with a note book full of jokes.

Burning Johnny billy boils, my queen sneezes; how wonderful and sweet.
It Hurts

Stephen Encisco

As she sat huddled on the edge of her used bed, she cried. She cradled her head in her hands, throbbing with broken memories. The moon and the stars watched her body shiver through her bedroom window as she struggled to process what had just happened. Their luminescent smiles offered no escape from her traumatic prison. Her silent tears made no mark on the outside world; she was alone in the darkness. Sad blue eyes fogged with the weight of a terrible, horrifying occurrence. There was nothing else on her mind; nothing else would ever be on her mind. Gingerly touching the sheets beneath her, she felt them cold and uninviting, stained with her own blood. Her beautiful face contorted in anger.

He had no right!

The slightest movement sent searing pain throughout her entire body, and any attempt at rationalisation crashed with a solid emotional wall in her mind. She coughed once, twice, and winced from the tearing sensation in her chest. Slowly running her right hand up her left arm, she felt the bruises on her skin where he had struck her. She could barely raise her left arm, and her legs trembled so much it was impossible for her to stand up.

Her hair, brown and free-flowing, was scruffy and untidy, chunks of it lying on her pillow and scattered across her bed. He had been brutal. She tried to form words with her mouth, but the left side of her cheek was so swollen her lips were stuck in place. Her puffy, red eyes and swollen face betrayed her beauty. Now, it was gone forever. Casting her eyes up to the sky, she gasped with the realisation that her life would never be the same; people would always look at her differently now, wondering, watching, speculating. She would be treated special, always given sympathetic priority, have people smile sadly at her, never voicing their internal disgust and relief it didn’t happen to them. And she would glare at them for pitying her, glare at the world for thinking they were better than her. But they would dismiss any objection as the ramblings of a ‘damaged’ girl, and so it was to be.
Her mum had left on a business trip for three days, and he had come home from work late. She could smell the alcohol on his breath, but he had come home drunk many times before and she had had no reason to believe that tonight would be any different. But it had felt different the moment she heard the key turning in the lock. Every movement he made before he came to her room had carried an ominous undertone which she had ignored. When he opened the door to her room and stepped inside, she had flashed him a loving grin. Almost immediately, her gaze fell to his heavy work jeans and she had flushed, embarrassed, noticing his obvious arousal. Thin tendrils of doubt pricked her mind and weaved themselves into her perception of him. She half-smiled uncomfortably – her whole body was on edge. Never had she considered he was anything but a perfect father with a drinking problem, happily married and getting on with life. He staggered unsteadily towards her, dropping his bottle of beer. It fell in slow motion, a glass projectile, and shattered on the bedroom floor. She told herself to calm down with the assurance that parental instinct and common sense would override anyone’s carnal desires, but this assumption backfired with the first backhand that sent her sprawling heavily onto her bed. She had gently rubbed the stinging pain on her cheek and looked at him incredulously; she couldn’t believe what he had just done. Then she saw the madness in his eyes, saw a man who had given up, who could not go on, who was taking the pleasures of life by force because it was the only way. Her mouth quivered as he began to un buckle his belt, fear welled up inside her and she realised he had become alien to her. Her lungs filled with a mighty roar and he had whipped the belt out viciously to silence her, ending the world as she knew it.

Although she regained consciousness a couple of minutes after, she was no longer living in reality. This was a different place, a different time. He grunted and heaved on top of her and she could smell his sweat mixing with the cool night air. With each rhythmic thrust he severed fifteen years of unconditional love between them, every ounce of careful parenting gone to waste bit by bit, until they were no closer to each other than a stranger one might encounter on the street. Then it was over, and she was alone, lying still on her bed. She could feel the soft tickle of blood spreading under her stomach. Listening to the sounds of the night, she let herself be swept away by her tired mind.

Why? She felt her whole body scream the dreaded question.
* * * *

She awoke to the familiar sound of the key turning in the lock and she heard the stomp of his work boots coming up the stairs. Hugging herself tightly, she closed her eyes and waited. Two days. Her mother would return in two days.
Last Chance

Sean Kelly

‘I’m just saying, breaking a promise isn’t some massive offence,’ Kim said, shrugging. ‘People do it all the time. All it means is that you changed your mind.’

‘That’s one way of looking at it,’ John said, grinning crookedly back at her from the other side of the bedroom, happily leaning against her wall. ‘But most normal people feel like they’ve been stabbed in the back, if a promise is broken.’

‘It’s a handshake, not a contract,’ Kim muttered.

‘Why the prejudice against promises?’ John asked, raising his eyebrows as the smile faded a little.

‘Everyone has their little hatred,’ Kim said, smiling at him from her bed.

‘I wouldn’t exactly call this little,’ John said, the half-smile finding its way back onto his face. Kim giggled a little, shrugging innocently.

John felt a vibration against his leg, and with an apologetic look at his girlfriend, John took his phone quickly out of his pocket and opened the message that he had received. It came up on the screen.

John had to read the message twice. By the time he had finished it the second time, John’s heart had stopped beating.

* * * *

Twenty-three steps.

He was a fit, healthy, seventeen year old boy. In the past two days he had leapt over fences, sprinted through back yards and alley ways; John had even managed to push his way up a seven foot brick wall. But the twenty-three steps that curved their way to the balcony above outclassed each and every test that he had faced to that point.

It was basically the walk of death, after all.
John ran a hand through his jet black hair, stepping back from the first step and then forward again. Nothing changed, John observed dryly. It would seem that he was just going to have to walk up the steps.

John cracked his neck. He wasn’t sure why he cracked his neck of all things, but it made him a feel little bit more ready. And then with an awful feeling of finality in the pit of his stomach, John raised his leg and took the first step.

There was little doubt in his mind. For everything to really come to an end, this had to be his walk of death.

After that each step got easier as he took them one at a time, his heart beat increasing with each footstep. It pounded in his ears like a drum beat, accelerating as he neared the end. At the landing, John looked up at the final twelve steps, and with a deep breath and an air of defiance, he took them two at a time to the top.

The balcony was clear of any furniture. It was just a concrete slab for a floor and a couple of poles holding a tin roof above his head. Waiting for him, as John knew he would be, was Alric.

Alric watched John closely as John pulled to a stop. The shining, silver handgun at Alric’s side, was loosely held in his limp arm. Ten metres separated the pair, and Alric slowly raised his arm, letting the silver gun point its barrel between John’s eyes. John clenched his jaw, heart beat ever increasing.

‘Did I interrupt anything?’ Alric asked softly, tossing his blonde hair out of his eyes.

‘A little bit,’ John said, his voice cracking a little. He cleared his throat.

‘My deepest apologies.’

John narrowed his eyes a little as he heard the sarcasm clearly in Alric’s voice. Alric smiled a little.

‘Do I need to bother with the explanations?’ Alric asked lazily.

John slowly shook his head, sliding his hand deep into his jacket pocket and holding the rock within tightly.
'Good. Give it to me,' Alric growled.

* * * *

Kim raised her eyebrows at him, and John swallowed past the lump in his throat. How did he tell her the message he had just received?

Kim was slowly getting to her feet. She knew something was wrong, and when John still didn’t react with her standing centimetres away, Kim felt fear surge through her.

Kim very slowly reached out and took the phone out of John’s weak fingers, and with one last look in his horrified eyes, she looked down and read the message. It took her only a few seconds to read it, and a moment later she was shaking her head, looking up at John with a terrified look on her face and throwing the phone away.

It landed on the bed, facing upwards:

*The meeting place in half an hour. I take her otherwise.*

‘No,’ Kim said loudly, shaking her head. ‘No, no, no, no you can’t go. You’re staying here.’

‘Kim…’

‘NO!’ Kim shouted, whirling away from him and storming over to the door, slamming it with all her strength. John watched her as she looked back at him with wild, terrified eyes.

All either of them could do was stare at the other.

‘If I don’t go, he’ll just come here,’ John said, his voice dull. ‘We all die anyway. At least if I go, maybe I can reason with him.’

Kim didn’t respond, just standing right in front of the door, blocking John.

John slowly walked forward. Kim stared at him as he gently moved her out of his way and opened the door. Every fibre in him desperately wanted to throw his arms around her. His entire body was burning with the desire, to at least kiss her soft lips, one last time.
John didn’t know if he could leave without one last bit of contact with Kim. She was the only one who knew what had been happening to him in the last few weeks. She was the one he trusted more than anyone else.

He stole one last look at her. Kim’s eyes were fixed on him, the beautiful brown eyes he had been transfixed with, just one simple feature within her gorgeous face that lit up with each smile, framed by a curtain of straight, dark red hair.

That simple glance almost stopped John dead in his tracks.

But as John walked out of the bedroom, he knew that if he stopped, he could never leave. Leaving the bedroom had been all the effort he had to give. If he stopped now…

John pushed forward, swallowing hard as he kicked open the back door and quickly walked down the small path to where he had parked his bike. With all his might John was trying to suppress the realisation that he had just seen Kim for the final time.

‘John!’

* * * *

‘So what’s the deal?’ John asked, holding the rock tightly.

‘You give me the code, and then I let you go,’ Alric said. ‘We stop chasing your girl. And we all pretend that we never met.’

‘Simple as that?’

‘Simple as that.’

John took a deep breath, eyeing Alric disbelievingly. There was no chance that Alric was going to simply let John walk away. John knew that things ended here for him. John was a few metres from the back of the railing.

‘Do you know what’s inside that vault?’ John asked, trying to keep his voice controlled and calm.

Alric smirked, shaking his head.
'And you’re still going to help them get it?’ John asked, shaking his head in disgust. ‘I don’t care how much Alex is paying you. This is going to cause more hell then money can save you from.’

‘Save the speech,’ Alric growled. ‘Just give me the damn thing.’

John slowly took the rock out of his pocket, looking up at Alric dully.

‘You writ it on a rock?’

‘Last place anyone would look,’ John muttered, shrugging. ‘Catch.’

John threw the arm at Alric as hard as he dared. Alric snatched it out of the air without issue. He looked at it suspiciously, flipping it over.

‘Is the fourth one an s or a two?’ Alric asked, frowning.

‘It’s a z actually,’ John said. Alric raised his eyebrows, shrugging. He took out his phone, and John could only assume he sent the code off straight away. And with a smirk he tossed the rock over the balcony.

Then he cocked his gun.

‘So much for our deal,’ John sighed.

* * * *

Two men quickly ran through the front yard of the house, trampling the neatly cut lawn. One kicked the door open, and the other surged forward, holding a rifle up and looking carefully around the room.

With a barking call the man ordered his colleague to follow after him. They moved quickly from room to room, looking for any sign of life. The house was empty, and they yelled at each other, from different rooms, in another language.

The first man that had entered arrived at the door, smirking slightly at the three letters stuck to the door. He called his partner over, jerking his head at the door beside him.

The partner nodded, readying himself. This was the last room.

This was where they would be hiding.
The first man kicked the door open with ferocity, and the door slammed against the wall.

The ‘K’ on the door fell to the ground.

* * * *

Alric smirked and John slowly raised his hands.

‘We had a deal!’ John spat at Alric, feeling every bit of agitation he had been suppressing through their meeting starting to boil over.

Alric shrugged arrogantly, tossing his hair again.

‘But you don’t give a damn, right?’ John snarled, lowering his arms with a burning glare. ‘It doesn’t matter to any of you. You’re all too concerned with yourselves to even think about something else. Where would you find the time to screw people over?’

‘Exactly,’ Alric grinned. ‘Fiends like me, we gotta prioritise.’

‘Well when the entire world goes up in flames, your priorities might shift a little bit,’ John mused, smirking a little.

‘Don’t bother trying to talk me down,’ Alric snarled, sudden anger leaping onto face. ‘It isn’t going to happen.’

‘You don’t even know what’s inside!’ John shouted.

‘Want to tell me then?’ Alric shot back, his voice tight.

John looked at Alric for a second, and then with a shrug he nodded a few times.

‘Sure. Why not?’ John growled. ‘It’s knowledge.’

‘Knowledge?’

‘Knowledge, that’s right,’ John snapped. ‘Information. How to do things, how to keep Alex alive.’

Alric was silent for a moment.

‘That explains a lot…’ Alric mused, nodding to himself. ‘Like the massive amount of money he’s going to pay me for that code you so brilliantly put on a rock.’
‘Glad to see you care,’ John muttered sarcastically.

Alric shrugged, and when he carefully realigned his gun with John’s nose, John could tell that talking time was done and dusted. Now Alric was going to kill him. Just as John had expected. Just as he had planned.

It wasn’t going to make dying any easier.

John saw Alric’s hand tensing as he began to pull the trigger, and as he saw his death, rushing towards him with the jerk of a finger, one burning thought filled his mind:

*Not yet.*

So as Alric slammed down on the trigger and the piece of lead exploded out of his handgun, John was ducking and turning. As the bullet flew over head, John was heading for the railing behind him.

As Alric was pulling down on the trigger again, John -

- *turned around as Kim ran towards him, throwing her arms around him. John couldn’t help but return the gesture. Kim slowly reached up a hand to* -

- John’s head glanced quickly over his shoulder metres from the back railing. He would have gone over the side, but it was a fall to concrete. At least when he leapt over the back, it was grass. There was some chance.

But even after two missed shots, Alric still had time for one final shot as he took aim and pulled down the trigger, just as John leapt into the air, landing a foot on the top of the railing and springing forward.

John shouted -

- ‘You can’t go,’ Kim whispered, tears rolling down her cheeks. All John could do was shake his head, knowing his voice would choke up to little more than a croaking response.

*Kim lay her head against his chest, and John gently tried to detach himself from her. He had been every bit right about how much willpower he possessed to leave. It was diminishing, and quickly.*

‘I’ve gotta,’ John choked out. ‘Sorry.’
‘Sorry?’ Kim asked quietly. ‘That doesn’t seem big enough for what you’re going to do.’

‘Can’t think of much else,’ John chuckled darkly.

Kim slowly looked up -

- at the sky as the bullet caught John in the back, his eyes widening as he stared at the dark sky above him for a moment.

John fell limply to the ground below, landing with a loud, bone-crushing thud. John could barely move, every bone in his body feeling broken, the bullet in his back burning with fiery intensity.

John’s eyes were shut, and he couldn’t help but wonder if they were ever going to open again. But he had to, there was something -

- ‘you have to do for me,’ John whispered. ‘Take your folks, take them to the airport and just get out. Just in case.’

‘I’m not leaving you behind,’ Kim said firmly.

‘I might not be coming back.’

‘You will be,’ Kim said, shaking her head at his words. ‘You can reason with him. You have something to bargain with. You’ll come back.’

‘But while I’m gone,’ John said, improvising. ‘They might come and find you. And then I’ll have nothing to bargain with. You’re their ace in the hole in this deal, so you have to get to the airport.’

Kim took a deep breath, and then nodded.

‘You wouldn’t have done too well if I didn’t run after you,’ Kim suddenly said. ‘Were you going to let me know to go to the airport, or where you just going to leave?’

‘Honestly, I didn’t think about it until then,’ John replied, smiling.

Kim giggled, sniffing a little bit and wiping her eyes.

‘Just promise me one thing,’ Kim said, looking right into his eyes. ‘Just promise I’ll see you again.’

John nodded.
Kath Manzie Youth Literary Award

John groaned, reaching for his pocket.
One final effort.

* * * *
The two men waved their guns around in anger, staring around at the empty room. They threw open the covers, overturned the beds.
But, to their frustration, it was completely empty.

* * * *
Alex stood in front of the vault, his eyes wide with pleasure, his heart racing with impatience. Every cent that he had spent on Alric had been worth it. They had their way in.
Soon Alex would be healthy. And not only healthy, he would be beyond powerful, beyond anything the world had seen before.
Knowledge would be his power, Alex mused.
And with a hiss the vault door detached itself slightly, opening a bare centimetre as Alex’s assistant put in the final digit. Alex couldn’t hide a smile on his usually cold, expressionless face as his assistant took a step back, nodding to Alex.
With a delighted hop in his step, Alex walked forward and took his gun out, pointing it at the man who had served him well, and putting a bullet between his eyes. Alex’s assistant crumpled against the wall.
With a reverence, Alex slowly reached out his free hand and grasped the handle of the vault, the impenetrable fortress that had been both the thorn in his side and his last hope, and cast it open.
And when he saw what was inside, Alex’s eyes bulged in horror.
He stormed inside, whirling around, looking. But to Alex’s horror there wasn’t a single thing inside the vault. Alex whirled around, facing the entrance to the vault, and saw a note taped to the door.
He ran the few steps, ripping it from the door.
And after only a few seconds, Alex was pulling his phone from his pocket, desperately dialling Alric’s number and pressing it frantically to his ear, a wild gleam in his eye.

* * * *

Alric slowly walked down the stairs, holding the phone at his side.

He had barely had time to congratulate himself on a job well done when his phone rang. He had seen his bullet connect with John. The fall alone would cripple the boy. His bullet would do the rest.

Alric had no hope as he slowly walked over to the patch of grass John was lying on, motionless. Alric held the phone to his ear, and he could hear the panicked breathing of Alex on the other end.

Alric could barely believe what John had managed. With his death, he had effectively killed Alex.

Alric looked down at John, seeing a phone held limply in his hand. Alric knelt down beside John and felt for a pulse. After a long moment of nothing, Alric sighed.

‘What was the message again?’ Alric asked softly.

‘If I memorised everything in this room, and then burnt all of it, would that make me your last hope?’

Alric swallowed.

‘He’s dead.’

* * * *

Kim felt her phone vibrating in her hand.

People walked all around her busily, her parents arguing with a flight attendant over the price of a ticket. The terminal was a hive of activity.

Kim stared dully down at her mobile.

She didn’t need to open it to know what it was going to say. She didn’t need the proof. When John had nodded at her before breaking away, running for his car, she had seen the look in his eyes.
Very slowly, Kim looked down at her phone and pressed the middle button on it, and the message opened after a brief moment.

There were only five words. With every word of the small text message, more tears began to run freely down Kim’s face. The phone slowly slipped from her numb fingers, the sound of it clattering to the ground lost in the sound all around her.

*I just changed my mind.*
Familiar Strangers

Kierra-Jay Power

It’s been a month since the accident, but they still remain, to me, strangers. Now familiar strangers, in this confusing world. They always step hesitantly into the room, with pity in their eyes and caution in their steps. There’s always a hurried introduction, and that pause that says they’re waiting for a spark of recognition. It never does come. But they’ve kept coming, these people who claim to know me from my past life. From before the accident.

They always rant on about who they were to me, how much I meant to them and then stutter stories of our supposed interactions from before the accident. There’s still always that same pause, as if they’re waiting for me to suddenly jump up out of my hospital bed and scream “I remember!”

And they always leave with broken hearts and crumpled faces when I don’t.

There are always doctors here, in this white room with me. I’m never alone. Even when they leave, the walls are lined with photos of smiling faces that mean absolutely nothing to me. A picture, supposedly, of my house. But it remains just a pretty house, I have no recollection of ever calling it a home. This isolated, cold hospital room where I’m surrounded by frozen smiles on unfamiliar faces is the only home I’ve ever known.

The doctors says we’re slowly reaching the four-month mark, which is when they would accept that I have permanent memory loss that may never come back. I hope it never comes back. I’ve been learning about the person I was before, with the visitors cramming stories and photo albums down my throat. I can’t say I like this person I supposedly was. I repeated this to the red-haired woman who claimed to be my mother, and she burst into hysterical tears. She kept repeating, “The person you are! Not was! Are!”

Maybe someone ought to tell her that her little baby doesn’t exist anymore. He’s locked inside a stranger’s brain – my brain. And with the fast-approaching four-month mark, these familiar strangers have been invading my space with an unhealthy desperation they apply to their unsuccessful memory-jogging.
But wait, I haven’t told you about her yet.

I was doing a world map puzzle on the floor, the one depicting a football stadium lying forgotten on the floor. She came in without a sound, pausing to knock on the open door. She was pretty, and I suppose around my age. She stood there for a while, just watching, something they never bothered to do. They always seemed to have the urge to interfere in what I am doing, to fight over a place in my life. She just stood there.

I couldn’t find the piece I needed, a part of Japan, and ran my fingers through the puzzle pieces, trying to find the elusive oriental-printed cardboard. She stepped forward, finally, and though curious, I didn’t look up. She leant down to pick something up off the cold floor, and then held out a piece to me. It was the missing part of Japan. I took it without a word, and instead of a scolding, I received a smile. I looked up, finally, into her pretty eyes.

“I’m Samantha.”

And it was the shortest, least confusing introduction I had received yet. I was thankful to her for that.

She came back every day after, for maybe an hour. She always reintroduced herself, like they often forgot to. We didn’t do much talking. When we did, our conversations were lengthy ones, about books or paintings. They were topics that never related to me and my past life. I liked her for that.

There was never any pressure from her to remember things. But, somehow I had this feeling that though she acted like we were strangers; she had to have been at least an acquaintance in my past life. There was a feeling of déjà vu that had nothing to do with her constant visits. Why would she visit a stranger?

I was finally allowed access to the internet on the hospital’s computer. I typed in my name from my previous life, and read the many articles that loaded slowly onto the page.

JOCK LOSES MEMORY IN DRUNKEN CAR CRASH

Jock? I only needed one stereotypical word stamped across my life, it seemed. And drunken? There had been no mention to me of influences
like alcohol affecting either side’s driving. But this article, a lengthy one from the first page that continued onto the third, stated that the jock in question was under the influence, though it was the other party who caused the crash. That smelled like a bribed misinterpretation, to me.

Everyone who walked through my hospital room’s doors, I realised, after I had read that article, was trying to put me into a box in their head that would describe my behaviour. To the doctors, I was a stubborn patient. To my parents, I was simply confused. To my ‘friends’ it was karma. But to her…

I seemed to be just me, when we spoke. There were no predetermined lines drawn across the floor. She expected nothing from me. I loved her for that.

One day the woman who called herself my mother saw her as she was leaving the building.

“Oh, baby,” she snivelled in a shrill tone that people normally reserved for toddlers, “was she here? Oh, that horrible girl! I could wring her slimy neck!”

I was curious. So I had known her from my past life. For once, I was grateful that this disgusting woman had a tendency to rant and rave.

“She has no business being in my boy’s room! After all that she did…” she sniffed, reaching her arms out as if expecting a comforting hug. She looked tearfully put out when I remained in my chair.

“You always used to say how much of a b-witch she was, you know, honey?” that goddamn pause, “You said she looked smart, but probably slept with her professors to get her perfect grades.”

The repulsive lump in front of me sneered, clicking together her fake red nails. She scurried off like the rodent she was to go report ‘that horrible girl’s’ visit to security.

She didn’t come back the next day.

I cracked, finally, after waiting for three hours with an uncompleted puzzle for her. I reluctantly addressed the doctor.
“Where is she?” he glanced at his watch, then the door, and seemed to realise who I was talking about.

“That girl? Your mother,” I resisted the urge to grimace, “had her escorted out by security. She seemed to be under the impression that she was distressing you.”

This doctor was smart. He could see what a monster that red-haired woman was.

“She said she didn’t want her to be around you…”

His next words shattered everything, glued it back together, and sealed me back into the world with a purpose. In the time it took the doctor to say those words, I had decided.

I stepped out of my room for the first time, and the doctor didn’t stop me. He watched with a knowing glint in his eyes. Sometimes I think that doctor may have been my guardian angel.

I walked out. And, there, on a bench in the hospital’s outdoor park, was her.

“Samantha,” I breathed. She looked up and smiled, a clichéd twinkle in her eyes. This girl who had changed my life, and made me who I was today. The person I want to be. Me.

“…after all, she was the driver who caused your crash.”
First Sign of Madness

Kierra-Jay Power

They say that talking to yourself is the first sign of madness. So, when co-workers started dropping hints containing their worry over my mental stability in the form of the aforementioned phrase, I was a little offended. I mean, really, I don’t talk to myself. The people I talk to are just invisible.

Ok, so they’re actually dead, but I try to be sensitive about it. Shouting ‘I see dead people’ is just rude and thoughtless. I mean, dead people have feelings too.

At least, that’s what Marty told me when we first met. He used to be the owner of the restaurant I work in, before the loan sharks gave him a friendly warning by dunking his head in boiling vegetable oil and fat. The problem had been that Marty was incredibly allergic to nuts, which the pot had unfortunately contained. “Croaked it right there,” he’d pointed to a spot by the oven with a nonchalant shrug, “my face covered in burns and swellin’ up like a greasy balloon.”

And despite Marty’s casual references to his untimely (“Not really,” he’d said, “the cigarettes or the liver probably would’ve done me in early anyway.”) demise, apparently “other folks aren’t quite as accepting.”

Which I had learnt the hard way, after asking an old woman’s ghost on the subway how she’d passed away. The poor woman had burst into tears, and Marty had later consoled me by saying that she was “probably a freshie.”

But it was sometimes so frustrating, being followed around by conversation-deprived ghosts. They tended to pick very unfortunate times to try to give me messages for their loved ones. And, after having the door slammed in my face while trying to explain to one grieving widow why her husband had left her, I’d stopped delivering such messages. They often got a little too messy, too hard to explain.

And then there were the hordes of ghosts trying to use me as a confessional booth, or psychiatrist, which often left me needing one myself. I had mused over hiring a shrink to talk all this out, but after one failed session that ended with a phone call to St John’s psychiatric facility,
I dismissed that idea. Despite what some ‘believers’ may say, few really believe in the dead until they’ve seen a ghost themselves.

The ability to talk to ghosts, inevitably, did come hand-in-hand with some serious mental issues and inner turmoil. It was one morning, where I was contemplating several of the more gruesome stories and deaths I had encountered, that I bumped into the solution to my psychological chaos.

Once we got through the tedious “yes, I can see you’s” and “you do realize I’m dead’s” and the ever popular “so, do you talk to ghosts often?”, he introduced himself as Ben Foray.

He listened quietly while I spilled my entire life story. Starting with the moment I realized that other people couldn’t see the nice man in the house next door, burnt beyond repair from the fire that had killed its sole inhabitant, to the decision I had reached only moments ago, when I realized that maybe I did need to see a shrink. It would have to be someone who believed in the dead, in ghosts. Maybe someone with… personal experience in the matter.

Dr Ben Foray, dead psychiatrist, agreed.