This publication is a collection of poems, short stories, essays and performance scripts written by the finalists and winners of the 2012 Northern Territory Literary Awards.
Northern Territory Literary Awards 2012

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

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

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

Entry Forms are available from the Northern Territory Library and ONLINE at www.ntl.nt.gov.au
Northern Territory Literary Awards 2012

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Due to copyright restrictions, scripts and screenplays cannot be included in this publication.
A pig hurtles through the bush. Dogs rush after it. Behind them runs a man. He carries no gun. Just a knife. He’s calling after the dogs by name, urging them on. He feels as if he’s running up at the front there, with them. They’re connected somehow. Man and dogs, one pack. The pig is tiring. Dogs descend. The pig puts up a fight and tears open the flank of the youngest dog, but the older ones still bring it down, holding on to ear and cheek and shoulder. The man gets there at last. He is swift with the knife and plunges deep. Blood spurts up onto his chest, his face. The sun hears a roar of victory.

Back home, the man chains his wounded dog to a verandah post and stitches its wounds. The others cool down under the outdoor shower. He watches them, cold beer in hand, thinking on the one that’s missing – dropped dead with heat exhaustion. There are days he thinks he’ll do the same. Still, he wouldn’t hunt any other way than being in there with the dogs. There’s a thrill with the knife that can’t be had with a shotgun. He drains the beer and flings the bottle over the verandah to a pile of empty stubbies. It breaks at the neck.

A fair way from the house the man strings up his pig from a tree branch. Four old pig heads dangle next to it, still swarming with flies. They stink. The dogs hang around, expectant. He works deftly with the knife, peeling back skin, freeing entrails, slicing muscle. He is about to throw a hock to the dogs when he sees something flit through the trees. He waits and watches, knife in hand. The dogs raise their heads.

There it is again. A little boy in a red shirt.

The man calls out. No answer. He returns to the pig. The dogs scrabble over another hock. This time the boy dares to come closer, darting out from behind trees, scampering into long grass. Again the man calls. Silence. He walks into the tall grass.

No one is there. Above him, whistling kites circle through smoky air, waiting for creatures to flee a slow fire snaking through bush not far off.

The man goes back to his pig. He’s distracted now, and not by the crackle of flames. The boy has pulled a string of unravelling images after him – blurred pictures, voices, running feet, faces.

A hand, his own hand, strikes a jaw. Maria. Kids yell, scream, run for the gate.
They’ll take themselves home from this birthday party. But that one little boy, the little boy who has nowhere to go because this is his home, he says very, very softly, ‘Pig!’

There is a whirl of chaos punched through with screams. He sees the terrified face of the now silent child who is running. Maria can’t see out of one eye, but she’s crying, shrieking and following the chase anyway. He’s going after the fleeing child with a mattock. But it’s the belt he’ll use in the end. Whip on flesh, a crackle through the air.

Later he stands in shadows outside the child’s room, peering through open louvres. Red weals from the belt shine across the boy’s skin. Maria’s face is a mess.

She approaches the window. He steps back. Along one louvre she lights a row of tea-light candles. The small flames are eager, ready to crack glass.

He goes and lies down on the bed to wait for her. But this time she does not come to him.

In the dark before dawn he hears her creep down the hallway, out onto the verandah, down the steps. Through the louvres he watches her split shadow walk out his gate, the head of the child lolling in the crook of her arm.

Blood from the dead pig drips onto the man’s shoulders. He’s drenched in sweat, crouched low, cutting lines in the earth and thinking of the boy. He feels watched, uneasy. The dogs are restless. Above him the rotting pig heads sway, eyes agleam with flies. A strange warmth tingles along his spine. He uncurls and heads back to the house, leaving the carcass to the dark.

Into the kitchen he lumbers, flinging the knife across the table. It spins to a halt by the wall. He grabs a beer. Squinting at him from a photo on the side of the fridge is a dead boar, mouth jammed open. Beside it a little boy stares out of a small snapshot. His eyes are dark, his lips twisting as if trying to speak. The man tears the photo free. The boy’s mouth whispers, contorts with effort.

‘Pig!’ he spits out at last, and is crushed between the man’s fingers.

That night the man lies in the dark, listening to a fire creeping along the ground not far off, vaporising tall grass in its wake. He is exhausted, more so than usual. Strange heart palpitations rattle under his chest. His jaw aches, and behind his eyes a pain pulses. The doctor picked it, warned him to slow down and use a shotgun, or give it up. As if to drown the idea he collapses into snores, and finds himself somewhere else.
He hears it before he sees it – a large boar moving through the pandanus, come to sniff around the waterhole. The man tries to conceal himself. Everywhere are the pig’s hoofprints, sunk into mud. The hog pauses, snout testing the air. Only then does the man realise he has no knife, no shotgun. He does not move or breathe. But the pig is onto him. In a couple of seconds he is discovered. For a moment they stare at each other, man and pig. And then the boar charges. There is no time to run, and nowhere to go. In seconds those tusks will take him, skin him alive, face and all.

With a loud gasp the man sits up, fingers groping for the lamp. The globe flickers and buzzes awake. Gradually the room takes shape with familiar debris from years of uncleared living. On sweat soaked sheets he lies awake, watching the ceiling fan spin.

The strange vision of the boy earlier in the day troubles him. He didn’t get a good enough look at the child’s face. But those spindly legs, the tangle of hair, a fleeting grin – it could be Maria’s boy, waiting out there. Then again, surely the kid is bigger now. It’s hard to keep track of time.

He’d always found the boy unnerving, the son of Maria, not his own.

‘He’s just a kid,’ Maria used to say. ‘You were like that once.’

He can’t remember. His childhood is a blur to him now. Only one or two memories hold, like his father taking him to the hay shredder and throwing in a pup so he could watch the hay turn red; or the first time he shot a shrieking feral dog caught in one of the traps. And the night he came home with a tattoo.

‘What the fuck is that?’ his father snarls, pointing at the offending arm with a fork.

His mother tries to speak, but the words are smacked from her mouth. His father is standing over him, kicking the chair from under him, dragging him by the hair to the kitchen, holding him down against the sink to scrub his arm with the pot scourer.

His mother’s voice is shrill, pleading. But the great weight against him will not move; and the merciless scouring will not ease. His own cries have abandoned him. He is broken, pinned, nailed to the floor. Extinguished.

When he wakes all he hears is water dripping from the kitchen tap into a sink of waiting dishes. His mother’s crumpled body lies close to him. Between them is the pot scourer, its mangled, metal wires enmeshed with his own skin and tiny remnants of roast lamb.
The marred tattoo stings the man awake. He staggers out of bed, still disoriented. He often has bad dreams at this time of year. It’s the smoke from constant burn-offs in the bush that do it to him. He gets out of bed and goes to sit on the verandah steps.

Still his thoughts won’t leave him. After a while he heads for the ute. The dogs follow. Rattling along the dusty road, he half-expects to see the boy by the roadside.

But when the shadow emerging out of the dust swirling around the car is a sow and piglet. He swerves the vehicle and skids onto the side of the road. The pigs trot off into an abandoned mango orchard. The man pauses, engine running. Something about the arrogant ease of the sow irks him. The dogs are wild in their cage on the back of the ute, but he won’t let them loose. He’ll do it on his own this time, take the shotgun and the knife, creep up on her under the old trees.

One shot and the sow falls with a great commotion of squealing and grunting.

The piglet runs crazy around her, and he takes a shot at her too. She drops, shrieking and writhing somewhere in the grass and fallen mangoes.

Fuck the doctor, he thinks, and returns the rifle to the ute. There’s only one thing to do with a pig. Knife in hand he stalks his way into the orchard, rotten fruit squelching underfoot. The sow is still alive, eyes pleading, mouth spewing froth, back leg in a spasm.

‘Dumb fuck!’ He spits, and kicks her in the head.

It reminds him of Maria, cowering there on the floor amidst fallen balloons.

His boot is on her neck when the child floats in, party hat askew. He shifts his foot.

The boy slinks past. A balloon pops beside the mother, and she jumps.

When the man comes to some time later, his clothes are wet and warm with blood.

The boar’s body is dismembered across red-wet grass and the sweet orange flesh of split mangoes. Not far from him the piglet is still thrashing around. He grabs it by one leg, staggers to the ute, and throws it into the cage. There is a high-pitched squeal as dogs tangle for leg and snout and bone.

Back home under the outdoor shower, the man watches water and blood flow away. He sees the face of Maria, blood and water. He sees the shaking hand of a child.
Blood and water. One of his teeth is irritating him and he searches his gums with his finger. It comes away without so much as pulling it. He stares at it for a moment, tongue testing the new gap. It’s the second tooth he’s lost this week.

Above him a blue fluoro light zaps insects. Under its strange beam the skin on his arm has an unfamiliar hue, and the hair on his arms looks alive. His face is madly itching with stubble. It’s so thick he’ll have to shave with a knife, he thinks to himself with a grin.

It’s almost noon the next day when the man wakes up, though he doesn’t feel any more rested. He snorts his nasal passages clear and staggers to the bathroom. In the mirror he sees an aged shadow of himself. His skin seems darker, as well as the stubble on his face. There is a soft, dark down growing all over his cheeks these days, and along his shoulders. He opens his mouth to look at his gums. They seem swollen, gleaming with yellow-white jawbone behind thin pink gums.

Outside the open window his dogs pace and pant, growl and sniff. It sets him on edge and he roars at them to shut up. A cockroach tries to scuttle past his foot. Under his bare heel he crushes it, and glances in the mirror again.

God! What was that?

He could have sworn he saw a face pass before him in the mirror – a face like his but darker, hairier, and with – with tusks.

But when he looks again the ghost is gone, and all he sees is his own reflection, with its sunken eyes and cracked lips. That pig in the mirror, he tells himself, it was a dream. A weird, unexpected trip. He picks up the knife resting across the basin and picks at a mole on his shoulder. Age, drink, drugs. They get you in the end.

It’s dark when the man stirs, licked awake by the youngest dog. He doesn’t remember collapsing onto this sagging old sofa on the verandah. He’s even covered himself with a threadbare blanket, which the dog is pulling. He lurches to swipe the dog’s ear when it suddenly stops, drops the blanket and stares at the man’s feet, leaning forward to sniff around them without touching. The man follows the dog’s snout. Shadows focus.

The room spins. Peeking out from under the blanket is a pair of cloven hooves.

Before a full-length, cracked mirror the man totters to consider himself. He is in a dream, he is sure now. There can be no mistake. He is staring at the face of the man he saw in the mirror earlier in the day. Two long curved teeth have cut through a slit in the gums to protrude over his lips, leaving his mouth a sorry sight of
congealing blood. His nostrils are wet, enlarged, quivering. The down on his face and shoulders has thickened, and spread across his skin. His skin that is no longer white, but dark, unknown to him. Even his eyes, those dark, bewildered currants staring back at him alarmed, are now edged with obscenely long eyelashes.

‘It is the mirror,’ he whispers to himself.

He knows how to fix it.

With one blow the mattock shatters the mirror and splits the dresser.

Mattock still in hand, the man scuttles out to the verandah and stumbles down the steps, tripping over a dog so it drops the pig hock it was chewing. In a flash the dog leaps at the man’s face. The man roars, dabbing at his nose. The dog pauses, unsure.

At that moment a kite whistles above. The dog rushes for the pig hock, but the bird is too quick. It has already swooped and is rising upwards, hock in its talons. The dog jumps, wildly trying to grab the bone back.

The sound of vibrating wings fills the man’s ears. When he glances back to the verandah, he sees the shadow of a woman. It is Maria, wringing her hands and imploring the dusk,

‘I just want someone to love me, you know.’

The smash of a fist against flesh. Against a wall. A hairline crack slithers up the plaster. Maria’s eye-tooth cuts through her cheek. And the little boy rushes at him, shrieking,

‘You’re a pig!’

It is early morning, before light, and pouring with unseasonal rain. In the distance a stone-curlew wails. The man hurries out to wind up the ute’s windows. But he can’t get hold of the door handle. He feels giddy, out of breath. In the side mirror of the vehicle he sees a vision pass. A man with tusks. He pauses. Holds up one hand to the mirror. His fingers are congealed together, as if with glue. The skin is a dark blackbrown, the fingernails blue-black, as if every one has been crushed under a stone.

When he lifts his other hand to a mirror he sees nothing recognisable at all, a clump fist covered in some kind of shell. The vision fades, but he feels light-headed, faint.

Scuttling back towards the house, he is met by two of the dogs. They growl, suspicious, and will not let him pass. He loses patience, yells at them. Yells again.
But they will not back off. And his voice is cracking, hoarse, losing its strength. The dogs are barking now, calling the rest of the pack. Quickly they encircle him. It is a bad joke. Another foul dream. His voice is lost on them, lost to himself.

Their eyes are full of a menace he has never seen before. They are snapping at his heels, sniffing at his thighs. Around him fangs gleam, teeth snap the air.

He rushes for the fence.

In seconds the dogs are pulling him from the high cyclone wire he put up to keep the dingoes out. Fangs pierce his flank; dig in to rip open his calves. But he manages to hold on. They keep leaping for him as he scales the fence. His body tumbles heavily to the ground on the other side and he clambers away into the bush.

The dogs leap wild against the wire, start digging under.

The man runs. He runs with a fear that overtakes him and ignores the tear in his side, the damage to his legs. But something in him tells him not to keep running upright.

He drops to all fours. And so he goes, a fast-paced phantom – half-man, half-pig – running for his life. Hoarse breath flushes from his great, fleshy nostrils. Now and then he glimpses a flash of tusk. His hooves pound the earth, skid in dirt, brave hot, blackened ground from last night’s fire.

Not far off the dogs are baying and barking, fast approaching. He charges through the bush with all his might, but they are closing in. They are closing in. The tall grass has all gone and there is nowhere to hide. They are just behind him now, tongues lolling, fangs eager, saliva foaming and spitting off into the air.

Teeth sink into his ear. Fangs latch onto his face. Claws grip onto his shoulders. His great body thuds to the ground.

This time they will not wait for the man with the knife.

The dogs set in.

And take the pig apart.
The Airport Lodge

Stephen Francis

We are incarcerated in close proximity to Darwin airport but the roar of the jets doesn’t keep any of us awake. We are used to it, and to us it is no more of an inconvenience than the whirring of the cheap air conditioners, which the government has installed to keep us cool. My thoughts are unclear as to whether the scream of these beasts reminds me of a force sent to liberate us, or of innocent victims killed at weddings, at birthday parties or simple family gatherings.

Collateral damage is the word commonly used to describe the death of innocent civilians in air raids. It is interesting to use such an austere and military expression to describe dead infants, killed by 500 pound bombs dropped on their compound. A simple wicker cot offers no protection against the blast and sometimes the remains cannot be found. The infant is vaporized and categorized by the faceless spokesman as collateral damage. There can be no comfort for a parent who must bury a child, but can there be a pain worse then having no remains to bury? Collateral damage, no comfort.

I believe I have felt a pain that must compare to the pain a parent feels from the loss of a child. I have had the cordite covered fingers of a militia man pull my eyelids open to ensure that I witnessed his accomplices deflower my daughter against her will. The word rape is used so often in here as a reason for our journey that I rarely use it. It is part of my fellow travellers’ everyday vocabulary, so I use it infrequently. You would think that having one’s eyelids pulled open to witness this act of despicable brutality would mean a lifetime of haunted sleeps; yet the human mind is such a complex thing that it is the sounds of that night that haunt me rather than the sights. The sounds have never left me. The swift unbuckling of the militiaman’s belt, the laughter, the breathlessness, every scream, every whimper and every grunt still ring in my ears. Not even the roar of the jets can drown them out and though my eyes filled up with tears that mercifully blinded me, my ears heard everything.

The sound of evil lingers long after the sight of it fades from memory. I have shared this pain only once since my arrival here, but there are many similar stories told here every day. Yet still we are informed that we may not be made welcome here, and that we have arrived illegally. I was forced, helpless, to watch my daughter’s life being ruined, her innocence forever shattered by a militiaman’s ruthless and relentless penetration. Yet I myself am now classed as a criminal.
I think my guards would be surprised if they knew how well I speak their language. The guards assume that we are all ill educated but amongst us are professors, teachers, engineers and a number of professional translators who speak many languages. We have learned to play down our level of education as we are viewed with further suspicion if we claim to be from the educated classes. In here it is far better to be viewed as a desperate man with no means, who wishes simply to provide for his family, flee persecution and seek a better life. There are certain criteria that must be met and we prepare our stories carefully to ensure that our applications are viewed as genuine. The focus of our host nation remains on how we came here, rather then why we came here. There is no sympathy, just the matter-of-fact recording of our past agonies on reams of paper by yet another matter-of-fact government worker or a square-jawed policeman with the word ‘Federal’ emblazoned on his uniform.

Although my room is small I do not complain. It is neat, clean and safe from intruders. It is as comfortable a room as I have ever slept in, and although we are confined behind razor wire most of us do not feel like captives when we are in our rooms. The guards refer to our rooms as ‘dongas’ and we have been informed that many men live in similar quarters when working on mines throughout this region. We have at least something in common with the men of this region. We know are incarcerated but we don’t feel trapped when we rest in our dongas, and we have privacy. We value this privacy and although we know we are considered to be criminals, we at least have the dignity of privacy.

I would like to adorn the walls of my donga with pictures of my wife, my son and my daughter but I have no pictures nor do I have anything that can identify me. It is a condition of carriage that all identification documents are thrown overboard. No exceptions are made and it is common knowledge that retaining identifying documents can cause the boat captain to lose his patience. An angry boat captain is to be avoided, as only he can guide his cargo to safety. The truth is, though, that there is no safety. Some make it, some don’t. For days our lives were in the hands of an Indonesian man who placed no value on the safe carriage of our souls. He was no doubt paid handsomely for his services, yet delivering us alive to our destination was not his responsibility. Our tariff of ten thousand US dollars guaranteed us nothing; an expensive fare for an undecided fate, yet we were grateful for our chance to take the final part of our journey.

For many the boat journey was as traumatic as the persecution they were fleeing. I myself had become numb with seasickness and as I willed myself to die I somehow found the strength to live. Is that a cruel irony or a unique survival skill? Only God can answer. Wailing, whispering and whining accompanied every moment of
the voyage as the waves mercilessly undulated beneath our blatantly unseaworthy vessel. Beside me lay a thin Iranian boy who could have been my own son had he not been so emaciated. This child never spoke nor did he seem to sleep. His green eyes stared unblinking at the sky by day and at the stars by night. His eyes were the first to spot the plane circling above us, watching, tracking and calculating. He lifted his thin arm and pointed, and his pointed finger gave us hope, hope that we had been spotted and hope that we would now be found and brought to the island.

Half a day after the green-eyed Iranian boy pointed silently to the sky we saw a sleek-looking boat sailing towards us. The Indonesian captain killed the engine and we were finally spared the sickening fumes seeping from below deck that had poisoned us for days. The nameless Pakistan to whom we paid half our money in Malaysia promised us that we would be spotted from the sky and then met by the Navy. He explained how a boarding party would search and secure our vessel and would then be towed to an island named Christmas Island. I know from my studies that the words ‘Party’ and ‘Christmas’ are two words English speakers associate with happy times in their lives, and for us it was no different. Boarding party and Christmas Island. Happier times. How wrong we were. I have read the story of Christmas that Christians celebrate with such wonderful fervour. When fleeing from persecution, Mary and Joseph were denied refuge three times until pity was taken on them. So there it is, an unmentioned irony. The story of Christmas is one of a family fleeing persecution, seeking refuge and now those of us doing the same are taken to an island named Christmas.

I once overheard a guard on the island say that ‘birds of a feather flock together’ and I realize that he was describing the human propensity to stick with one’s own race, tribe or clan. I rarely mixed with other nationalities on the island. There was a language barrier but also a deep suspicion of other races, with each nationality convinced that the other is treated more favourably and receives faster processing of applications. We had all arrived the same way with one common goal yet we were not united – rather we were divided. We risked our lives, left our families and paid every dollar our families had ever saved to escape violence; yet acts of violence were perpetrated daily. We had escaped some of the world’s most punitive regimes in search of a better life yet many chose to protest violently and took to the roof. I stood silently by as I had always done in my life. I knew there was nothing to be gained by standing on a roof holding worn-out bed sheets with poorly spelt slogans scrawled on them.

There was no joy on the island, just endless days of uncertainty. We were well fed, warm and safe yet the pain of departure and separation never eased. It consumed our every waking moment and silently infiltrated our dreams. Well fed, warm and
safe, three things that many of us had craved all our lives and yet it proved to be insufficient for our happiness. Uncertainty is a slow killer. Patience alone cannot overcome the agony of uncertainty. To know one’s fate is to be truly liberated. We got no answers, we were made no promises. The line we heard so often was ‘case-by-case’ basis. We were never ill treated or spoken to unkindly but we were beaten by uncertainty, dehumanized by virtue of a decision that would be made based on facts provided to one of the many matter-of-fact government workers we were interviewed by. I saw no need to embellish my story as my truth is as horrific as any fiction. The swift unbuckling of the militiaman’s belt, the laughter, the breathlessness, every scream, every whimper and every grunt rang in my ears louder on the island then anywhere else.

The day the matter-of-fact government worker informed me that I had reached the next stage I felt an empty sense of elation. I was to be transferred to what she referred to as the mainland although I would remain incarcerated indefinitely. In truth I only heard the word indeterminately. My heart ached for my family as I re-read this word in an effort to ensure my comprehension. The uncertainty would continue, a never-ending wait for my right to exist.

I cannot deny, though, that I was glad to leave the island. I had made no friends in an entire year but had had hundreds of empty conversations with my fellow travellers. My heavy heart had no room for other humans. For one year and one month I was well fed, warm and safe, yet spiritually I was defunct. The search for a better life is one full of despair. As the plane taking me to the mainland rose high above the island I knew that ahead lay more days of uncertainty.

We are incarcerated close to Darwin airport and although the wire is shorter in height then on the island we are not free. The wait continues and there are still no answers, only more questions from those matter-of-fact government workers. The truth is that we are not wanted here, yet our host nation must be seen to treat us humanely. This is the burden a civilized nation must bear. I have heard stories that life in this nation is not easy for many of my countrymen who have been lucky enough to be granted the prized ticket to a free life, but I am not daunted. I will make the most of my opportunity when it comes and then my family will join me.

I am not wanted here but I will make my life here. I have committed no crime but I will always be punished by the swift unbuckling of the militiaman’s belt, the laughter, the breathlessness, every scream, every whimper and every grunt forever ringing in my ears.
The Surgeon

Bruce Hocking

The name in the headline catches my attention but loses it a moment later when a child screams.

My son has bombed too close to a friend. I lower the newspaper and look into a checkerboard of faces bobbing in the waterhole. Behind them a sheer rusty cliff stretches skyward and a ribbon of a waterfall slaloms down its face.

‘Please James. Be careful. You don’t want to hurt anybody, do you?’

Nobody pays any attention. They are too busy shouting for more.

I turn back to the paper. It is not the first time I have seen Maximillian Haas’s name on the front page of the Territory Times. For a surgeon he has a habit of attracting more than the usual publicity. Even when we worked together in a southern city emergency department many years ago he liked to be at the centre of the action. I read the article below the headline and an ember that for years has glowed in my memory bursts into flame once more.

I was an intern, bottom of the medical food chain and Max, my senior registrar stood several rungs above me, but please do not think I am offering this hierarchy as an excuse for what I did, or did not do. It was a Saturday night with the usual weekend crush. Everyone was frantic, most shouting for attention and a few rushing to those who needed it. Fear, anger and the antiseptic smell that seeps from the walls of emergency departments everywhere hung in the air like fallout.

A motorbike had been speeding along a city street when a car pulled out from the curb. If the driver had waited a moment longer they would have missed by that moment. The bike had spiralled across the road mauling the young rider as he tried to hang on to his runaway love.

Sometimes when professionals lose their bikes on TV there is a gentle laying down of man and machine and a long smooth slide to the grassy verge or tyre barrier that edges the track. The machine is smashed about but the man stands and walks away. This was not like that. It was messy and brutal.

I was the first to examine David. I skimmed the information on his chart. Although a student at the local university, he seemed unusually conservative. He lived at home with his parents and his black hair was unfashionably short. His once
white shirt and tan slacks were shredded, bloody and ingrained with bitumen but hardly a hair was out of place. David was conscious but quiet, his body awash with endorphins that tranquillised his mind and eased the pain. In a day or two he would dissolve into uncontrollable agony. His dark eyes, made black by the empty colour of his skin, watched each movement as I poked and prodded him. He felt cool and clammy to the touch. Beads of sweat lined his shaven upper lip. As my hands calculated the extent of his injuries he kept asking me what was wrong. Lots of bruises and lacerations and probably a couple of fractured ribs judging by the grimace on his face when I prodded him there, but nothing major to see until I cut away his slacks to fully expose his legs. His right thigh was swollen, skin the colour of eggplant and stretched as tight as a pregnant belly. He had bled heavily into this leg and the galloping beeps from his pulse monitor warned me it was still happening.

“We’d better get some blood into you straight away,” I said, lightly brushing his thigh.

David lurched, trying to sit up but not from the effects of my touch. He fell back onto the bed and his eyes flashed like an ambulance on an emergency.

“No! I can’t doc. I can’t have blood. I’m Jehovah’s Witness. Fluids are fine, but … but please … no blood.”

I felt my brow grimace.

“You have to David. IV fluids won’t be enough. Blood is what you need.”

“I can’t,” quieter now. “My father will …”

He turned away and the words slewed in that direction.

“You have to realise what sort of trouble you’re in mate. You’re losing too much blood into that leg. Much more and … well, you’ve just got to have a transfusion. Please David.”

He went quiet.

I wanted to argue some more but I felt my own chill as the number blinking on his pulse monitor kept getting larger. I thought of this young man bleeding to death right in front of me while I harangued him. I turned to the nurse who was busy cleaning his wounds.

“Quick. Call Max will you”
I paced as I waited. I kept looking at the various faces of the monitor that blipped and traced out David’s vitals. Green fluorescent waves like an accordion were squeezed too close together. Still, waves were much better than a straight line. David kept his eyes on me, looking for a sign. Clear fluid ran hopefully down two plastic tubes into his arms. I rested my hands on his bare feet. Much colder on the right. He needed surgery straight away and I was no surgeon.

No hero either. I turned again and spotted Max striding down the corridor and I let go a breath I didn’t know I was holding on to.

Max was a big man. His fingers were like small cucumbers, not what you would expect of someone who wielded a scalpel so precisely. Trained in the south, he remained a son of the north, a character shaped by a land whose ruthless extremes of desert and flood taught him to cope in any situation. The land grew him up as a trauma surgeon, tall, strong and fearless.

Ironically, the same land had grown me up too. Beige, bony and barely visible.

“What have we got here?”

His voice was reassuring, like a mother’s tending her sick child. Everything will be just fine. I am here now. I felt my body loosen but wondered why he never addressed me by name.

“Probably a fractured right femur, Max. Swollen thigh, blood pressure low, pulse high. I can’t feel a pulse in his right foot. My guess is he has damaged his femoral artery and it’s bleeding heavily into his leg. He needs urgent surgery. And he needs blood stat.”

I sounded like an accountant adding up numbers.

“So, where is it, the blood?”

Max’s eyes were made huge by thick glasses, yet he peered as if trying to find me. Perhaps looking from his side I seemed tiny.

“Umm. He’s Jehovah’s Witness Max. His … err … religion won’t let him. He has refused several times already.”

David was staring directly at Max now and a faint smile crease the surgeon’s usually granite face.

“You’re kidding me,” Max said to me. Turning to David, “Hey boy, you wanna DIE?”
I swear I could hear the word ‘die’ bounce around the walls of the room for a minute or more. It silenced the chorus of groans, complaints and demands. Faces everywhere turned towards us. Bustling nurses stopped dead in their tracks. A drunk vomiting on the grey tiled floor dropped to his knees as if ducking a bullet.

David closed his eyes.

“You hearing me boy?” Softer now but still threatening. “I said, do you want to … die?”

He placed one hand gently on the young man’s livid thigh and stared into the monitor.

David’s head seemed to sink deeper into the white pillow. It moved, left and right. No.

“Well have the blood and let’s get you into theatre so we can fix your leg. What d’ya say?”

David shook his head more vigorously now.

“No, no blood. I am Jehovah’s Witness like he said,” pointing at me. “I have a card that says what I can have.”

He looked from one side to the other in search of his wallet. I noticed a tear begin to slip down one cheek. I’m sure Max saw it too and he leaned in closer.

“I know what you think you can have boy, and I promise you it will not save your life. Blood will save your life. I will save your life. Your religion won’t.”

Max’s voice grew quieter and more menacing with each tear the boy shed.

“No, no blood. Can’t we wait for my father? He won’t be much longer.”

I watched them glare at each other.

“Time is not your friend right now boy. You haven’t got much of it left. You had better decide all by yourself and quickly.”

Max stood up straight and waited. Nothing. So he turned to a nurse.

“I am going to wheel this young man into that storage room down there.” He pointed the way. “We are going inside. Just the two of us, and you will stand at the door and see that we are not disturbed. Understand?”
She was small and pretty, harried strands of blonde tied up hair streamed down the sides of her face. She was looking straight into Max’s chest as she nodded and stood aside. Max unlocked the wheels of the barouche with a flick of his foot and pulled it out into the corridor. He turned towards the storeroom. The nurse scampered in front. She closed the door after them and stood guard as if her life depended on it.

Standing alone in the now empty cubicle and enclosed on three sides by plain grey curtains, I tried to imagine what Max was saying behind the closed doors. Of course I wanted David to have the blood too, but there seemed to be more at stake than that and I could not quite grasp what it was. A nagging thought just out of reach of any words to describe it. I knew that in David’s place, I would never have made it to the storeroom. I would have capitulated at Max’s opening spray, but David had resisted. He seemed to be driven by some sort of conviction, something strong enough that he might even lay down his life for it. I felt bland in comparison.

It was only a few minutes and the storeroom door opened again. Max pushed the barouche back towards me. David had his face buried in a pillow.

“Get that blood down here now!” Max bellowed at me. I turned, and to my complete surprise, my heart sank.

The surgery went well and afterwards when I went into recovery to check on David I saw a man sitting there, his elbows resting on David’s bed. He had clasped one of his son’s hands between his own and he had drawn it up to his face. David was sleeping. The man stood and turned when he sensed my presence. He was tall and lean, a similar build to his son. He had a sliver of short grey hair skirting a bald head, a pencil thin moustache and frameless glasses. He wore a dark pressed suit and grey tie. Tears filled his eyes and he kept hold of his son’s hand. I told him I would come back later.

I re-focus on the newspaper and read the story again. A Porsche 911. It would have been flying.

He loved that car. I remember Max buying it when he was accepted into the College of Surgeons, his training finally done.

“It’s a fuckin’ beauty,” he had said to me. “Just think, my father was a refugee running from Hitler’s madness, a stranger in this country. He had nothing and wanted me to have the best of everything. So I reckon this is for both of us.”

Soon after he had returned to the Territory. He loved that there were no speed limits up here. Behind the words on the newspaper I saw the scene unfold. Brilliant
sunshine search lighting through cotton wool clouds and sparkling off the polished black duco. AC/DC’s ‘Fly on the Wall’ album cranked up hard. Everything in that car at full throttle. Hugging comers. Car and road rubbing bellies. Until a sharp bend and halfway through it and just a few metres ahead, a line of Brahmans strung, head to tail across the road like circus elephants, their eyes bulging.

I settle back into the imperfect contour of my memories. When David had finally walked out of the hospital I watched him go. He smiled at me, happy to be leaving, but it looked like he was missing something, something he had come in with. Whatever it was, I knew Max had taken it away from him and I had watched him do it. I hoped he could find a way to retrieve it because it seemed crucial to him. I wanted something like that too.

Max and I gradually lost contact. We went to different hospitals pursuing our careers and our paths never crossed again.

I have often wondered if that incident with David left a mark in Max. Like all of us, he had sworn to act in the best interests of his patients, not necessarily to keep them alive at any cost. I am sure that according to one version of that oath, he had done everything asked of him that day. He had saved a life. But I wonder if something kept nagging at the back of his mind like it did in me. I have asked myself dozens of times whether I watched in silence that day as Max took a life. He left the patient breathing of course but did he take something that David might not have been able to fully live without? Were the cranked up music, the fast car and a race along an inadequate country road an antidote for a ghost who kept pointing a finger at him?

Suddenly squeals ricochet off the cliffs. My eyes snap open. The boys in the waterhole are jumping up and down and starting to scatter like a spooked school of fish. My son is not among them. Some are pointing behind me and I whip around and see James running flat out, his legs pumping, his feet skimming the cut grass. He looks like a torpedo, eyes locked on the waterhole. He’s on track to detonate a titanic bomb in the middle of his friends. Suddenly I am out of the chair and on my feet. In one seamless movement, I bound a couple of steps, bend and with one arm, I scoop my son up and onto my chest. It is smooth, like ballet and I hold him tight and whisper into his ear as he grips me around my neck, his legs still running.

“No you don’t. Not on my watch.”
Suction

Shannon T. Holopaine

Now turbulence stutters many hearts whose way is to think the worst. An airplane dips, the seatbelt lights flicker on. Hostesses, formerly the measure of elegance, navigate aisles crudely, sometimes spilling free from their mannequin smiles and spilling coffee pots in turn. Their long legs, upon which any fall is further than from limbs more regularly set, begin to mimic the walk of orb-spiders stung by wasps. If the turbulence is terribly unstable these orb-spiders eventually find their seats, fold their slender legs across one another and sit inanimate with the other passengers. The passengers in turn close their eyes and hope the stillness they obtain in their seats will not only counter the aircraft’s sudden tilts and minor falls but, impersonating the meditation of a Buddhist, disregard the thoughts that fret at death. This, however, succeeds only for those with a healthy supply of Diazepam, most of whom are well asleep before the turbulence starts, whilst the less pharmaceutically fortunate may be seen, of a sudden, to raise a hand, fiddle with a button or a pocket, bring a kerchief to a clammy brow; or else open a pair of dilated eyes to furtively peer about the cabin and, hoping to discover, to their relief, that the seatbelt lights are off, the turbulence officially over, find the little lights, to their dismay, still too well illuminated.

But of course not all do think the worst, and like the hostess who continues awkwardly working through the mundane bout of turbulence, such passengers, often well travelled, continue with their newspapers, books and in-flight films, forgetting they are tens of thousands of feet above the Earth with nothing between them and the gravity compacted globe except for the plane that bears them, a low flying flock of gulls and a passing electrical storm.

Tom Burgess was a burly man. Not in the manner of being particularly big, or muscular for that matter, but in the way that men, being men, often can be burly. Tom, it must be said, was an Australian. And in Australia, be it due to the country’s odd fascination with ball sports, with big brewery beer or, where the two most regularly combine, with staring into a television set, the Australian male often cuts a particularly burly figure of which Tom was anatomically prudent enough to not substantially deviate, despite not being an avid sports fan. His genes were also nationalistic enough to bestow upon his skin a permanent reddish tinge, to his eyes a pale blueness and to his scalp an auburn mop of hair that bleached in the summer sun. His nose however, what with its high, narrow bridge and rather pointed tip, jutting slightly left due to a certain nightclub incident, was somewhat
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too Germanic to pass for a staple Australian nose. His best mate Phil McGregor, long before becoming Tom’s best mate, late in primary school had often heckled Tom for being a “bloody wog” or a “Kraut” thanks to this nose, even though Tom’s ancestors were wholly English and Irish just like Phil’s, although not of similar convict stock. Of course, back then, anyone who looked somewhat different incurred a racial slur, although times, we are told, have apparently changed. Today, just as then, whenever overly agitated or dissonantly strummed by nerves, the end of Tom’s Germanic nose would subtly twitch, a condition that only worsened Phil’s schoolyard jests, landing Tom, for a time, the culturally ingenious nickname weaselwog. But that was long ago and now, would you believe it, Phil was getting married to a woman Tom had never met and Tom was due to be Phil’s best man.

Having studied International Business for two years, Tom had quit, in his own terms, in preference for real-world action, namely to work in an outbound call centre where – cold calling unwitting customers who were often in the middle of a well-earned meal, were hard at hearing or else spoke very little English – he would inure into their confusion the dire, in fact existential necessity of having an in-home demonstration of the cleaning power of the Laxs Vacuum Cleaning System. Tom, fortunately or unfortunately, had never seen a Laxs vacuum in the corporeal, which his managers deemed superfluous to his role as an appointment setter. After all, every worker was given an image and detailed description of the Laxs Vacuum Cleaning System – its main selling points included – during training, and this was all the information a committed appointment setter really required.

Although Tom had never won the monthly $100 K-Mart voucher for setting the most appointments, he never fell beneath his Key Performance Indicators and he even had vague hopes of one day becoming a team leader: team leaders earned an extra seventy-three cents per hour under the company EBA. Of course, just like every other call centre, Tom’s workplace was unique and not like other call centres. For this institution’s managers, team leaders and CSRs resembled a family rather than a collection of jetsam selling vacuum cleaner appointments, amongst other services the centre sold; where the well-being of the staff and the customers always went before the interests of profit. At least this is what the printed A4 placards, pinned to the workplace walls, informed all who happened to accidentally read them. Alongside these apodictic descriptions of Tom’s working environment, eager team leaders would paste motivational phrases, printed on coloured paper for extra virility. And it must be said, during the lulls in cold-called conversation, an occasional glance would come-to having alighted on one of these coloured sheets, shuddering amongst the motivational text, although perhaps not with the appropriately motivated affect.
Long term staff, of whose ranks Tom, again fortunately or unfortunately, could be considered one, rarely spoke about the high initial staff turnover, or the faeces occasionally smeared upon the inside door of the far left male toilet cubicle, a phenomenon that had sporadically plagued the cubicle for a good two years now. The centre floor manager, Megan Josh, a gangly woman with an oily brown perm, pale skin and thin, ever quivering lips that spoke a measuredly enthusiastic bureaucratese, was thought a genius by the team leaders and many of the long term staff, all of whom modelled themselves in some small or large way upon her personality, if not her appearance. It was Megan who, appearing concernedly put-out – this being obligatory to her role as floor manager – finally permitted Tom’s team leader to allow Tom to finish his shift two hours early one Friday so as to make a 4:50pm flight to Launceston for his mate’s wedding the following day.

Tom, as usual, had requested a window seat. For he adored staring out airplane windows, at the asphalt intestines and concrete veins strewn far below and the places, remote from human interests and economy, where these roads no longer sutured the land and where Laxs were useless, superfluous things suited only to rotting in winter rain. He would sometimes imagine finding himself in just such places, living off his wits like Bear Grylls, a post-industrial noble-savage, ever proximate to death if one’s good sense or foresight were to err. He secretly adored the splashless fall of cloud-shadows atop the immense sea. And when the sun set, his spine would tingle with an intimation of the insignificance of human life before him, disclosed amongst the tiny specks of town-light dwarfed by a mockingly uninterested, growing night or the almost imperceptible lamp of an automobile crawling along a distant road, not half as beautiful as the amorous jittering of a firefly yet, being human, thoughtlessly taking for granted an anthropocentric significance amongst the being of things. Even great cities, from a certain height, were being swallowed by the night.

Maybe it’s unfortunate that on this occasion Tom hadn’t received his requested window seat. If he had, when the turbulence struck he very well may have stared transfixed through the doubled window pane, his nerves oscillating gleefully against the approaching ground, contemplating the solitariness of death, a subject his thoughts, although in a manner akin to bumps in the night, were not unfamiliar with during the long hours of call centre work. Whereas Tom normally would have deposited his chin on the window ledge for most of the flight, bereft of a window and ledge, Tom instead took to thinking somewhat more deeply than usual about the prospects of his job, the sea of faceless customers whose lives he daily inured himself into, and the imminent wedding of his friend to a woman he was still to meet. What exact form these thoughts initially took we cannot quite say, although Tom’s nose was several times observed to twitch.
When the turbulence first insinuated itself it was but minor. The kind of turbulence encountered on many a flight, later forgotten about when a meal arrives or a passenger sips a second drink. The seatbelt lights flickered on and the hostesses, devoted to hostess duties, kept working the aisles in their tipsy, spidery way. The captain made his obligatory announcement that all was in order and that the turbulence should very shortly be passed through. Those few passengers who thought the worst shut tight their eyes, pressing stiffened bodies into chairs; and those who refrained from thinking the worst kept on with their newspapers, their movies and little cans of big brewery beer. Tom, for what it’s worth, kept thinking. Thinking, that is, until the plane made a threatening dip of few breathless feet, wherein Tom, re-adjusting as the pilot regained control, craned his head above the top of the seats and stole a look around the cabin. Some of the passengers had made feeble, slavish sounds, riddled with a worry Tom found particularly irksome. Others had even bellowed little screams, not necessarily out of fear but because that was all they knew to do in such a situation. Immobile with fear, eyelids stretched across eyeballs or else covered completely by cotton eye-masks, these people had made of themselves breathing corpses. In fear of an end that anyway in life was inevitable, they mimicked an image of death in hope of avoiding its reality, as though a reaper wouldn’t notice them and instead pass by their inanimate terror towards somebody somewhat more animated, someone perhaps with a facial twitch. But unlike certain insects which, stilling in the face of threat, can rely upon their camouflage to preserve them, even the most pastel loving human stands forth against an airplane seat with the rudeness of a roof hook. These passengers wanted to be objects. It occurred to Tom that it was these same objects whom he politely bullied into Lax’s appointments each day, these faces corresponding to the waves of faceless voices his unwanted phone calls, mid dinner, hailed. He had always considered his “contacts” as objects – the repetition of the job, amongst other alienating factors and institutional practices, led to this – but not as unique individuals who themselves desired to be objects: he had never thought of this, and the thought confused him. Seeing these objects of his vocation as such, the heterogeneity of their fretting faces expressing the desire to be objects themselves, had the obverse effect of revealing something tender to Tom regarding their subjectivity. In a whorl beyond his comprehension a world exterior to the one scaffolding his everyday world palpitated before him, through him, a torrent of wordless affects that split each thought’s sandbag. Again, violently the plane fell several feet, this time veering to the right. Tom’s bold hand was flung into the little face of the boy seated beside him who then began to wail horribly, a cry not dissimilar in tone to the screams of a theatre-sports performer playing a dying rabbit. For the entire flight this boy had stared into a Sony PSP Go, his midget thumbs trailing a blaze of bullets through a martial hyper-
real. Although the wailing struck Tom as over exaggerated and obviously not his fault, he nonetheless acted out, as best he could, something of an apology, *I'm so sorry, it was the plane that*… The mother, terrified by the turbulence, unconsciously finding an opportunity to sublimate her fear not only into something within her control, but also wielded over another, screamed gauchely at Tom. At which point, the child’s cries made worse by the mother’s vitriolic attention, Tom felt quite glad that providence had flung his arm at the stupid child’s head.

Again – dear Lord – the plane gave plunge and Tom’s hand, the palm raised in supplication towards the mother, square whacked the child’s tear strewn face. This time the child let out a horrendous shriek that was without fabrication – but not before a short pause that vouched for the pain’s reality. Already turned towards his mother, his little pink fingers pointing at a bruising eye, what could this mother do but swipe her acrylic nails, in riposte to the chance and fate that had struck her son, at Tom’s poor face. But just as they reached his face the plane, by grace, stabbed into a sharp descent.

Elongated by senses sped within time, his turbulent thoughts all knocked into order through the fall, Tom returned to a state that may be called, for want of any better calling, composure, swallowed in a stream of helpless, pitiful screams. Discovering himself being flung from his seat, Tom landed in the row behind, atop another woman’s screeching. The sharp descent of the plane continued, but its constancy of plunge, seeming not to accelerate, meant the cabin regained what it could of stability, much like a cat, mid-air, four storeys down, turning upright after falling from a 34th floor window. Though this small measure of stability becalmed no-one: every passenger on board – and in such circumstance the call is fair – became convinced that they were soon to die.

The throng of screams became precise wounds scouring and recalling Tom’s earlier incomprehension as the passengers’ panic made them all alike in a manner expressing their existential idiosyncrasy. And then, a solo baritone arising clearly thorough a Requiem’s chorus, a thought, its force charged with action, took hold of Tom: if death were here he would not submit to its certainty slavishly. He would, in the only manner he felt compelled, celebrate his body and what remained of this being and of a human freedom he had never particularly took hold of, nor even felt before. But before this thought had become a thought wringing itself with words, feeling the scratches the acrylic nails had burnt into his cheek, or perhaps the blood that trickled across his lips, Tom watched his burly hand, clenched into a white-knuckled fist, surge against the face of the screaming woman he lay atop. This sold her to unconsciousness, which ceased her screeching and – very likely for her good – stole her away from mortal fear. The teleological movement named Tom Burgess had bloomed into completion.
With flailing fists and kicks, in a state approaching unbridled ecstasy, Tom climbed across the cabin and its many, terrified contents. He searched out the blonde boy he had accidently hit, who cowered and shivered at Tom’s approach. Grabbing the boy by hair and shorts, he heaved him as far down the angled aisle as he could, then knocked out the hissing mother with a well meant shiv of elbow. Now that his death was certain, as well as the death of all those around him, social morality had a restraining hold on Tom no more. Not that this was articulated in Tom. It was, as a milieu, articulated through him… it was Tom’s milieu’s final scene, its expression of interest in what remained available to its citizens of poiesis. His convulsive impulse towards expulsion, a celebration of the body’s excessive energies, bloomed into a fit of violence utterly bereft of antipathy. Nobody resisted his path. Nobody dared punch back. Some people prayed and their faith was kicked clear out of them. Some became convinced Tom was Beelzebub and that it was hell that had caught their afterlife by the hair. Others attempted to run away, only to stumble on other passenger’s limbs, or to fall with the aeroplane’s tilt, finally to be set upon by the grace of Tom’s serene rage, the ecstatic discharge of his kicks. For Tom, this cabin, neither that of a plane nor a hearse, became a sea of somatic impulse indistinguishable from the pressure, pulse and temperature of its water. Even if some passengers indeed thought to fight back, against their fear of death and fear of what they could only conceive to be a madman pummelling them, Tom could not have felt their blows as a resistance. The final celebration of his embodied being, his complete, masterly denial of the hold of fear, absorbed all resistances, in turn celebrating the event of their own being, adding to his boundlessly intoxicating ecstasy. The entire cabin became his flesh and the movements of attack and resistance were an internal dance of the organs, their wills harmonized into a convulsive, active discharge of living energy.

After almost two minutes – 116 seconds to be exact – of terrified screams and, for Tom, ecstasy, something occurred that was a verified miracle for the Believers: the pilots regained control of the plane, safely landing twenty minutes later at Launceston airport. Battered and bruised, the cabin’s contents departed.

The following day the wedding unfolded splendidly. The photographer took the usual, gorgeous photos. The caterers catered the usual, lukewarm food: after all, wedding catering is a difficult art. The wedding cake was brilliant-white, three tiered, flavoured with a hit of Bundy Rum. Big brewery beer flowed liberally. All had a merry time. Phil’s new wife, Lauren, was beautiful, and Phil cleaned up like you wouldn’t believe. Not once throughout the entire ceremony was Tom’s nose observed to twitch. On Monday, still a little hung over, Tom arrived at work two minutes late.
Jack and the Beans Talk

Karen Manton

The phone rings. Jack goes inside to answer it.

‘Come to me, Jack,’ a female voice says.

There is a brief pause.

He says nothing. The phone clicks dead.

In his gloved hands is a pair of forging tongs, glowing red. He carries them back outside and throws them on a mound of red-brown earth. There is a hiss and curl of steam.

Around the outside of the hexagon house grows a tomato vine that bears both cherry tomatoes and green beans. It is an open house, without a solid door at the entrance and – except for a few leadlight windows upstairs – there is no glass in the window frames. No walls separate the rooms within. It is one large room that has corners of being – cushions and a window seat here, a large four poster bed there, the extraordinarily long, beautifully polished jarrah table there, a pot belly stove he forged himself and a wood oven on elegant and rusting legs there, in the kitchen corner. Bookshelves line the walls and the floor is made of smooth, white slabs of rock. In the centre of the house is an old tree around which a spiral staircase winds.

Jack knows the house well. But he’s quite sure it doesn’t belong to him.

Where is everyone? That is the question. He picks a tomato from the vine, bites into it, and looks up to the blue, blue sky. After some aimless wandering through the garden he considers a large bag of fertiliser, which he decides to carry to the nursery.

He will pot more little plants. It is what he does best.

Four hundred seedlings nod at him gently in the breeze beneath the brown hessian shelter that keeps them from being fried by the dry season sun and drowned by the wet season rain. The white goat comes near, limping and dragging its chain. It sniffs a broken terracotta pot. Jack follows to pick up the pieces.

He remembers doing the same years ago when he’d accidentally smashed one of his mother’s flowerpots. He remembers how furious she was and how she’d beaten
him and he sat at the table with a purple eye and when his father had come home he’d said, ‘That’s a bad bruise,’ and went on eating his dinner.

Later that night his father pointed to his son’s eye and pulled him aside.

‘We’ll put a stop to this,’ he said.

He took Jack to boxing classes and even did some with him, showing him just how hard to pummel a bully. But try as he may, Jack could never quite imagine delivering such punches to his mother. Usually he wore the bruises under jumpers. It was only the really bad days she got him in the face.

Jack pauses his thoughts to set the goat free of the chain. The vertical pupil stares into him intently. Jack starts to wonder if he has done the right thing.

‘Of course you have,’ says the goat as it trots away.

‘Odd,’ muses Jack, ‘I thought you were limping.’

Then again, everything is a little strange, these days. A raven alights on the dripping garden tap.

‘What do you make of it raven?’ asks Jack. ‘I am here with my tomato plants – that grow beans; in a house I know well but don’t own; set in an unruly garden that is familiar; with a white goat who roams and can speak.’

‘Lex and Sunday aren’t coming back,’ says the raven. ‘This is your place now, Jack.’

He’s about to ask ‘Why?’ when the raven coughs, and he remembers.

Sunny and Lex. Unexpectedly dead. Mangled with the car.

It’s always like this. He falls into a deep sleep. Wakes up disoriented. Forgets what happened and why he’s here. If it weren’t for the raven he’d be lost.

So, it really is his place now. This strange hexagon house with its spiral staircase in the centre wrapped around an old tree, and its few leadlight windows distorting the light and the real. Sunny and Lex built it with their own hands.

It’d be Sunny who left it to him. What would Lex think of that? Maybe Lex knew all along. Maybe that’s what they were arguing about when he lost control of the wheel. Or maybe he just had an aneurism and no secret was to blame. Jack can’t remember what they were talking about. He was just an observer who’d fallen asleep in the back seat. Waiting for the shit to hit the fan. And then the windscreen, the car, his heart, Sunny and Lex – the whole lot shattered.
‘It’s a miracle,’ people said.

Jack has no idea when he arrived. He could have been here a minute. He could have been here a year. Every morning it’s a surprise. Perhaps he isn’t real. Perhaps he’s in a kind of limbo, neither here nor there. Perhaps what he sees is just a reflection in the mirror of his dead eye. What a creepy thought.

‘How long have I been here?’ he asks the raven.

‘Couple of months,’ replies the bird.

The goat looks on, chewing grass.

Jack half expects to wake up and find Sunny and Lex peering over the hammock, laughing at him and saying, ‘What are you doing here?’ or ‘Look at the tomato plants – it’s like you’ve all moved in…’

Now he thinks about it, the tomato vine is entering the house and climbing up the walls.

‘I must remember not to cut it,’ he tells himself, ‘because it lets me know how long I’ve been here.’ And he scribbles a note saying, ‘Don’t cut the vine.’

He contemplates it now – the curling vine with its vibrant leaves hiding shy, elongated, green pods and bold little red spheres. He stands on the bed head to pick whatever he can find, and wonder at the beans.

He panicked about it once – the vine of two fruits. Pulled it from the outside walls like it was some kind of sprawling evil, and let it die uprooted by the shed. But the tomatoes would not die. Every day there were more hanging from the brittle, yellowed vine. The beans, on the other hand, drooped and hung there wasted, rattling in the wind.

People said it was amazing he survived and in a kind of way it was, though he finds it disconcerting to keep forgetting why he is here. He writes another little note before he forgets the words of the raven: ‘This is where your home is.’

He sticks it to the bed head. He likes the sign he has made. It is definite.

‘So,’ he says to himself, ‘may as well make it official with a housewarming.’

‘Excellent idea,’ says the goat at the doorway, issuing a loud burp of approval.

‘Excellent, excellent,’ echo the beans, whispering from behind the leaves that hover against the wall.
Jack sets about preparing a banquet for his friends. He smiles into the steaming sauces and warm oven. He must have been a chef once, though he doesn’t remember when. It doesn’t matter. What’s important is that he knows his cooking is extraordinary. Everyone will agree.

When he is done Jack lights a candle and sits at the table in the dark, to wait.

In they come, all seven of them. They are a buoyant, laughing, chatty lot, and most impressed with his culinary skills. He serves mussels and octopus, kangaroo and beetroot, roast sweet potatoes, seared capsicum, stuffed olives and numerous dishes featuring his cherry tomatoes – stuffed, dried, marinaded, puréed… and plenty of basil, also from his own pots, is likewise served. He wines and dines the lot of them and falls asleep during their conversation.

Their voices scuttle through his dreams with the chatter of the beans. In amongst it all waltz Sunny and Lex. They are received like royalty, and proceed to make the party their own.

‘It is my cooking,’ Jack tries to say, but nobody hears.

Sunny and Lex. Always the centre of everything. Never more alive. The house bubbles with the life of others while Jack snores.

When he wakes no one is there, but for the whispers of Sunny and Lex who are fading into notches of wood in the wall. Their breath shifts the leaves of the vine as they pass. The candle has melted down to almost nothing. The flame is dancing high with the last of the wax. He can hear a bat darting in the darkness, flying so close it shifts the hairs on his head.

The only visitor is a dim shape in the middle of the room. Jack strains to see into the shadows. The more he sees the more he wishes it had remained a blur. Sharp metal protrudes at odd angles, white duco is spattered with blood, a roof has caved in, a severed wheel rolls away, deformed shapes loom from the twisting mess. Hard to tell what is buckling metal and what is altered flesh.

He must have dozed off again, he guesses, because he now has a sense of waking. A woman in a soft blue dress is standing there, holding a slender white glove.

‘Why don’t you come to dinner,’ she says, kissing him full on the mouth.

‘I’ve just had a dinner party,’ he replies, touching his lips, wondering if the kiss was real.

‘But nobody’s here!’ she laughs out loud, ‘Where are they all?’
‘I don’t know,’ he murmurs. ‘I don’t seem to notice anything these days.’

Although he sees from the corner of his eye that another tomato plant has reached through the window and attached itself to the wall.

The woman is closer than ever.

‘Dance with me,’ she says, and lets fall the blue robe.

‘I can’t,’ he replies, avoiding her gaze and the sight of her naked body.

‘Come to me, Jack.’ Her glove caresses his neck.

‘I’m in pain,’ he says, feeling the bruise on his face return, along with many others.

‘All the more reason to dance,’ she laughs. ‘Or make love to me on this table.’

The candle fizzes out, leaving him in utter darkness.

What a surprise to wake up and find he is making love to her on the banquet table! Which somehow seems to be his mother’s. He thought it had long since gone to ashes.

His father set fire to it when he was a boy.

It is during this scene of making love with thoughts interrupting, that a man in a brown pin stripe suit appears, carrying a radiator under his arm.

‘Impossible to turn the heat up anymore in here,’ says the stranger.

‘What do you mean?’ stammers Jack.

‘Well you are making love to your mother on her kitchen table aren’t you?’

Jack lets out a cry, ‘Oh my god! What are you saying?’ and looks around, aghast, for the woman.

But she is gone. He is alone and naked on the table. Above him the light bulb swings gently. On it is a tiny bird, preening feathers. Every now and then it pauses to look down at him.

‘I can’t remember a thing,’ Jack says into his folded arms. The stranger is nowhere near.

‘It must have been a dream,’ he tells the goat at the steps.

He feels better now. The vines are still creeping up the wall and reaching around to the next panel, but there is nothing strange in that. This is how it has always been. He is getting comfortable with the idea. He crunches the bitter dark of a coffee bean between his back teeth and tongues the grit away.

The floor is cool underfoot. It is what he likes best about this house. The cold white stones that keep their calm in the oppressive heat. He used to lie on them and love the gentle slope of a stone against his cheek. Watch Sunny melt into them beneath him. Call her back out of them again.

It is only recently that the floor has become magic. Sometimes it is made of glass and sometimes it is made of marble. There are moments when he feels moss under his feet and the scales of lichen in the grooves of his palm. And in the dark it creaks like wood, and smells of the shadowy womb of a tree. When he kneels to pass his hand across the surface, a splinter needles into his skin.

He pulls out the splinter with his teeth the next day. Sunny taught him that. He remembers her laugh, the bite of her teeth, the triumphant extraction of a tiny sliver of wood. The way she spat it out and bit his lip, affectionately drawing blood. She was a strange mix. He would leave covered in the atmosphere of her breath and later answer the phone to her spite.

‘I hate it,’ stabbed her fury, right into the centre of his ear.

And it would lodge there, somewhere in his brain, festering and swelling. The lie. The object of her hate. It was always his. She would not own one drop of it.

Today he will pick the beans. One by one he takes them down. They drop into a saucepan at his feet.

‘Beans grow with tomatoes,’ he murmurs. ‘It has always been so.’

‘Exactly,’ twitter the beans on the vine, leaning out from the pert leaves to tempt his thumb and forefinger. And in their excitement they sprout from the pot, calling, calling to him.

The sundial reads six o’clock, evening. It is time. Behind the mound of wavering weeds and grasses over the way, his calling waits. Jack has a project and it lies in the middle of the tall grass where the smells and sounds of seething life abound.

He takes off his boots and walks in. His feet find an already trodden path to the hiding place. You might expect an exotic tropical plant, a new species, a botanical
miracle to be there. But there is nothing alive about it. It is all metal. A wheel, a
avoided headlight, the bonnet rising like the nose of a whale from the ground. He
loves this sculpture in working, his ode to Sunny and Lex. Out of the wreckage.

The first fire was hot and merciless. Weeds and grass melted away in flame.

The carcass of the vehicle hissed in delight and glowed red through the night. Now
Jack forges his mystery artwork in a small furnace and large pans of hot coals by
the wreck.

He wonders if Sunny and Lex will like it – if they return. He gets confused about
that idea, despite the raven. The only words he can trust are those of the goat, who
seems to read his mind. The beans are good listeners but they never disagree with
him. These are the kinds of things Jack ponders from behind the blue protective
goggles as he stirs the coals and weathers the sparks that fly out from his hammer.
He smiles to himself. If anyone saw him now they still wouldn’t know him.

They would think here’s a gardener who tired of the green and the supple, the
living and the fragile. Who wanted to sear into something without killing it, bend
an arc of red-hot steel, hammer the unwilling into a new shape. They wouldn’t
understand that it is here, amongst this heap of defiant persistence that he forges his
soul. It is here, out of this mud and fire and air that he will be born.

His wiry toes are steeped in damp earth. His pale skin is savaged by mosquitoes.
One slip and he’ll be lame forever. His eyes and hands are safe behind goggles and
gloves. But his feet are on their own.

It is hot and Jack is weary. He has worked all night and into the day. He will leave
his sculpture to scorch under the sun. The grass whispers as he passes. He pulls on
the waiting boots. Sweat trickles down his nose into the dust and onto leather. His
flesh at least will weep salt and water, even if his eyes won’t.

‘You are the only man I know,’ Sunny said once, ‘who cries without tears.’

He suspects she found it repulsive. Another kind of lie, she would have thought.

Tap, tap, tap. Jack’s boots stir the wooden steps. He cannot see in the fresh darkness
of the house. Wing, feather, claw, beak rush past as the bird flies out. The light globe
swings more than ever in its wake.

As his eyes focus Jack sees a huge bean split open in the middle of the white stone
floor. In it a giant pea sits, the ground of a fat stalk that has wrapped itself around
the old tree and spiral staircase. Up, up it reaches to the wooden panels of the
ceiling, where its green tendrils sprawl, seeking cracks out into the sunlight.
Jack has been waiting for something like this. A sign. An invitation. One he can cling to with his fingers and toes.

There is a great creaking and stretching as the burgeoning vine parts the roof.

Now Jack can see it has reached all the way to a handsome cloud. Somewhere up there is Sunny, laughing as she clings to the tip of the green vine, her feet – no doubt – kicking free in the wind and cherry tomatoes dangling from her ears – while not far off is the sound of Lex singing as he flies away with a new pair of wings.

Jack pulls off his boots and begins to climb.
The Son with No Name

Alan Whykes

Alija was wearing a plain white t-shirt several sizes too large. His wife wore the same shirt with a different shape of misfit. We thought we’d had everything ready: apartment, threadbare but solid furniture, washing machine that appeared to work, pasta and tinned food in the cupboard and the power on. What we weren’t ready for was people who reportedly had only a suitcase of worldly possessions arriving without that suitcase. They had emerged from Immigration clearance clutching courtesy toilet bags, edgily, as if a shirt and a toothbrush kit might not ward off evil or salve the prickly fortune of a new country. Our welcome party of three people and a soccer ball felt inadequate.

Back at the apartment they had taken off their shoes and changed, and we had showed them how to switch on the fans that now chopped late September night into pieces and whirled the glug around. Alija kept patting the head of Salim.

“My son,” he said, “my son.” Salim rolled his ball across the floor. Between them they spoke little more than these words and hello-goodbye pleasantries. I had about the same in Bosnian.

My two assistants, themselves refugees of a few years earlier, did all the heavy lifting of the conversation. They were also my cultural guides and had insisted, for example, on spending the last of the grant money on the array of tiny cups into which Melvina now poured the coffee.

“Wouldn’t you rather sleep?” I asked quietly.

Melvina and Alija stared vacantly as if time itself was just yet another thing scorched by war.

By the time the suitcases arrived a few days later our sponsored refugee support group had already covered considerable ground with our charges in tow: Immigration office, bank, Medicare, the only primary school that had an Intensive English Unit, bus terminal, Interpreter Service, post office, local shopping centres, library. We had accumulated a large pile of translated brochures in languages they might conceivably understand such as Tropical Health Issues in Croatian and Cyclone Evacuation Procedures in Serbian. There was also the lease to their apartment and the utilities contract that had just been transferred to their names.
Melvina straightened the pile of documents and put them on a table beside the telephone.

From one of the suitcases she produced a doily and placed it on top of the printed documents. And on top of that, a photograph of their three children.

The girl we knew about. She was somewhere in the system and likely to arrive in the next few months with her husband as our next family to be supported under the resettlement program.

I asked my assistants in an off-stage whisper about the other boy in the photo. He looked like the eldest with the cut of his father’s chin jutting protectively across the other two. We can’t ask, they said. Some things can’t be asked yet.

Alija and Melvina were both enrolled at the Migrant English Course with an entitlement of five hundred hours of study. They made passing friends there but always seemed tired when I saw them on my weekly visits.

“Hot,” said Alija simply. “Hot. I no like.” I wasn’t in a position to do anything about Darwin’s climate, not even apologise for it.

Melvina made thick coffee in a long-handled pot and Bosnian baklava and was always busy dusting. It was a fruitless battle in her louvred box but she struggled on. There was not a single item more frequently dusted than that photograph of the children.

Three children, not two.

Not asked, and not told.

After some months they moved to a housing commission house out in the no-nonsense belt of post-Tracy bungalows that spoke of brick that would not be huffed and puffed away, nor promised anything other than solid walls and a ceiling upon which geckos might scurry and pause and scurry some more.

They dropped out of their English classes. Alija said he had chronic headaches and there was an exhaustive round of counsellors and frowning doctors before we had papers ready for a disability pension. I filled them all out, one bleating space after another. Name, address, date of birth, telephone number, dependants.

Melvina lit another cigarette and another. Alija coughed and wore a grimace that was beginning to fit too well. His wife emerged from the cloud of smoke with
a tear that dripped into a bowl of salted nuts. “Sorry, I no English,” she said. “No school. No any more school. Think, think, very hard for me. I sad for my son.”

I remembered the news reports from Srebrenica. Men behind fences, skeletal beings with desperation where eyes had once been. A letter arrived from the Red Cross offering compensation for the son who was among the disappeared. We had it translated and presented it solemnly to Alija and Melvina one morning.

She held the paper firmly and decided uncertainly which way was up. Without reading it she put it on top of the pile and then replaced the doily and the photograph. It was some time later I realised that even though she might have chosen not to read the letter, it appeared that she simply couldn’t.

My assistants fidgeted. The dots were joining for them and they had enough anguish in their own journey not to want to know all the details. Even this felt like a betrayal for all of us. We started with earnestness and sixteen hundred bucks with which to give a family a new life, but we can’t raise the dead from the barking muzzle of war crime. We didn’t even have a name. A boy or a man or a soldier, missing presumed dead in a mass grave. Fish in a barrel. Missing. Wrong time, place and ethnicity. Presumed ‘cleansed’, ethnically.

The missing is lessened if you spray the photograph with Mr Sheen once a day and wipe clean.

My sun, my sun beats down with the merciless razor heat of unfortunate longitude. Alija delivers junk mail for pennies a shot to people who, like him, couldn’t give a flying digital videodisc for the latest bestest. Melvina is out contract cleaning houses and hoping she won’t get reported to social security for the extra cash.

Cash money.

The Transitional Government of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina hereby states its offer to you of a sum of three thousand convertible marks as compensation for the loss of your son in the vicinity of Srebrenica in 1996.

Blood money.

Time plants its head in its hands and weeps.

I see her mouthing the words on the catalogue headlines.
Bread rolls $1.99, pack of six ready-to-bake-at-home.

8 megapixels with zoom lens!

Half-celery, product of Australia.

30+ sunscreen (Cancer Council approved).

Harry Potter print Snugglers.

The words are born like children, helpless and in need of nurture until fully grown. I try spelling the words for her letter by letter. Every sound is hard won. Melvina pouts the consonants through cartons of cigarettes and swallows the vowels in alternating gulps of hard homeland snow and adopted sweat.

She has a grandchild now and he looks too much like someone else. His knees bruise on cheap tricycles and she applies plaster free from sniper fire. I have never seen her smile beyond a curl of courtesy, and I have never heard the name of that other son.

There are labels affixed to everyday objects; Melvina has given her whole house the see-and-say treatment with sticky notes. Alija grumbles mildly about them but he also appears proud in her growing ability. When a yellow leaf falls from the cupboard, c-u-p-b-o-a-r-d, he dutifully picks it up and tries to reattach it.

“No worry, Alija, no worry,” she says. “I again write.” She peels another and writes. I borrow her pad and write my name and stick it on my shirt and she almost laughs.

I still fill out papers for them but as we do citizenship forms one day I notice that she has a duplicate.

“Please you write. After, I write. Same you write. Thank you help me. I again write.”

Alija blushes on her behalf. “Always write. And read. Our language too.”

A grand-daughter arrives and there are new photos. Alija takes some video – the children playing at the water park, the Bayram party for the end of Ramadan, the chickens in the yard, the family gathered and Alija looking like a Doobie Brother in the Hawaiian shirt he got for his birthday – and asks me how to transfer it to
a VHS cassette. They have Australian passports now and are going back to Bosnia for a holiday.

While they are away their daughter and son-in-law tell me of another reason for the trip. A mass grave has been excavated and relatives of missing persons are being invited to submit DNA samples for matching.

My own path takes me to Europe and in a side-trip from Italy I end up in Sarajevo. I pass on gauche souvenirs such as umbrella stands made from shell casings. In Mostar I take pictures of ruined buildings, doors and windows that are empty constellations adrift in a galaxy of bullet holes.

On the bus back to Split we stop at a roadhouse. I am wandering around the back to take a picture of frowning mountains when the driver stops me with a hand on my shoulder.

“Ne, ne,” he admonishes. He mimes stepping on a land mine and leaping to eternity.

The son still has no name. He grows not older while his younger brother turns into a man and leaves soccer and classrooms behind for a factory job and a girlfriend in Melbourne. Melvina and Alija have their grandchildren and school runs. They can’t stand the heat any better than they could at the abrupt beginning and spend most days cradled in a womb of air-conditioning. In the afternoons Alija still delivers catalogues. Melvina can read them to me now. She buys the Bosna Times and reads about trials of war criminals punctuated by advertisements for Minas coffee and hokey mix-tapes of narodna crooners.

The DNA sample provided by Melvina Hasanovic does not match any existing sample in our database of persons recovered, including those from the recent excavations at Sandini.

Things change in the world of refugee support. Volunteers are still there but they are coordinated by a team of professional staff at the Melaleuca Centre. I had long since faded into the background even before the intake panned to Somalia, Nepal, Liberia, other countries I can barely name but that are vaguely familiar from news reports twitching with switchblades and child soldiers. Melvina and Alija, indeed also the other five families we settled from Bosnia, still introduce me as their sponsor although formally that arrangement ended ten years earlier.
Alija has found a few friends from the old country, men who once a week or so limp around with legs of shrapnel to play cards or chess. They say little; words in any language are just another exhaustion.

Melvina is different and somehow antisocial in her shapelessness. Coffee and cigarettes are still the propulsion from her twilight zone of sleep on anti-depressants to cleaning and household chores. Pendulous memory sends her back. A speck of dust on the framed photo might suggest she has managed to pass a day without thinking of him but there are none. She has no fashion, girls’ nights, neighbourhood associations, parties, hobbies, holidays, no existence beyond the entrapment of uncertainty.

She says she is writing about her experiences during the war. Long pause. The sun drops its fiery coin to pay for fifteen minutes of sunset. As dark comes to us so does her story. “My husband say we go, I say no, my home, I no go. Why? My home. Then very bang bang, bad people, everybody run. My neighbour gone, everybody gone.”

Melvina screws her face up with resignation rather than anger. “No help. Nobody help nothing. Ni na nebu ni na zemlji. We say my language. No in, up … sky, no in ground. Nobody help.”

Alija is quiet. “If I listen my husband, my son no die.”

I ask her if one day I might read a translation of her writing and she sighs too softly to hear as she pours more peanuts into a bowl, each one making a tiny thud as it falls and then lies still.

For a few years she grew capsicums, tomatoes and cucumbers. Now the vegetable patch is being reclaimed by weeds.

“I tired,” says Melvina.

She buys her cucumbers waxed and wrapped to sterility by an anonymous company somewhere. She says they taste of nothing and she dips them in vinegar and salt and says they still taste of nothing because she didn’t grow them. They taste of anonymous.

She had to get rid of the rooster because the neighbours complained. The last five hens scratch at the dry ground for answers.

“Please you come, we have form.”
I fill out Australian Immigration departure cards once again. The flights are booked, the trip planned. Melvina creakily copies my print on to a second pair of cards. The amount of space left for writing is a challenge for an elderly migrant unfamiliar with forms. Are you carrying more than AUD$10,000 in cash? No.

Yes. A DNA match has been found.

A hoped-for miracle melts.

A burial is being organised.

A mass burial; there are many victims, all broken and tangled, all decomposed until eye sockets are set in permanent accusation, all kept dinner-warm in memory as they have been hidden cold in ground, all flesh made history and that the kind we barely speak about.

A wooden box will hold the remains, and for decency’s sake it will appear like a coffin until the bundle within is lifted out and returned to earth.

A plain green cloth shall cover the box.

A woman and a man shall weep. They are not alone.

A prayer will be held.

An imam will invoke God and justice and heavenly realm of peace.

A talon of sadness will scratch a truism in my back: it is the living who require the prayers of the dead.

A mass gathering will unite mothers of the disappeared.

A woman will return her own bones to Australia and I will ask her to write for me in brave and true letters the name of her lost son, now at rest and forever dusted.

And her son will have a name.
The tired gums gather at river’s elbow
fallen limbs; things we forget or ignore
silt over. The fetid core we bury
deep yet pray for rain’s roar and ädchen flow.
Kwatyé pours like warm beer, arcs a rainbow
across the amber land. Law serpents draw
forth Kwatyé rising through topography
falling. Kwatyé tows the flotsam ashore.
For a moment the burden lifts to float
on flood; like a car swept up at a ford,
like Atlas freed by Herculean feat.
In an act of grace not made in false hope
– when into tjilpi’s palm red sand was poured –
Kwatyé scours the sand, our sadness replete.
Roy & Trigger

Allan Donald

(in a single breath)

as you remember childhood
begin here
with the boy
astride a hinged wooden gate
built by the previous occupant to protect his children
it swings out over shaky hardwood steps
the boy hangs on
he’s done it before
so sure
so safe

(breathe out)
limbs have dropped more than once
and the stumps bear wounds lipped swollen scarred

*here it happened*

she had a beautiful smile she made me angry
she made us all angry she wanted to speak to the manager
she was feisty full of potential young so young we didn’t know her

*here she stood*

circle of flowers centre of sand
circle of women centre of sand
grains all born from abrasion
pushed by feet into tiny peaks flowing as fine chains into hollows we must not be silent

*yet here we stood, silent*
till tired eyes turn
towards sound
this new-found warble
rising and falling as if
he is mouthing a charm
and the mother shhhhh
hoists him high on her hip
rocks him to a rhythm now hers
little boy join this circle
   the only baby
   the only boy
a boy named
safe place

  here she held him
  we all held him
     we held on
        to him

balloons drift
loose ribbons
we place flowers
next to the others
white lilies red interiors
the tree grows up and out
of this bed of flowers
already dying
in sand

old tree somehow rooted in sand
rooted where we now stand

but growing up
crooked, but still up
and the boy
arms raised

  here, from right here, up, up
Ordinary Evenings

Barbara Eather

At barbeques, in the suburbs, they are speaking of immigration
how those queue-jumpers
are ruining our culture, while party-animals
pasty-faced, turgid on bourbon
staggering in ever-decreasing circles
vomit quietly under African Mahoganies.

And they’re saying, with wide-eyed trepidation
on nights, when ravioli piles high on china plates
and left-over firecrackers are discharged
when they all come, there’ll be a war
and nights out on the town
just won’t be the same anymore.

And at the zenith of ordinary evenings of inebriation
just after the baklava is served
they’re calling for the boats to be sunk and
someone too drunk to notice their own blood
opens themselves up on broken glass
while articulating foreign policy as though sober.
Not the Larapinta Trail: a selection of 13 roughed-up haiku

Michael Giacometti

A journey of one thousand miles begins with the first step …

_Laozi, Tao Te Ching_

A long hike begins / with a heavy pack clipped / and a light tread Trek on your morning / shadow and bear always off / track onto roo pads

Where feral grass hides / rock stumble into golden / webs between wattle

Vibram soles tramp / iambbs like ripples into / Precambrian sand

Spring-loaded poles tap / metamorphic Morse on / sloping slabs of schist

Fingers read the Braille / of punctuated spinifex / above gaiter line

This aridity / cracks heels into quartzite blocks / the walk never ends

Sweat falls in ascent / of orogenic upthrusts / to eroding bluffs

Topping out at ridge / crest you drop pack and rock-hop / your vows renewed

In the constriction / of cliffing contours you plunge / pool to rocky pool

Frogs leap packs floating / hypothermic slot chasm / you cry for billy

Where time is measured / in shadows bivvy deep down / beneath emu night

All this moving on / packing and un- but of your / path no trace remains

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Before you Hit the Bitumen

Matt Haubrick

Now that I am dead
Now that I’m flying
Now that I’m free

An animal spread across the canvas of the world
A diamond traced along the glass of your new truth

Formed by the dark red wound
Framed by the stark white bone
Torn along the tight black curls
Of your broad beloved face

Wipe the whites from your eyes
From the corners of your mouth
Where the gin dries and the grins die

Wipe the white away from the ends of your noses
Pull down your dresses
As a tourniquet for your poor young knees
Lower your voices please

Where?
Where will you run to?
Where will you run?

There is only the one oasis of light
In this pitch black, stone cold, barren, 24/7, 7/11 night
This lonely road dances only from might to might

This is not the Earth
Not for the meek
Not of that bedtime story for the weak
Stand!
Over there!
Now!
Lie upright on the asphalt
Stare down the headlights of your destiny
Stand stock still and embrace your life’s own life’s
One true velocity

I’ll set you free
I’ll send you flying
And I’ll watch
And I’ll listen

As you lie gently dying
The Pandemic

Kelly-Lee Hickey

I Infection

The season started early;
twelve admissions in six days.

Statistics soar with smoke,
ash billowing through the streets.

Stories spread with handshakes
loosely held, fragments of consolation.

II Diagnosis

In the far flung centres of crisis
there are no emergency services.

The news crossed the border
before the forensics

resolved which jurisdiction
they would lie in.

III Treatment

In the chambers, fingers search for a culprit,
we quarantine women behind barb wire.

The small ward overflowing,
we discharge the walking to the creek.

We beg for a vaccine
and restock our first aid kits.

IV Fatality

She arrives after midnight,
leaves before morning,
‘the gate whisperer’
the head matron calls her.

Seven years of slipping away,
one day she finally falls.

V Remission

There is no cure.
Nervously I finger my scars;
eighteen years in remission,
my recovery not yet complete.

Some nights when the fever takes me
I hallucinate infection.

VI Immunity

When your interstate guest arrives
you realise you have become immune

as over breakfast you lament the symptoms,
discuss treatment option as you walk away

from the woman with the bandage
begging for change.
One Shoe

Fiona Lynch

she points her foot
at forgiving sand &
traces a circle
with a liberated toe

she calls to the aunties
and they come
in whispers
when she aches

she keeps sentry
at the river
as little ones duckdive
for nothing in particular
older brothers
roam through town
willing something to happen
and walking
like visitors
in their own bodies

a corseted foot
taps impatiently
harpooned with a bow
in a half-world
of blue-eyed corners

the land of opportunity
is measured
with a set square
and a radius
of spent promises
& cheap cigarettes
discussion papers
mark the spot
where white noise
is louder than birdsong

a strong woman walks
with tears in her veins

a strong woman walks
two places
one shoe
The Slow Living Diary

Karen Manton

*I can’t tell you the exact point of turning, although I expect it came with the bees.*

1. **the dis-ease**

I was working in a studio not far from Melbourne’s inner city. My desk faced a magnificently large window, and from it I could see a private knoll of the small reserve that backed onto our building. Greenery, the soil, leaves falling into it, and above, the friendly branches of an old, great tree whose roots sprawled out into the tidy grass of the park and underneath the slab of the building. Every morning I smiled at the cracks those reaching limbs had sent up inside the walls. One day the plaster would split open and reveal a hidden maze of secret root fingers.

Not everyone liked the window, for all the light it let into the studio. In the afternoons the creative director would tip-toe along our desks, sympathetically pulling curtains so our computer screens could glow their true colours in the dark. I kept my curtain knotted back, so I could see the little haven of green before me, the oasis that kept traffic and smog-coated buildings at bay. It was a balm for the eyes. A balm for the soul against the urgency of racing, pacing must-haves and must-dos scudding their way around out there in the mad rushing world of flashing advertising screens, giant bill boards, wailing radios and blaring TVs. These were the things that seemed to drive everyone to work in the morning. And drag them home at night. The pursuit of something, not yet grasped but full of promises.

Out of my glowing screen this urgency screamed, client after corporate client. All day long I pushed pixels and tweaked words in praise of plasterboard, paint, chocolate, motorcars, mobile phones, petrol and the sperm of excellent bulls. On the horizon loomed the casino. Tomorrow’s client. The biggest, most lucrative one of all. This was the project to secure the studio’s future. Everyone would benefit. We’d all be cashed up this Christmas.

I wasn’t sure I would make it to the end of the year. I was starting to fade.

I blamed it on city life, on concrete and bricks, the urban sprawl and all its scaffolding. But maybe it wasn’t the city that gave me this ever-present melancholy; this sense of suffocating that seemed to overtake mind, body and soul. Perhaps it was the moments
of being. Particles of soul getting twisted, bent out of shape, beyond repair. Slipped discs.

I can look up out of a train window, says my friend, and see the curve of a tree. Pick up a leaf, and marvel at its veins.

She lives in the heart of a city. And while I think my escape has been closely linked to an escape from the fast pace, the expectations, the endless constructs, distractions, pollution and escalators to success so inherent in cities, I see her point. She has her leaf. I had the bees.

2. the prophecy

A remarkable thing happened today. I looked out of the window at work and saw an enormous swarm of bees, looking like a great, conical basket hanging from a broad, strong branch. It’s magnificent. I’ve never seen such a fabulous artwork of nature. All day I’ve been looking out at them, watching bees come and go, come and go.

Lives with purpose. Honey. I fell in love with the swarm. For the next few days I looked forward to working near it, with only the great windowpane between us. It changed my whole take on the workplace. I took to sneaking outside to admire this mass of clever insects more closely. There was something magical about them – so many individuals held together not by any kind of structure other than their inner knowing. I watched them nuzzling around each other, hanging like a great bell of furry winged bodies, a beautiful, slow and heavy handiwork suspended in time and space. I was mesmerised.

But within a few days –

I can’t believe it. I came to work this morning and looked out the window to find the bees have gone. I kept staring at the space, trying to imagine them back. I even went looking for them in the park. I guess they’ve found themselves a hive. Or been taken to one. Or been eradicated. It sounds crazy but now when I look up to the branch I feel sort of winded. Like something essential is now missing.

In the days afterwards, I thought often about the bees. How quickly they had come and gone, spoken and left. A swarm of brave adventurers. The more I thought of them, the more something within me stirred. A dare.

Within two weeks I was gone.
3. **paradise**


Mangoes drop to the ground. Fruit bats screech. Bush turkeys scratch through secund dirt. A coconut falls from the tree, skinning my nose. It hits the ground with a dull thud and the vine leaves shudder in delight. Perspiration is dribbling down my back, crawling across my breast, dripping from my jaw. The first drops of rain splatter onto my shoulders. I steer the bike under the house, noting that the gears look rusted, and the handle bar foam is disintegrating. There is no point trying to fight decay here. Everything rots. I bind the splitting foam with tape. I am back from my errand, and that will be it for this afternoon. I can’t do ten things in a day anymore. I don’t even try. Don’t even make such a list. It’s a blessing once you give up imagining that more should be done.

It took me a while to ease into it, the slowness. Those who come from the chilly south, all hardened in our armour like dark-browed beetles, expect to continue our scuttling. It’s a way of living that has to be shed, like the comfort of solid, holding themselves-together houses. Houses made of bricks, with definite windows. Doors with a great many locks. Security, they call it.

*Here everything is open. The doors – if there are doors – are of simple flywire, not wood, and have no locks. The windows are glass shelves, racks of louvres giving a slit view of the world. Every now and then a breeze crosses through the house and we all waver in relief, like palm fronds.*

*A naked housemate trips down the steps from the living room and dives into the plunge pool. A visitor is strumming a guitar somewhere down there in the garden, amidst rude greenery. I am cooking up a green jackfruit curry, before the tree’s fruits rot and fall to the ground, letting loose a heady, pungent odour all over the house.*

In paradise nothing can be shut in. Nothing can be shut out. The jungle, the heat, the creatures rule. The vines and the animals will always get in – frogs, geckoes, cockroaches, cicadas, a praying mantis and the shy bush rat. *Rattus rattus* will dance along the fence and amuse you while his mates chew on the oven cable inside. I tried to keep them out at first. I lost. In the end you realise you are no more and no less than the rest. It’s just the cosmos, my neighbour says to me. No point trying to beat it back or sweep it away.

I used to sit on the balcony and look out to the great, vine-drenched banyan tree, pondering what this place would look like if we all fell asleep under a spell. In a couple of years the whole place would be covered in vines and other greenery.
Buildings would be entirely hidden, falling down, rotting, growing mould, fungus and plants. There is a sprawling life form here that has nothing to do with humankind although it will sidle up and live off you if it can.

4. thoughts on a beach

I’m in a weird state here… I don’t know if it’s more real or unreal than I’ve otherwise been… It’s like the dream has moved to the outside and is the atmosphere I breathe, and the place it used to fill is empty, in my mind…

The sky has deepened now, at the place where the sun went down. The sea is creeping closer, and the people look like shadows that could be swallowed into the sand.

Thirteen years on and I’m still here, a vine growing into a tree. Over time I have slowed down even more, felt the other elements whirl past. Now and then I think of old friends, down south. They’re all at the top of their fields, saving lives, saving animals, travelling the world, working hard, raising families, fighting for the environment, a better world, a better life. I envy them sometimes, riding the waves fast, fast, on excellent surfboards. They’ve done their time climbing ladders and keeping up with the pace. They’re reaping the benefits and they deserve it so well.

5. Sunrise, sunset

The sand is still hot from the day, and the beach is a scene of happy dogs and ballthrowing owners. My dog trots beside me, tan-socked paws splashing through warm water. The red ball of a sun gently descends into the ocean. Some of us will stop to watch.

This is my ritual, my daily routine. At dawn and dusk, sunrise and sunset, I come to inhale the sky. Occasionally I breathe in the theatre of a storm – grey-heavy clouds, bold lightning ripping through curtains of darkness.

The sun slithers into water. I walk on into an indigo dusk. At my back the silver moon rises over dim-lit dunes covered in the wavering silhouettes of spindly grasses.

When I am dying, this is what I want to remember. This slow breathing in and breathing out of sky, sand and water.

What have you done? people will ask.

And I will tell them how I saw three years of magnificent sunsets, and walked three years of spectacular sunrises. I will tell them how I witnessed the greatest live art in the world.
6. the slow living people

We’re not that tolerant of slowness or the slow living. Slowness and pain, or slowness and disability often go together. People associate slowness with age, illness, disability. Slowness is not admired. Or desired. It’s put up with.

But there is another side to slow living, a way of being that some people give up great riches or jobs to find.

Nobody wants a sick man, my partner says to me, and the fast-paced world seems to confirm that statement in many respects.

But I’ve learnt something, from living with a sick man. I’ve learnt to live more slowly because there isn’t a choice, if I want to travel with him. This has been the strange by-product of his sickness that has both plagued and freed me. Our days slow down because we have to live them in a way that he can manage, and I can manage, and the children can manage, all together. For me, at least, it’s a pace that has led to a place, and the combination allows the senses to be more awake to individual moments than the kind of frenetic, highly demanding life-style I might have led in a large, upbeat city.

Having children has slowed us down even more, which sounds strange because life with them can seem so busy.

You won’t have time to scratch yourself, people said, – two, so close together!

True, in one sense. But on another level, these two new family members pulled me even further into the slow living space. I stopped work in the outside world.

Turned in, to the house. The littleness of things became magnified. The days moved in a kind of slow motion. The world tilted into other realities. Part of this I attribute to the fact that simple needs take great effort – eating, sleeping, walking, dressing – every step in the process is noticed, every action is a skill to be acquired.

In particular, I think children live slowly because they can stand still in a moment, and let the chaos whirl around them. They can stop what they are doing and hold themselves present to something else.

I’m looking at my three year old, hoping he won’t fall and crack his head on the tiles as he spins, faster and faster. Suddenly he drops to the floor, fingers splayed out on the floor, eyes looking up in delight, ‘Look! The world! It’s tipping!’

Wonder. Being. These are the childish secrets of the art of living slowly. We wait for children, as they squat to pick up the tiniest red seed, or ponder an unusual insect.
They’re the greatest teachers in attention to detail, the kind that requires keen eyes, and the willingness and freedom to stop and look and be caught up in a moment. This kind of slowness the fast-paced world overrides, pushes out, avoids, because it wastes time by some measurements, and reaps nothing, by others. It’s the kind of littleness that can easily be despised, or questioned with guilt in mind.

Every now and then I look at our life of rhythm not routine, our way of living – part-time workers juggling parenthood and chronic illness, a slow life in a small town in the far, far north – and I wonder if we have dipped out, become nothing but mummified museum pieces, with nothing to offer the world. They’ll put us in a glass cabinet one day and exclaim, Look at that!

But what if I were to measure the moments of being? To look at those little drops of time again. What is it, sitting within them? Are they bent, out of shape? Or airborne, free as they should be? To live these moments is one thing. To hold them as precious is another. Perhaps the two together are what counts.

When I look through the open doorway and see my partner squatting by our two children to show them the transparent chrysalis of a caterpillar, hanging sure and delicate amidst the thorns of a kafir lime bush, then I know the bees were right. I have no money, but I have swarms of momentary adventures, which add up to endless riches.

This is the kind of living you can’t buy. The kind that allows you to notice a cicada crawling from its secret den underground; that lets you follow it to the trunk of a tree, and wait for it to emerge luminous green from its brown shell. It is the slowness that brings you to a spray of spider eggs hidden like scattered jewels amongst the leaf litter. Slow living is full of riches that can’t be counted and have no price.

7. the question

It’s during visits back to the old life, the city and all its frenetic ways, the fast life, that I feel out of place. Out of fashion, out of time.

What are you doing? people ask.

A fruit bat is dying at the foot of a tree; a Torres Strait pigeon eats red seeds in the palm tree, ants scurry along a slender twig, grasshoppers pause on the underbelly of a basil leaf. Cockroaches scuttle into a crack under the skirting board, the curve of a gecko’s tail protrudes from behind a painting on the wall, the baubles of a virus bulge from a leaf underfoot. Red hyacinth flowers hang like enticing bells, grey beetles peek out from a tiny hole in the trunk of the mango tree, a goanna stops, cautious against smooth bark, the golden orb spider escapes her broken web and nimbly scales up a palm tree.
This is what I want – these moments of being, drops of time lived slowly. What I am doing is collecting them.

My friend is right. It’s not about the city. It’s about the veins in a leaf.

Swarming bees. I’d wish for everyone, anywhere, a wealth of these moments, a life taken slowly. It’s what I want for my children – the real moments that make up a real education.

As for the other life, I guess I can’t go back now. Slow living is the state of being behind. The fast river has gone on without me. The question is, do I care?

8. The dance of the butterflies

Look, look! they call out. And we pause at the gate to watch. Beside us the shadows of two butterflies are courting in a spiralling, airborne dance. It takes a moment to find the butterflies themselves, circling upwards nearby. Their wings are purple, are edged with white. A two year old child, a one year old child lean as far as they can out of the pram, to follow the way of the dancers. For one minute, two, more, we admire the winged angels making their way around the garden. And when we can’t see their purple wings anymore, we can still see their shadows dancing across dead leaves in the morning light.
Katherine Shopping Centre car park on a busy dry season Tuesday morning, Ginny and I sat in an increasingly hot and sweaty ‘Bessie the Bovan’ – a Hi-ace van painted up like a Freisian cow – waiting for the Greyhound bus from Darwin. We’d just hauled ass from Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, about 1200 k’s, where we’d entertained the drunken punters at Bojangles and the more polite, though no less sober, Cattlemen’s mob at their annual Ploughman’s Ball, with our upbeat country folk tunes, witty banter and the occasional bad joke.

We were to pick up Kimbo the Clown – yes that’s how he made his living – though we were soon to find out it wasn’t just an act. He’s lived his whole life doing stupid stuff. He’d flown into Darwin from Sydney the night before, never having been North of the Tropic of Capricorn, which was pretty evident when he got off the bus in Katherine’s main street and uttered “Fuck they’re black! I didn’t know they were so black!” Referring of course to the local indigenous mob sprawled out on the median strip enjoying a slab of green cans, a box or two of Lady in the Boat and a spirited discussion involving some very colourful language. After he’d gotten over the shock of landing in Katherine, we piled him and his small sports bag, which considering we were touring for two weeks didn’t seem like much luggage, into Bessie.

“Hey Kimbo, did you remember your pillow and sleeping bag? We got you a swag, but it’s probably gonna get a bit nippy out Kimberley way. You got enough clothes?” I asked him.

“She’ll be right. I’m sweating my ass off,” he replied.

After trying to explain to him that the nights get a bit cold inland he just shrugged and said, “I’m not a soft cock you know. It’s the bloody tropics, it can’t be any colder than Sydney right now.”

So we hit the road west along the Vic Highway for Kununurra and a small community south of there called Warmun, where we had our first gig. It was at Ngalanganpum (meaning mother and child) School, which has about 90 indigenous kids of assorted ages enrolled there. Show time 11am, a reasonable time considering Ginny is certainly not a morning person. Still after a night on the piss at Turkey Creek Roadhouse, it was hard getting everyone going. Ginny and I did our set with the kids getting them up on
stage for air guitar and Irish dancing competitions, which they all found hilarious fun, getting them suitably hyped up for Kimbo the Clown’s Northern debut.

He certainly has a way with kids and had them laughing and jumping up and down like crazy with his magic tricks and balloon animals. After the show he promised he’d give the kids their own balloon animals, so just as he was about to go back out to them, I suggested he only take what he could afford to give away, seeing as we had a few more schools to do balloon stuff at. He didn’t quite understand what I was saying, as far as him getting humbugged was concerned. As he made his way over to a small crowd of eagerly waiting kids, he didn’t see the rest of the mob running in from every direction, young and old, wanting a balloon animal from Kimbo. When the dust settled, Kimbo emerged from the middle of a melee of arms and legs, hair on end, dusty footprints up the back of his t-shirt and an empty packet of balloons. He was now very short of balloons and knows the meaning of humbug.

That night we camped out in a dry riverbed halfway between Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing. Got a nice fire going, cooked us up some curry and rice and enjoyed a quiet evening of staring at the flames and listening to the wildlife, which after a while included Kimbo’s snoring. He’d rolled out his swag and passed out fully clothed on top of it. Ginny and I hit the hay not long after that, with me waking up a few hours later to the sound of shuffling by the fire. Kimbo had dragged his swag over and was trying to get the fire going again.

“It’s bloody freezing,” he said.

I couldn’t help him out with anything other than an “I told you so”. We woke up the next morning to him huddled under his towel covered in ash.

About 800kms, and two school shows later, we arrived in Derby a day early for our show.

Deciding to have a bit of a nosey around we headed down to check out the jetty where you can watch one of the world’s biggest tides roll in and out – a whopping 11.8m! While we were down there admiring the muddy waters and taking silly photos of each other, we noticed a crew of Her Majesty’s servants doing a bit of a tidy up. We got talking to this young ranga named Herbie, and when he found out we were musos, wanted us to come perform for the inmates at Bungarun, where he was a resident. He had to check with Security to see if it was possible, so wandered off in the direction of a guy in uniform sitting in the shade with a book. After a short while they both came back over and were extremely excited about the prospect. Head security guard made a couple of calls and voila! we were now about to spend our first night in
prison. We were Bungarun’s first ever live entertainment. AND we got a place to stay and a feed, though we weren’t too sure what that was likely to be.

As it turned out Bungarun is a low security prison on the mudflats about 8kms out of Derby, housing about 20 inmates. Originally an old leprosarium started back in the mid 1930s, it closed in 1986 and was given over to the Aboriginal Land Trust, being a site of significant heritage and historical value to Aboriginal people and the St John of God sisters. It has been the site of a Department of Justice work camp since 2001 where prisoners get to work on rewarding projects, including the restoration and maintenance of the site, and interact with the community on a daily basis.

We got to roll our swags out in one of the old leprosarium buildings, with faded photos of former patients and the St John of God sisters looking down on us as we slept. Not that we slept that well. It was a very spooky place with some strange noises that kept us awake – well, kept me awake anyway, Ginny can sleep through a cyclone. One could almost believe in ghosts out there!

Anyway, we made them laugh and we made them cry, and they all said it was the best night they’d ever had in prison and said to come on back anytime we wanted. I reckon we will.

The next night we rocked up to the Spinifex Hotel, where we were to do our show, but found it had been closed down recently for renovations and our gig was now at the King Sound across the road. Compared to the relaxed run-down charm of the Spini, the King Sound was just like any other RSL Club type venue in Australia, with strict dress regs, poker machines and way too cold air-conditioning. As it turned out, Kimbo was in a bit of bother because he’d lost a thong somewhere between Fitzroy Crossing and Derby out the side door of Bessie and didn’t have another set of shoes. The publican was adamant that he couldn’t come into his pub without footwear. Lucky for Kimbo there never seems to be a shortage of lone double pluggers lying around the streets, so in no time at all he’d found one that almost fitted, just wasn’t black like his other one. Kind of a faded out lemon yellow. Anyway, the show went on.

Broome was a sight for sore eyes after a couple of weeks of desert dust. We headed straight for Cable Beach where we ended up in a game of cricket with a whole mob of ringers from Mt Sanford Station, who really blended in with the local beach bums in their board shorts, Hawaiian shirts and Akubra hats! The sun went down and the esky was empty so we all converged on Divers tavern for a few more coldies and some serious partying. Them ringers sure know how to dance up a storm. Woke up the next day a little worse for wear, and ventured out of our salubrious rooms at the Palms Resort in search of a washing machine. Two weeks of sweaty, dusty clothes were definitely starting to get a bit ripe. Luckily they had a laundry on the premises, albeit
an old one. I haven’t seen a twin tub since my grandmother’s house in the 70s. I was almost done hanging mine out when Kimbo staggered in, upended his bag into a washer, poured half a box of laundry powder on top of it, turned it on and wandered off. I hadn’t noticed that he didn’t put any water in on top of them. Neither had he when he came back later and began hanging out the still dry and dirty washing now covered in soap powder.

After two shows in Broome, one of them being cut short on us because the management wanted to show off the new lighting and doof system to the owners up from Perth – I hope this isn’t the beginning of the end of live music in Broome – we hit the road back east for our next gig at Cajebut Mining camp.

We decided to take the Gibb River Road as it’s a bloody beautiful scenic route, even though it’s a bit rough at the best of times, and because we don’t like to take the same road twice if we can help it. After a few hours of corrugations and Kimbo’s attempt at aqua planning on a creek crossing, we blew two tyres that had us running late for our show. We called them from Fitzroy Crossing and lucky we did because we were actually playing at Pillara mine, 80 kms closer to where we were, and would have been a hell of a lot later if we’d driven all the way out to Cajebut only to have to turn around and drive back!

Kimbo was a hit with his stand-up routine, which he was doing in between our sets, though at one point the miners said he was a bit crude. It must have been the joke about a white sheet, a woman with the painters in, and the Japanese flag. Now that’s saying something ‘cos those guys were about as rough as you get, though really well behaved for a bunch of rock apes. Just joking guys, we had a hoot!

Kununurra and the rodeo went off! Gulliver’s Tavern on the Friday night was a sea of ringers. Ginny and I were in seventh heaven. Halfway through our show some guy came up and asked us if he could get up on stage with us and dance and got upset when we politely told him no as it was way too small. He proceeded to tell us that he’d made a 50 buck bet with his mate that he could pull it off and was now 50 bucks down. Feeling a little sorry for him, and also seeing an opportunity for some free drinks, Ginny told him to go make another bet with his mate that he would suck her toes on stage but to make it for 100 bucks and a round of drinks for the band. So he did. Ginny had her socks off ready when he came up halfway through a song and pulled her boot off, nearly pulling her off the stage in the process. Man that was a well-earned 100 bucks. We didn’t have the heart to tell him where her toes had been in the last week. Definitely not too close to soap!

The rodeo on Saturday night had us up on the back of a truck looking out over the biggest mob of hats I’d seen since the main street parade in Tamworth. Towards the
end of our show we dragged a couple of ringers up on stage with us to sing *The Gambler*. If we had a dollar for every time we had that song requested we’d be a hell of a lot richer. Anyway, they did a great job. Even with us playing it in the wrong key and speeding it up. Just a pity they were singing a mile away from the microphones. Oh and a great stage dive off the truck, Mitch. Now I see how you got that broken arm.

Well it was a full moon and my birthday so needless to say the party kept going well after the bar was drunk dry of rum. A trucker friend of ours made the fatal mistake of passing out in the driveway of the ‘Band House’ where we were camping – apparently well known as the place to be for after gig parties. So we dragged him inside and made him comfortable on a swag then had our wicked way with him. We dressed him up in Kimbo’s bright orange clown wig, painted his mouth with some pretty pink lipstick, gaffer taped his ankles and eyes, tied a balloon penis on him, put lemon slices over the gaffer on his eyes, wrote “Thanks for a beautiful evening Trev, love Barry” on the TV in lipstick and handcuffed him to it, then took photos. We removed it all except the gaffer on his feet so he’d have no idea in the morning. The plan was to stick the photos up in all the truckstops from Kununurra to Darwin, but then thought it’d be better to blackmail a dinner and a couple of slabs out of him after we told him what we’d done. He was horrified.

Apparently so was Kimbo. He’d locked himself in the bathroom after watching what we did to Mish, scared to fall asleep around us in case his eyebrows were in danger of becoming extinct.

We pulled into Timber Creek on the way home for a couple of coldies and to say gidday to our mate Clive, the publican at the Wayside Inn. We were only supposed to make it a quick stop but somehow ended up playing a gig there and the party kept going, though we were definitely reaching the point of being almost partied out. After we’d done a set or two and had the whole bar throwing money at us, Kimbo managed to get a couple of young Japanese guys sumo wrestling. When that almost ended up in an all-out brawl with some local lads getting a bit carried away, he then started doing his fire juggling trick right next to the petrol bowsers, until Clive asked him very politely if he could move just a little bit further out. THE coolest publican ever. We were panicking there for a bit. Kimbo hadn’t even realised what he’d done.

Well we finally made it home to Darwin and after a last gig with Kimbo at the Palmerston Golf Club, where he ended up hooning around the bar in a golf cart, poured him onto a plane and uttered a huge sigh of relief. What an amazing tour.

It was definitely fun Kimbo, but I think you should stay in Sydney.
After the Bath

Kathleen Epelde

We’d been in Istanbul for a couple of days, and seen the two biggest sights – the Aya Sofya and the Blue Mosque. There was more, much more, according to the guidebook, to see. But, suddenly, I didn’t care if I ever saw the Topkapi Palace or the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts. All I wanted was to have a bath. A Turkish bath, of course.

As it turned out, our hotel was only about five blocks from one of the oldest bathhouses in Istanbul. Perfect. The Cagaloglu hamam was built in 1741 by Sultan Mehmet I as a gift to the city, since then, everyone from King Edward VIII and Kaiser Wilhelm II to Florence Nightingale and Cameron Diaz had had a bath there.

So I set out, weaving my way down the crowded streets, past the construction cranes and kiosks and shops selling books and carpets and kebabs. And men drinking tea. Turkey is the land of men hanging out drinking tea. Every block or so, I’d walk around a group of four or five seated on child-sized wooden chairs out in front of a shop, smoking and talking and drinking endless glasses of sugary, black tea.

Inside the Cagaloglu hamam was a courtyard that screamed ‘faded grandeur.’ The fountain in the middle had no water in it, and the grand marble staircase at the back led to a second floor that was closed off with chains and signs. Three or four men sat around, engaged in a desultory conversation, their limbs draped languidly over the stone benches that ringed the fountain. After a few minutes, one of them sauntered over and handed me a paper with the prices on it, regarding me with lugubrious eyes as he smoked, waiting for me to decide. I handed him fifty dollars, and he nodded in the direction behind me.

“Woman,” he said.

I walked down a corridor and into a room where a small group of women in white coats, like lab assistants, were clustered around a desk in the corner. One of them came over and handed me a cotton cloth and a pair of wooden sandals with high heels that looked more like small blocks of firewood than shoes. Then she ushered me into a narrow room and, with an expansive gesture of her arm, pointed out its features: a small table covered in dust, a crude wooden shelf above it, and a dirty mattress along one wall. I could hardly imagine Cameron Diaz lying on that.

Gingerly, I undressed, taking care not to touch the mattress. I hung my clothes on a hook in the wall and teetered out, struggling to stay upright on the wooden shoes
while holding the cloth – which was not much bigger than a tea towel – around me. The girl took my arm and guided me, like I was an old lady, into the steam room – a large room with a marble slab in the middle that lay beneath a glass dome through which sunlight filtered. Around the perimeter of the room were alcoves with a stone fountain in each, where cold water poured from a pipe. She handed me a plastic bucket, mimed the action of pouring water over her body, and left.

As I sat there, sweating and pouring water over myself, I noticed two other Western women across the room, their ageing white bodies spread out on the marble slab as young, beautiful Turkish women washed them.

Orientalism, I thought, sighing a dejected little post-colonial sigh. There’s no escaping it.

I’d written my thesis on how travel guidebooks to India orientalized the Indian Other, and it had pretty much ruined me for travel, to poor countries anyway. I had a terminal case of tourist guilt from being part of this industry that thrives on exoticizing and commodifying the Other.

The girl returned, wearing a bathing suit, and led me to the marble slab. I lay down, and she began moving her hand, covered in a mitten made of coarse cotton fabric, in long slow strokes over me. It felt strange, being washed by someone else. I hadn’t experienced this sensation since I was a child. When she was finished, she lathered me with suds, and then poured buckets of cold water over me.

I felt like the car in a car wash, right down to the five-minute massage at the end, a final polish and buff. I walked out of there, ready to hit the road. Next stop: Cappadocia.

We spent a few days in Urgup, seeing the cave monasteries and hermitages where early Christians lived, and then drove south toward the Ilhara Valley. We were heading for a town called Guzelyurt, where I’d booked us a room at a hotel in an old monastery, said to possess a ‘contemplative atmosphere’, if you believe those people who write guidebooks.

But there weren’t many signs out in the country, and we roared right past Guzelyurt and into a dusty little village at the top of a hill. The streets were deserted except for three women, walking toward us, wrapped from head to toe in brown cloth. As we approached, they pulled the fabric closer around them, so we could not see their faces.

In the opposite direction, an old man was approaching, with a boy of nine or ten at his side.

We pulled up next to them and I rolled down the car window.
‘Hotel Karballa?’ I asked the boy, tentatively. He was carrying a hay rake on his shoulder and looked serious.

He regarded me for a second with intelligent blue eyes, and then, out of his little mouth, came a stream of invective in Turkish that went something like this, I am sure: ‘Hotel? What do you mean, you stupid woman? There is no hotel here. This is not a town for tourists. Go back to where you came from, you lazy infidels!’

His voice got shriller as he continued, and he wouldn’t stop. I didn’t blame him but it was disturbing to be the object of such rage, especially coming from a child.

‘Go, Ric!’ I hissed at my husband, who was mesmerized at the sight of this kid. As we drove off, I turned around to see him, standing in the same spot, still shouting.

... ... ...

Guzelyurt turned out to be a friendlier place, though also conservative, like just about everywhere outside of Istanbul. As we sat down at a table on the plaza for lunch, I realized that every one of the twenty or so tables around us was full of men drinking chai. I was the only woman in sight.

That night, I was glad to see women come out to enjoy the festival the town was having. They sat in the shadows, though, quietly visiting with other women, covered in scarves and long cotton coats, as their men stared at the sexy young singer dancing up on the stage.

The kids were having a good time, too, running around, laughing and shouting over the music. Suddenly, a little boy was standing in front of me, presenting me with a flower.

‘For you,’ he said with a shy smile, his brown eyes glowing.

Maybe he was just trying to practise his English, but the innocence of it took my breath away. I barely got a ‘thank you’ out before he ran off to join his friends.

This is how much of travel is. You might try to be a good tourist – read up on a place before you go and even learn a bit of the language – but no matter how hard you try, most of the time, you’ll find yourself totally in the dark as to what is really going on in this place you’re in. And Turkey is a complex place – ‘where East meets West’ as the guidebooks are fond of saying, which has resulted in a culture that is a strange mix of sensuality and repression.

But isn’t that why we travel – to encounter difference? Seeing different cultures and ways of doing things makes us question our own ways of seeing the world, recognizing
that some of our values are relative, while others are universal. And hopefully we come away from the experience having learned something about ourselves and the world.

In Erzerum, one of the more conservative cities, in Anatolia, the northeastern part of the country, we checked into a hotel. It was a high-rise hotel on the edge of the city, and we were on the seventh floor. I opened the window to get some air. It was dusk and, as I stood there, looking at the mountains, the voice of a man echoed out over the valley. The call to prayer: Is there a more beautiful, mysterious sound in the world?

That night, we walked around town, looking for a place to eat, finally deciding on a restaurant where a smiling proprietor stood at the door. He welcomed us and a waiter came over immediately and seated us. All the tables were set, as though they were expecting a crowd, but we were the only ones there. Slowly, small groups of men began to arrive, and the waiter started taking orders. More men arrived and then a few women, wearing colourful scarves. They were seated in a room at the back. Again, I found myself to be the only woman, this time in a room of around fifty men.

Finally, the food began to arrive. But no one ate. Water was poured but no one drank. The head waiter stood nearby, checking his watch. And then we twigged to what was going on: Ramadan. We watched as the men at all the tables around us put the flat bread on top of their bowls of soup to keep it hot. Some put their spoons in the soup; the waiter kept checking his watch.

Then he saw me watching him and smiled. I mouth the word, ‘Now?’ across the room, pointing at the food. He laughed and pointed to his watch, wagging his finger ‘no.’ A man at the next table, who was watching us, laughed.

At six forty, as the sun set, everyone dug in. It felt like a family meal, with everyone talking and laughing. The waiter’s son, a boy of about twelve, was helping out, sliding around the tables with trays of soup and cups of chai after the meal. Half an hour later, everyone has finished and they go home.

Ramadan: A month of fasting, in which Muslims ask forgiveness for sins, pray for help in refraining from evil, and purify themselves by doing good deeds and exercising self-restraint.

I realized then, that I have not intentionally deprived myself of anything since I was a child, and used to give up candy for Lent. It’s all about desire in the West, creating it and endlessly pursuing it. We don’t deny ourselves anything, if we can help it. There is something to be learned here, I thought, as we went back to the hotel.
Miss Galaxy, Tonga 2003
Miranda Tetlow

No singlets, sleeveless tops or mini skirts. Keep it above the knee. These were rules to pack by as I headed off for a year of volunteer work in the Pacific’s last Kingdom.

I had accepted a position as a Media Coordinator for a Youth NGO. My job description was ambitious as the title, and I was charged with the responsibility of training and nurturing the future DJs, columnists, writers and publishers of Tonga. Of course, the reality of my job was somewhat different. I spend a lot of time with promising young Tongans, mostly drinking pineapple Fanta, eating deep fried cake and musing over the politics of sex, relationships and culture.

Contrary to Western myths about the sexually licentious Pacific, Tonga has a deeply religious population and traditions of respect, rank and hierarchy that go back centuries. The list of Tongan taboos is lengthy and unavoidable. They range from the language and protocol used in the presence of the royal family (who must be approached by commoners on hands and knees), to sexual mores where virginity and virtue reign supreme.

In fact, the word taboo derives from the Tongan tapu. We can probably thank Captain Cook’s voyages in the Pacific for this gift to the English language, but in any event, the words origins are widely recognised by etymologists. The notion of tapu is central to Tongan culture. And those who break tapu are punished – under law or informally by village gossips and finger pointers.

Yet one of the most popular events on the Tongan calendar is Miss Galaxy, a Tongan beauty pageant staged by the fakaleiti, the local transvestite community. This is a country where brothers and sisters sleep in different houses. Where affection in public is offensive and scenes involving kissing or sex are blacked out by the local television network. So I was surprised that one of the country’s most popular annual events would involve the fakaleiti sporting faux fur hot pants and high heels onstage for the best part of three days.

I encountered Tonga’s thriving fakaleiti scene when I first arrived on the main island of Tongatapu. Anxious to keep at bay the effects of sipi (greasy mutton flaps) and kapa pulu (tinned corned beef), I was pointed towards the netball fields where the fakaleiti team practiced diligently three times a week. As the gold medal winners at the 2001 Gay Games in Sydney, they deliberated on whether I had anything to offer their
current competition, but finally Saskia, with a frangipani behind her ear, declared that I was allowed to stay.

As I made my way out onto the field for the first quarter, my opponent Sione (Tongan for 'John') offered me a hibiscus flower for my hair and extended a long, manicured hand of welcome. In a country where someone riding a bicycle through the village is an event, the regular fakaleiti netball games were quite a spectacular and usually attracted a small but enthusiastic crowd.

Watching interactions between the Tongan community and the fakaleiti was even more interesting on the outer islands. ‘Eua, for example, has a population of approximately 5000 people, and if the capital Nuku’alofa seems to amble at the slow pace of taimi faka-tonga (Tongan time), this island is at a standstill. Notwithstanding, Maxi’s Disco is the place to be on a Saturday night in ‘Eua, particularly if you have a penchant for town hall socials, B & S balls and Under 18 rugby teams who have imbibed copious amounts of homebrew.

I was sitting on one of the benches inside when two young fakaleiti in halter neck tops, tight jeans with slits to the thigh and platform shoes sashayed onto the dance floor. The rugby team couldn’t believe their luck. They began slow dancing with the girls and I watched agape. I’d seen this scene descend into violence and homophobia in small town Australia, but in this backwater Tongan night spot it was dance floor as usual. The romance was only interrupted at midnight when the club, along with all shops and businesses, compulsorily shut in preparation for the Sabbath.

These initial experiences were an interesting taste of things to come. July is peak season for tourism, and takes in Miss Galaxy and a more traditional beauty pageant, Miss Heilala. Potential candidates for Miss Heilala must make ngatu (tapa cloth made from mulberry bark), perform the tau’olunga (traditional Tongan dance). Miss Heilala wannabes are on display across town for a full week, from official pageant events to their compulsory attendance at the King’s Church, where their full bodied, feminine charms are on the front pew for all to admire. True to Tongan custom, the swimsuit section is decidedly absent, although tau’olunga does involve the girls oiling their skin in order for the public to slap dollar bills on them as a sign of appreciation.

The Miss Galaxy competition draws its inspiration from Miss Heilala and like-minded beauty contests around the world, but combines their essential elements with satire, self-deprecation and home made glamour.

Anxious to catch the spectacle during my time in Tonga, I arrived clutching my ticket because Miss Galaxy has sold out, with audience members crowding into Queen Salote Memorial Hall, the country’s largest indoor venue.
And then the lights go down, and all eyes are on the stage. This may be the premier event for the Tongan transgender and transvestite community, but it still begins with a prayer from a local church minister. Then President of the Tonga Leiti Association, Joey Mataele, holds the limelight with the sort of authority only a shoulder padded white suit and bright-red lipstick can bestow. She gives a welcoming speech that includes pre-emptive apologies to the royal guests of honour for any offensive behaviour to come. And the gauntlet is thrown down – for three nights of “own costume design”, formal wear and talent quests.

Contestants have spent months rehearsing, obtaining sponsorship and fashioning clothes out of materials like plastic straws and tulle netting. And this year, the fashion extravaganza runs along an international theme. Outfits range from a sultry, shimmering Cleopatra number to Miss Trinidad and Tobago, who must duck so that the feathers of her Carnevale inspired bird costume don’t get caught in the ceiling fans.

Around me, sides are split and pants possibly wet, as contestants demonstrate talents ranging from tau’olunga to pole dancing, and list their favourite hobbies. Vanessa likes “reading, going to nightclubs and modelling with the boys”. Sonia’s favourite song is “Who let the dogs out?” while Uve’s “main interest” is “policemen”. The audience cheers and screams with laughter as participants ‘lose’ costumes, engage in crotch-rubbing dance displays and caress the buff, bronzed men who agree to perform alongside them.

Keen to get some more insight into fakaleiti culture and their position in Tongan society, I track down Joey Mataele a few days later and join her for coffee at a cafe on Tonga’s main street. She explains that the reception to Miss Galaxy and her community has not always been this warm. When HIV/AIDS gained a foothold in the Pacific, the fakaleiti were quickly denounced by church ministers and other community elders. Joey explains, “AIDS was thought to be a gay transmitted disease, and we started to get blamed for it and told we were sinners.”

In a population where the number of self-professed atheists could be counted on one hand, church disapproval is devastating. It was in this vein that Joey created the Miss Galaxy pageant in 1993, as part of a wider campaign to educate the community, address issues of discrimination and raise funds for the Tonga Leiti Associations’ activities. The fakaleiti were assisted initially under Australian aid schemes and by delegates from the Secretariat of the Pacific Community. And they were defended most vociferously by Papiloa Foliaki, Tonga’s first female parliamentarian.

Says Joey, “One particularly elderly minister said to Papiloa, ‘I don’t know why you support these children. [Homosexuality] is a sin, it’s in the Bible’. She just turned
around and said ‘I don’t know which Bible you’re reading’. After that, the controversy mellowed out.”

Joey laughs, and turns away to light a cigarette. “I usually try and stay away from politics, but I think it’s in our genes.”

The transformation of Miss Galaxy from blasphemy to entertainment must also be partially attributed to Joey herself, a high-profile campaigner with strong connections to Tonga’s always influential royal family. Her grandmother was brought up by Queen Salote, and Joey remembers growing up as “a living doll for Princess Pilolevu”.

She continues. “I think I was born with it. I don’t really remember deciding whether I was a leiti or not. On my first birthday I had a can-can dress, long curly hair and a corsage. Even my father said that they always noticed something different about me, but just left it at that.”

However, Joey admits it is not the same for all fakaleiti, particularly in outer islands or villages. At times, some have experienced harassment, exclusion from the community and physical or sexual assault.

Overall though, these days the flamboyance associated with the fakaleiti seems to earn them a grudging respect, even from most conservative elements of the population. But this version of tolerance is not accorded to gay men or lesbians. Joey notes that lesbians “don’t really come out in public, they don’t mix around with us. They keep to themselves. [Based on a] few comments I have heard, I think Tongan people would rather see the leiti. They can make an excuse for that, but not for the gay men or lesbians. I guess it’s because of our culture”.

I see the politics of sexuality play out regularly amongst friends in Tonga. Timi, a friend at work coyly admits to spending time with leiti, but marries a Tongan girl from his village before I leave. An expat lesbian couple living together pass as friends for months, but when the truth comes out, relationships with neighbours go cold. And a fellow volunteer, Martin, is openly gay and bristles every time he is labelled a fakaleiti by the locals.

He fumes. “You don’t have to be a leiti to be gay.”

In my year in the Kingdom, I learn that like most, Tongan culture is rife with contradiction. Virginity is sacred, yet explicit jokes abound, even on occasions like funerals. The fakaleiti enjoy high profile in the Tongan community but lesbianism exists mostly in rumours and whispered gossip. Homosexuality is not illegal, but it is against the law to walk around in public without a shirt on.
Miss Galaxy was an eye opener for me, and it’s still a favourite event among the Tongans, who love performance and visual story telling. It’s also illustrative that sexual diversity can be embraced, but as in any culture, there are always strings attached. And in the case of Miss Galaxy, some feathers as well.
A Place of Giants

Alan Whykes

The airport is small, as you might expect it to be, a calling card of buildings plonked on a low ridge. Could this really have been the fulcrum of epic battles for empire and Christendom? A soldier with an automatic weapon slung over his shoulder spits on the tarmac as a motorised pinnace brings out steps to the aeroplane. Already I have the feeling of being back, if not in the profligate gore of far centuries, in at least the nineteen-sixties. The landscape as seen from the air was not totally bereft of colour yet suggested a faded technicolor print of itself: trees washed out to barely green, buildings resigned to the fact that camel-hair brown can only be stacked three-storeys high, misshapen rocks that don’t sparkle in afternoon haze. I half expect David Niven, toting pale lilac cravat and stoic grimace, to pop out from behind a palm-tree (outlined in the dim and unwanted shades of the last crayons in the box) and ask me what the jolly heck by jove I’m doing here, or Gina Lollobrigida bestrapped by sunglasses and bandeau bikini to glance dismissively from her observation deck sun-lounge and order another cocktail from the off-white waiter.

The immigration officer asks if it’s my first time in Malta then stamps my passport before I can reply. Yes. The ring of ink glares regardless. The tourist information office is open but closed. “He’ll be back soon,” says another armed layabout. He’s not back within ten minutes anyway and I decide to find for myself a bus. I walk through the signless sixties until I see something that resembles a bus stop and the bus duly arrives shortly after, an out-of-puff Bedford Dupliant. The grinding of gears registers a small result on the Richter scale as we set off and echoes taxi drivers gnashing their yellow-brick-road teeth at me paying twenty cents for the journey instead of eight pounds.

Just twenty cents. Only three hundred and sixteen square kilometres of land. Barely four hundred thousand people proclaiming themselves to be an independent country. Only forty percent self-sufficient in food. Three islands worthy of the name and a few rocks breaching the cosmic blue of the Mediterranean. Highest point a goatherd’s bored throw above sea level. The numbers are small, small, small; even huddled together for comfort they barely seem capable of confronting the credulity that there is anything here at all.

A cough surges out of Purgatory and collapses me like a cheap beach chair; Dragunara Road goes vertical and the dust tastes like dust; a doctor diagnoses secondary infection of the whatsit; for three days there’s nothing but staring at the roof of my room. Exotic kickshaws such as the candy-coit qaghaq ta l-ghasel, supposedly easier to digest
than pronounce, must wait while I plough through acapsuled cocktail of antibiotics. Absurdly, these are the moments of which travel is made; too easy the shufti in the Uffizi, the aircon express to Ljubljana arrowing between field-scratching peons, the all-under-one-roof craft village, the lost luggage recovered in less than a day, the faultlessly translated menus of expat-islands, the guide gilt-tongued in five languages. No, it’s when some carelessly broken fruit sends you reeling to the slimy latrines at midnight, when the bus conductor is perched on a devil’s pyramid of boxes in the aisle so he can stuff his hands pathetically into the hole in the roof to staunch the rain, when the penalty for going through the wrong exit door is a rifle in the ribs and three hours of cowering, it’s in these times you know you are really Away, Abroad, Abandoned to the capriciousness of wildcat train strike or Maoist putsch. Every journey worth the name is inscribed in the cringing of bowels.

Innards and the rest of me are jammed into an apartment on the fifth floor of a hotel – and I use the term loosely – in St Julians. Somehow the decor survived post-seventies purges although it appears a succession of tenants have whittled away at the kitchen utensils. A cutting knife, for example, might be useful but there is none. I hack haplessly at an onion with a butter knife until both of us are weeping. The right window refuses to kiss and make up with his left sister, thus leaving a channel for mosquitoes of the gregarious sort. As the Indonesians say, there was only one but he brought his friends. The television has no remote control and all the button-pressing of legions provides nothing other than unlikely Maltese infomercials for carpet cleaners. A nuclear fail-safe sequence of light switches is required to spark the reading lamp into life but this is inadequate to transport me far into the disconsolate world of Francis Webb. The book slips from my hand as various planned excursions slip out of the range of possibility and become one with the sea, unworriedly filling a horizon gap between a red-rug casino and one of Vivaldi’s lesser seasons.

By day three, the travel rations brought from Italy are exhausted. I venture out and run the gauntlet of convenience wedded to expediency. I shall not want for precisely the things I do not want: chocolate bars, dried biscuits, Halter bonbons, tinned potato chips, unsly grog from Swedish bog beer to tipplers’ miniatures, chewing gum, fresher mints, the whole lot hocked by Joe, copied by Abdul and replicated by balding Brian on the next corner. My saving grace is a fruit vendor who, between throwing soggy strawberries at a skateboard crew providing Urban Defacement Services, plies me with grapes, bananas and oranges enough to tide me over. I hear some Maltese words barked sharply from a five-hundred-year-old cannon and they’re probably not vocab tidbits suitable for postcarding home to mum. The fruit tastes like stiff water, the air crumples stiffly from lack of moisture. My faithful ceiling offers me again its blank canvas upon which to faintly outline the crusader battlements I cannot see.
Suddenly I’m up and forcing myself perversely to see something, anything other and more than the still-life rectangle conjured by my implacable windows. There’s Marsaxlokk and its Lego-boat harbour fringed by dead fish staring glassily forever. There’re the balcony-fringed streets of Valletta, too precipitous to give full symphonic backing to the meticulous grid layout. Pock-marked bastions spill over with tightly-clinging weeds and the resignation of being admiringly sighed at for the millionth time. There’s the Centru Laburista bar pouring Nescafé for twenty-five cents into the cups of never-were-revolutionaries. There’re the glowing streets of the old capital still haunted by leering gargoyles and the whiff of gunpowder stockpiles. From the citadel of Mdina other villages shimmer and give way to other villages, an écru horizon carved out of yak butter.

On, on, the ferry from Sliema that leaves Captain Morgan touts in my wake, the cranes of irrepressible commerce, the noonday biddies collecting sun and hours in eyes dim, the Three Cities poking their slivered tongues into the sacred blue of the Grand Harbour. High upon the pentagonal cavaliers, where once signal fires indicated enemy approach, two goats chomp uncritically on wildsown grass. The Castellano’s residence is closed, the panorama open and loudly announcing megayachts for the mega-idle from its wide angles. I tiptoe by the Sacra Infermeria, a hospital of the Knights that, with the war business going through a cyclic downturn in 1652, was turned into a convent. Benedictine nuns still abide by their world-eschewing vows, never seen, never heard, never photographed by he turning this way and that from Chiaramonte relic to cat filling the lustrous interlude between flowerpot and doorway. The flowers chuckle softly at the monotone limestone and chant swoon before my voluptuous pink, covet the riches of my pure gold, swoon …

Through veil of -ycins and heavy tissues I notice that every house has a name. Even the most modest refuge has there beside the door a brief epithet in serious letters of nostalgia or private fancy: Eureka, Casa Salvatore, Sydney, Delphinium, Ontess, Vulcan, Merci, Oberammergau, Soleado, The Aztec, Ta’ Ging, Azur, Prinjol, North Star, Hurricane, Emerald, Qalb Ta-Marija, Polmar, Millennium. And if I had a residence here, what would it be called? Prone? Unforsaken? Wistful? Passer-by? I pass Wignacourt’s miraculous aqueduct, now channeling only sightlines from the central plateau to the inevitable sea and its endless boulevard of lycra-strapped girls striding for health and tottering pommies gasping for the revitalisation of sea air.

On, on, the bus that hurtles through every rut as its gramophone wheels play the teeny-town tunes of Madliena, Qawra, Bugibba, Xemxija, Melieha and finally the land’s-end port of Cirkewwa. Ferry ushers me past the crouching turtle of Comino Island and on to Gozo, wobbly legs send me winding between olives and vines sprouting from lost-my-balance hillsides. At Gigantija, the prehistoric boil on the lip of Xaghra, I’m
prepared for a pile of rocks. And so it is, but what sublime rocks! Every megalith begs a story, every block rolled into place five thousand years ago dares to speculate. The altars are long since dry of blood and the roof support beams have rotted to delusion. Yet the encroachment of poppies, daisies and other opportunistic seed heads offers hope; the people died out but life as life did not. See the sunlight passing lithely through the passageways of priests! Marvel at the balance of stone piled on boulder propping up the platinum chambers of heaven itself! I catch my breath and inhale deeply of the dulcet vales draped below, expanding in turn inside of me. Bigger now, the rapture and ruin of aeons at my feet, I am finally awake and upright, beanstalk surging in exuberance. I find my place, the place of giants indeed.

I rise up through Victoria’s fabulously walled city and its antechamber mapped by children bouncing between ghostly icons, idle sulkies and doors worshipping viridity. I am tall enough to stand square against row after row of bus-shelter balconies, plinth elegant and pouting with pride. Balconies are for laundry, for conversation, for allowing the still air of December to be toasted by leisurely degrees, for odds and ends, for the lazy curl of straw blinds, for painting from the inside with languorous strokes and drips of carelessness, for pot plants, for maintaining one’s detachment from the hoi-polloi heading home to stand, in turn, in their own glassed domain. Or in the case of the Casa Viani, the balcony is for defenestrating the French Commander and hence sparking a general uprising against the occupation. These people stood up on their handkerchief isles again and again: in 1565 against the Turkish invasion, during the Second World War against the German blitz, endlessly and uprighteously against a tide of foreign pickpockets, Papal khedives, imperial carpetbaggers and the meagre providence of their cactus-crowned rock.

I could be as shipwrecked as Paul, dubitable chronicler and saint-to-be run aground in AD 60. Presumably he didn’t land with a fistful of counterfeit banknotes like the stubbly boys (Albanian? Tunisian?) trying to pass bodgy twenties in a nightclub framed by a semi-naked fire-eater upside down on a trapeze. The boys pretend it was all a silly-ho-ho mistake and move on to flush the dosh elsewhere. Probably they don’t reach the souvenir shops populated by bus miniatures (lovingly crafted but without the loaded eccentricity of the real thing, e.g. a hand-made sticker “Meet Me Half-Way” emblazoned on the windshield or a clock improbably truncated at 3:33 forever), jokey tea towels, museum piece replicas, plaster Osiris eyes and the layered beauties of Gozo glass. Having relatives in Australia – possibly those dislocated Malts who hacked at my ankles on the unfenced fields of suburban under-twelve soccer – he is able to advise me that Gozo glass is the ideal gift for my mother, sister, girlfriend, neighbour’s budgie, etc. I succumb to mum and he inspects the bill under a blacklight. It’s good. I reel out into the light, the steep alleys and wheel ruts of San Gwann and the ultimate exhibition of cockily-draped cats as urban decoration.
I know someone will ask me, even after all photographs have been exhaustively sifted for traces of the living, what the Maltese are like. From my vantage points — balcony, park bench, fifth row of bus, mediaeval parapet deflecting morning sun not arrows — I can do little other than examine the parade of faces. Italo-Norman, Turk, modern Greek, mediterraneo classico, Arab half-breed, Cypriot or compulsive gambler, flouncing ode to hair-care products, self-muzzled catechumen, extirpated Brit, Russian rigour scowling from a hired wagon, hooked nose bent over blow-dried moustache, tears of no-rage dried to resemble eye patches of faithful pooch, squinting fisherman, sage of rocks and gravel, woman with cheeks sectionable as tree trunks for deciphering her years. The faces weave their tapestry, each individually-crafted thread but a shade of the whole. If only I could stand back far enough to see it! The only meaningful distance will be my departure.

Gone like a stolen kiss, I’m out of the hotel while the streetsweepers still tend the detritus of the night before. Goodbye mosquitoes, well-examined ceiling and the mock imperial demeanour of a time writhing in Other. When I get into the taxi the driver already has a half-smoked, half-chewed cigar wedged between his fingers. It’s a plectrum he uses to play the steering wheel across road lanes, turning a modest duet of early traffic into a lively five-piece with big band kick out of the curves. Occasionally he lights it up, long enough to satisfy himself that his hacking cough has not gone away, then stubs it out on the dashboard. For the first time I’m aware of industrial suburbs, crouched under bridges and behind embankments as if terminally on the run from public consciousness.

Airport again, the unavoidable closure of the parenthesis. The immigration officer is bored already and there’s still six hours at least to oily lunch. Exited Malta blah-blah, the ink is just as clear and irreversible. A week already? Somehow I’m bigger now, reduced in health but grown in spirit. I get barely one tender foot in the door of the plane and the rest of Malta rides with me beseeching a tag-along lift and a memory. You’ll have it. They nod, giants all in a row, their massive foreheads bowing to almost kiss the waves. By George, says Niven nipping out from behind the palm for a whistled toodle-pip, by George you’ll have it.
Into the Territory

Rohan Wightman

We’d lived in the Territory for six years but spent most of our holidays overseas and had been planning our first long outback journey, checking out *The Territory*, for six months. Then the engine of my 4–runner blew up, and I had to buy another car in a hurry, which was now haemorrhaging oil over the carport.

‘I told you it was a piece of shit. I don’t know why you insisted on buying it,’ said Liza, eying off the pool of oil spreading from the front wheel to the back of the car.

The haemorrhage was patched, or whatever it is mechanics do, by the afternoon. I was getting a second spare wheel from the wreckers when I noticed water pissing out of the radiator. I cursed and bought some Stop Leak, hoping it would do the job so I wouldn’t have to tell Liza about the latest disaster.

The pool of green water under the engine the next morning revealed the truth.

‘Shit, what a lemon,’ grimaced Liza as she dumped an armful of camping gear on the ground. ‘Better call the house-sitter.’

‘After I call the radiator repair people.’

It was 7:00 in the morning. I called every radiator place in Darwin until someone answered, then told the house-sitter we’d be out by the middle of the afternoon. She’d flown up from Melbourne and was staying at a backpackers until we left.

By 2:00 the radiator was repaired. We hurried back to the house, packed and took off, forgetting the camera in the rush. The steering on the Landcruiser was as sloppy as a seal’s kiss. You didn’t steer so much as work out your arms and shoulders. The faster you drove, the harder the work out.

Thankfully the loud stereo masked the grinding sound coming from the front wheels each time I turned.

‘Play Savurve Mountain,’ yelled Ksenya, our four year old daughter, from the back seat. I cranked up Neil Young’s Sugar Mountain.

‘We won’t get far tonight,’ said Liza.
‘Maybe Hayes Creek. That camping ground behind the shop’s pretty nice.’

Ksenya demanded Sugar Mountain replayed, which it was for the next hour.

‘Better stop soon,’ yelled Liza, ‘got to feed Ksenya and put her to bed.’

‘I’m not tired,’ wailed Ksenya.

‘Are you ever tired?’ I asked.

She shook her head.

‘Next town’s Adelaide River.’

‘That’ll do, there’s a caravan park there,’ nodded Liza.

The camping area was a small patch of grass tucked between the caravan area, the service station and the highway.

The light from the servo spilled out over the tent. There was constant noise from the highway, and headlights from cars and trucks getting fuel illuminated the area like a spotlight.

‘Weird place for a camping area, you’d reckon they’d put caravans here ‘cause the light wouldn’t affect them as much.’

‘Yep, it’s a crap site,’ agreed Liza.

‘I’ll put up the tent,’ laughed Ksenya, running around the car.

Sleep was the full stop between the rumbling of trucks and glare of headlights. Ksenya was awake and demanding breakfast as day light merged into the service station lights. It was cool and clear, the stars still shimmering. Cockatoos screeched as they flew out for the day.

By 7:00 we were ready to go. I had a quick look around the Landcruiser. Nothing leaking, I turned the key, it spluttered and stopped. I could feel Liza looking at me. I closed my eyes and willed the engine to start. It coughed and rattled into ignition.

‘Going to Mataranka?’ asked Ksenya.

‘Yep,’ smiled Liza.

‘Mataranka, Mataranka,’ sang Ksenya.
The Stuart Highway was relatively quiet as the sun rose into the clear sky and the last of the stars disappeared.

‘Remember last time we were here?’

Liza nodded, ‘Pretty different now isn’t it.’

‘Sure is.’

Last time we were on the way to Mataranka, hiding out from Cyclone Carlos. The now sluggish Adelaide River was a swirling green monster licking the road spanning the bridge. The flood plains between Adelaide River (town) and Hayes Creek were a series of lagoons flowing over the road. Red legged jabirus and ibises waded elegantly through the water; a carpet of purple lilies gently bobbed in the current and the trees were luminescent green. Now it was nothing more than a cracked plain of dusty earth spotted with bedraggled trees.

We drove quickly through the crisp dawn, the black ribbon of the Stuart Highway unwinding before us until the sun was well above the horizon. A lumbering caravan wavering all over the road slowed us down. On rises I glimpsed the lane in front; a convoy of caravans stretched for ever.

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Mataranka Homestead Caravan Park was packed. Caravans sat in regimented lines, so close you could hear your neighbour farting. The camping area was a rough steep patch of rock where a few tents were spread out under the odd trees that remained.

Another poor camping site, by the end of the holiday I understood why tent sites were in the worst locations.

We set up camp then walked through a pandanus forest to the hot-spring. We heard the laughter well before we got to the fenced and concrete walled springs.

The place was packed. People of all ages floated, sat and chatted in the warm water. Bags and towels were strewn over the flagstones surrounding the pool, and a nappy peeked out from behind some bushes.

We jumped in, the warm water washing off the residues of the day. Ksenya splashed about madly. Liza and I dodged our way past people, looking for a place to call our own.

We crawled out hours later to make dinner. With Ksenya finally asleep we sat around the fire and drank a beer. Minutes later a band started, their repertoire a collection of Aussie rock classics, starting with Men at Work’s Down Under. Song after song of iconic
titles followed, most referencing Australia in some way, just in case the wildly cheering audience forgot where they were. No songs from Youth Yindi, or Warumpi Band. No, ‘My Island Home’ or From Little Things Big Things Grow. They played the same songs for the next five days.

Ksenya was awake at six in the morning, crowing, ‘hot springs, hot springs.’

Steam drifted off the water in thin tendrils. It was a cold morning so the springs felt beautifully warm and relaxing. The minerals, fresh from the ground, lightly pricked my skin. Ksenya and I lazied around, floating through steam.

‘Beautiful isn’t it,’ said Liza as she plunged in, after announcing breakfast was ready. We swam around some more, enjoying the quiet. People appeared in dribs and drabs until the pool was edging towards crowded, so we left.

After breakfast we drove to Bitter Springs.

The blue tinged springs are clear and deep, pandanus and ferns crowd the shoreline. The river has a slow current and fifteen minutes after entering the water we were at a bridge, which was as far as you could go. We got out and did it all again for the rest of the day. It was crowded too, but was so big you never felt crowded out.

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Five days later we left Mataranka and the Stuart Highway and onto the single lane Roper River Road, which soon turned from bitumen to a dusty orange line cutting through scrubby green.

Gnarled spindly trees and low grass shimmered all around. Cattle grids and tracks going to places unknown flashed past. We didn’t see another car for hours. It was just us, the dust, cattle and the occasional Aboriginal man sitting under a tree. The car bucked and rattled along the road, red dust settled like an eiderdown inside the car.

‘Dirt road, dirt road,’ chanted Ksenya before demanding Saltwater Band on the stereo. Subtly the land changed. The trees became less dominant and gave way to savannah. The horizon remained olive, the sky blue. The fuel indicator dropped as the sun climbed.

There were no signs indicating anything. I stopped the car and we stretched our legs. The only sound was wind rustling the grass. The silence filled us, squeezed out the residues of our working selves and the cacophony of memory of everything before.

‘Peaceful isn’t it,’ remarked Liza.

I nodded and Ksenya threw stones at the car.
We rattled off and arrived at The Roper River Store early in the afternoon. A road train was pumping fuel into the underground fuel reservoirs, its trailers snaked across both driveways. The store was a tall square brick building, slightly incongruous amongst the flat plains. A patch of watered green grass was opposite; a fading sign stated it was a camping area.

We bought fish and chips and waited for the truck to finish. Eventually we filled up and turned onto the Nathan River Road. A line of green trees signified the river. The land was green on one side and brown on the other. The sun was sinking into the horizon.

‘Better stop soon,’ said Liza.

‘I know. I’ll look for a place.’ All I could see was grass and trees. No signs, no camping spots. I turned a corner and was stunned. Buses, caravans, camper-trailers and mobile homes were crammed into a grassy area as big as three football fields.

‘Shit, what’s this,’ muttered Liza ‘Must be Tomato Island.’

‘Tomato, Tomato Island, I want to camp,’ sang Ksenya.

I stopped the car for a look. A suitcase crammed with books sat on a rough wooden shelf. A sign proclaimed, Tomato Island library. Please return books.

Close by a man sat under a tarpaulin shelter surrounded by red plastic fuel containers. A sign advertised Fuel for sale. A flag pole, flying the Australian flag, stood in the middle of the camping area.

‘May as well stay here, said Liza.

I nodded. ‘If we can find somewhere.’

We drove slowly around. Eyes followed us. Most people had caravans or camper-trailers. The few tents were pushed to the very edge of the temporary organic village that is Tomato Island.

I shook my head. ‘No places here.’

‘I want to camp,’ wailed Ksenya.

I drove off. Ten minutes later I spied a track leading towards a caravan. I followed it to a wooden jetty stuck out in the mangroves. A sign stated Lenny’s Jetty.
While we were looking for a place to camp, a bald headed old man stumped across to us from the caravan.

‘This is my place, gonna be five more caravans with my mates here in an hour. You can't stay here,’ his dentures clacking like machine guns.

‘I want to camp!’ wailed Ksenya.

‘Been coming here for ten years, this is mine,’ repeated the man, the sinking sun painting his domed head red.

As we drove off his wife waved, as if we were friends departing after a nice dinner together.

‘Prick,’ said Liza, ‘I hope Lenny gets taken by a croc next time he’s pissing off his jetty.’

Ten minutes later another track veered off towards the river. I followed it, no one was there. Hastily we put up the tent, lit a fire, cooked dinner and put Ksenya to sleep.

The fire glowed in the darkness. Silence descended like it only can well away from the urban world. At last it felt like we were out bush and I was looking forward to a peaceful night in front of the fire. Then the whining started, fat swarms of mosquitoes blitzkrieged us.

‘Light a coil,’ suggested Liza. I did, and smoked the fire up and we doused ourselves in citronella. Still they kept coming. We spent five minutes slapping ourselves silly then went to bed.

I woke to a series of loud whines, too loud to be mosquitoes, although the outside of the tent was thick with them. I stumbled out, with Ksenya, and we wandered down to the river. The river was one hundred yards across and looked deep and inviting as it snaked through the verdant country, its steep banks indicating how big it got in the wet season. A flock of whistling ducks flew overhead; then a flotilla of boats, fishing rods hanging off them like antennae, whined past.

Ksenya and I watched the river for a few minutes. A white triangle bobbed in the distance. Magically a yacht appeared, sailing upstream. It scudded past, a man at the helm. I yelled, ‘where’d you sail from?’

‘Vernon Islands,’ he yelled.

We came to our first river crossing soon after leaving, a four metre wide slow moving stream of water. The Landcruiser’s nose dipped down, muddy water splashed over the
windscreen. Ksenya laughed hysterically and with a throaty grind the Landcruiser leapt out the other side.

‘I want a river crossing,’ yelled Ksenya.

‘We’ll look out for another one,’ said Liza.

For the next few hours Ksenya was amused by at least ten river crossings. The country slowly turned rocky. The road became teeth shatteringly bumpy, rugged orange cliffs towered next to us and trees were replaced by grasses and boulders.

I was listening to ABC radio as we drove and heard that Rhett Walker had been flown to hospital after an accident.

‘Shit,’ I said to Liza, ‘that’s the guy who owns Lorella Springs, where we’re going.’

‘Sounds bad. Do you think they’ll want people there still?’

‘Dunno, can’t really turn back now.’

By lunch time we were at The Lost City, a collection of rock pinnacles and huge boulders spread out over a couple of kilometres. Any collection of large rocky outcrops vaguely resembling a lost Mayan city is called The Lost City in The Northern Territory. You’d think they could come up with another name to distinguish them, Post-Apocalyptic City for example.

We started chatting to a couple and found out they’d just come from Lorella Springs.

‘How’s Rhett?’ I asked.

‘Pretty bad. He was clearing some scrub with a tyre chained to the back of the grader. The fencing wire tied to the chain snapped and the chain flew through the back of the grader and wrapped around his head. Took twelve hours for the flying doctor to get there, looked like he was going to die, there was lots of blood.’

A few hours later we passed the grader as we drove into Lorella Springs. We went to the bar, a solid wooden building surrounded by grass and a huge fire pit, to book in. We got a nice site close to the hot-springs.

Most people had caravans, camper trailers or mobile homes. No one has just tents these days, guess that’s why camping sites are generally in the worst locations. Tents are what poor people have.
We spent the first few days recovering from the long drive. The hot spring was a small creek with deep holes, surrounded by pink lotus flowers. The water was clear, relaxing and rarely used. Lorella Springs is a million acres of wilderness with four-wheel drive tracks to a great variety of features. Every morning cars would disappear for the day, exploring the station.

After a few days we decided to go a natural waterslide that runs between two rock pools. It took us an hour to drive twenty kilometres on the rough track, and another hour of scrabbling along a dried rocky creek bed.

We were on a high plain and below us stretched wilderness as far as you could see. There was no one there but us. The silence, the sense of isolation seeped into my body like a drug.

The slide was ten metres long and followed a water course down a large rock from a small pool to a large pool. It was a fast ride into the deep cold pool, but so refreshing. Ksenya found my phone and decided it might like a slide too. ‘No,’ I yelled. With a laugh she pushed it down and it slid into the water.

. . . . .

We were happy lazing around the camp, sitting by the fire at night and looking at the stars.

Across the way two families had set up camp with their camper trailer. They had a boat, quad bike and chainsaw. The men got around in blue jeans and singlets with akubra hats.

They always had a huge pile of fire wood and fancied themselves as real bushmen, which is why I was bemused by their wood chopping antics. One of them was striking at a small log with an axe. It kept leaping snake like into the air.

I don’t claim to be the outdoors type but know you should put you foot small logs while chopping, otherwise it’s likely to smack you the face. After awhile they stopped chopping and strode our way. The bigger one was top dog, and his slight mate was his sidekick and admirer.

I could see it in the big bloke’s eyes, he had a narrative for me from the moment he saw me. Bald guy in a sarong, wife in hippy clothes, cheap looking four-wheel drive, camping in a tent, must be on the dole, bummimg around on MY taxes.

‘You just travelling around are ya?’ the bigger one asked, arms folded across his chest.

‘No, on holidays.’
‘Oh yeah, how long for?’

The smaller guy smirked as the bigger guy spoke.

‘Few weeks, school holidays. I’m a teacher.’

‘Oh,’ muttered the bigger guy.

‘Yeah, I taught Indiana, Rhett’s son, the guy who owns this place. He did a blog for me for English. It was good and I wanted to check the place out.’

‘Fair dinkum,’ he exclaimed.

‘Yep.’

The smaller guy scratched his balls and looked away.

‘Okay, nice talking to you.’ And they stumbled off towards the bar.

They left the next day. I hope they learn how to chop wood one day.

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We left a few days later via the Carpentaria Highway and were back in Darwin four days later. Our three week journey into The Territory was finished and I felt I knew it and its people a little better.
Looking for Bertha Strehlow – giving voice to silence

Abstract:
Silence is a prevailing theme in the story of Bertha Strehlow (1911–1984). She lived in Central Australia in the 1930s at a time when very few white women had. Bertha was the first wife of Central Australian anthropologist and linguist TGH (Ted) Strehlow (1908–1978). Her story has been largely overshadowed by the dominance of his career and publications, despite her pivotal role in the development of his work. While examining the historical silence that surrounds her, I explore Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the ‘two books’, to help unravel the problem of fictionalizing the story of an historical character. This conceptual framework explains my impulse to write about this little known woman.

The paper also looks at the characteristics of the verse novel and explores how it is an effective genre for the development of a narrative to give voice to historical silences. I include two poems from my creative work: *At the end of the frost*, a verse novel from Bertha’s point of view, to demonstrate how poetics in the verse novel can illustrate the gaps in the narrative of historical fiction and how it is an effective literary device to explore silence in history.

Introduction
As the study of any biographical work unfolds, contradictions and conundrums in the life of the subject are uncovered. Bertha Strehlow is no exception. While fulfilling the traditional role of the ‘wife’ in the 1930s, she also wrote publicly about the poor treatment of Aboriginal people in Central Australia by pastoralists and the government. Despite this, there are few records of her or her attempts to speak out about her concerns regarding the injustices around her.

Bertha (1911–1984) was the first wife of the anthropologist and linguist TGH (Ted) Strehlow (Jones 2002). She lived in Central Australia from 1936 for six years and travelled widely, writing and assisting Ted in his work. But Bertha’s story has been largely overshadowed by the dominance of her husband, despite her pivotal role in the development of his career through the editing of his work.

In this paper I explore how poetry, and the verse novel in particular, is effective in the exploration of Bertha’s silence and how this can give her the opportunity to speak.
A conceptual question: Deleuze

While searching for a possible framework that might make sense of my impulse to write about Bertha as well as dealing the issues of imagination and ethics in historical fiction, I was relieved to read the work of historian Tom Griffin (2009:8) and French postmodern philosopher Gilles Deleuze⁴. Griffin discusses the writers’ conflict when faced with writing ‘truth telling’ and fiction. He proposes that:

Imagination must work in the creative friction with a given world, there are rules as well as freedoms, there are hard edges of reality one must respect… There are silences not of our making…These silences and uncertainties should be part of any story we tell (2009:8).

To work with these ‘hard edges’, ‘these silences’, I have explored a theoretical approach that suggests a way to understand my writing of Bertha’s story. I examine a concept highlighted by Deleuze and ask: is it possible to use his concept of ‘the two books’ to expose the untold story of Bertha Strehlow?

Deleuze theorised that for every writer there are two books to be written: the book in ink and the book that is etched on the soul⁵. He said ‘A great book is always the inverse of another book that could be only written in the soul, with silence and blood (Deleuze 1997).’ Is it possible then to tell the story written on the soul – for the writer to ‘speak’ as Bertha?

To consider applying this theory to the problem of writing for, or about, an historical figure, the different aspects of the person’s life need to be considered. The primary sources of information on Bertha Strehlow includes the writings about Bertha by Ted in his many diaries (Strehlow 1955), the limited work she published, and her letters, all of which contribute to the ‘book written in ink’. This includes evidence of her travels across the desert by camel in 1936 and her grave illness following the miscarriage of her baby near Kata Tjuta (Mt Olga)⁶.

The inverse then is the verse novel that becomes the inner story – the ‘book of the soul’ – the silent story. Using this theory may provide a framework for stepping into Bertha’s space, to develop an understanding of a character across time.⁷

While I have enjoyed the poetic image of the book of the soul, there have been critics of the concept. Academic and commentator on Deleuze, Ian Buchanan, suggests a difficulty with this theory. He argues that in writing ‘the book of the soul’ yet another book is created and the book of the soul continues to remain unread because it is always defined by its absence (Buchanan 2000:3-4). Despite this criticism, I still feel this is a useful concept, as it helps me to explain why my work on Bertha, which is fiction, will only ever hint at the book of the soul.
Further to this, an exploration of the literature shows the versatility of the verse novel, and demonstrates it is an effective genre that has frequently has been used to explore the ‘book of the soul’. This is particularly evident in the verse novels of poets Emily Ballou in her work on Charles Darwin (2009), and Anna Kerdijk Nicholson in her work on James Cook (2010). The works are good examples of the creative friction as expressed by Griffin (2009:8) as stories that extend the known outer historical landscape of the characters and touch on the silence of their inner landscape.

The Verse Novel and Historical Fiction

Using verse to explore biography can hint at the empty spaces of history – ‘the unknown’, by placing possibilities there. Through poetry the vivid moments of Bertha’s life in Central Australia are told. This brings her into the writing and explores her as a character living at a significant time in history. The verse novel as a genre intuitively reveals her part in the history. The historical events of Bertha’s life and the information about the era drive the plot, moving the story forward while the interweaving themes of place and belonging are explored by inner reflective poems. The poems explore insights into her as a character that aim to challenge some of the stereotypes of the female ‘pioneer’ (2005).

Writer and commentator on Australian verse novels, Christopher Pollnitz, (2009:235) suggests that the verse novel form is effective for use in historical fiction because can push the author into ‘quasi-confessional intensity’ by the use of the first person monologue. By writing about Bertha in the first person, it is possible to do as Pollnitz suggests and interrogate the inner landscape of the character. The following poem is an example of this. Bertha has just suffered a miscarriage on an epic camel trip and is gravely ill. The poem allows an insight into her character at a moment of grief and fear.

Beauty

Beauty is a young man
so filled with fear and passion
he breathes his secrets to me.

Here the desert sky
reaches beyond the heavens.
As the night blackens
it presses down on us and
he speaks of loss –
of being utterly alone,
and we pray
that God will save us.
I feel calm – safe,  
and tell him  
my big secret – of the man I loved first.  
I feel my husband stiffen, pull away  
from me.  

But we are here alone –  
our baby gone now.  

Her tiny, hardly formed body  
buried by the tree  
where I have cried myself empty.  

And now my stained  
cloths,  
shade the waterhole  
pink.  

I watch him,  
bent by the sand  
as he washes them.  
There is no one else.  

(Shilton 2011)

For this poem and others in *At the end of the Frost*, I have used the writing technique of parataxis to evoke a sense that the characters are ‘outside time’ in the desert. This technique enables the past, present and future to intersect in the lives of the characters (Mallan & McGillis 2003) as past events come into the present at this moment of crisis for Bertha. The continuity of time has a metaphorical effect as it evokes the timelessness of the desert and thus operates at a deeper level across the whole story: 

Writers Mallan & McGillis discuss this technique:

> Parataxis stretches out connections, suggests the continuity between past, present, and future, lends to an apparent equal importance of all experience, and of course refuses to privilege one character or one object or one place over another. In other words, in a paratactic space one may successfully avoid rule: boundaries are fluid rather than rigidly demarcated (2003:4).

Ted and Bertha are altered from this moment on. The intensity of the present, with the shocking loss of their first child, with the fear and intimacy it evokes, and their absolute physical isolation, impacts future events that will always be overshadowed by the past.
The use of this technique as well as others such as fragmentation, metaphor and imagery, can evoke an intense emotional response in the reader. This stimulus to the imagination helps the reader to fill in the gaps as the characters step out of history and become more identifiably human.\footnote{12}

The development of character can help to explain the increasing popularity of this genre and its use in the writing of historical fiction as the character is speaking directly to the reader. The characters in *At the End of the Frost* are historical figures and the story has the basis of fact, but uses fictional devices where Bertha tells the story she may never have spoken aloud. For instance, in a paper Bertha published documenting the camel trek her and Ted took in 1936 (Strehlow 1945), she does not mentioned the loss of the baby nor her subsequent illness and brush with death. This information is only revealed in a letter to her mother in law (Strehlow 1936).

As I write about Bertha I find myself looking into her ‘quiet’ past. I am writing about an historical character not widely known, who has had very little, if anything written about her. Besides the primary sources, there are no historical texts, commentary or theoretical works on Bertha.\footnote{13} Thus there is a real sense of the writing coming out of silence.

**Place and creativity**

Poet and screenwriter, Emily Ballou, in her background essay on her poetry about Charles Darwin, talks about walking by the same river that Darwin walked beside many years earlier. It was this, and the reading of his work that was the beginnings of a relationship. She says:

> It’s an act of affinity that allows two historically separated people to briefly, simultaneously, exist together in a new form. Weaving the mask of Charles Darwin and transporting myself into another time … also allowed me to explore philosophical concerns I felt otherwise unable to write-as-myself (2010:2–3).

Likewise, Bertha and I have shared the setting of Central Australia, her for six years and me for twenty-six, separated by nearly fifty years. This shared setting has allowed me to ‘jump time and perspective’ (2010:2) as Ballou suggests and to imagine myself in Bertha’s space, enabling the creative process to unfold around her.

Emily Ballou discusses creating a ‘portrait’ of Darwin in words (2010:1–2); ‘Tiny moments and thoughts, like collage slowly assembled, once drawn together make a face (p2).’ Similarly as I focus on Bertha’s writing and her turn of phrase in the limited work she left, my poems shift between fact and fiction as the story arrives like a ‘wave at my feet’ (Brophy 2003:171).
Initially, my writing on Bertha focused on the romantic possibilities in the story; the love of a man, the sense of adventure, the desert… but it soon became clear that the story had deeper complexities; the physical and geographical challenges of the era, control in the marriage, and the difficulties of the ‘pioneering’ aspects to Ted’s work\(^\text{14}\) (McClintock 1995). Taking these complexities into the writing have help develop a multiplicity of layers in the work. The collage slowly assembled (Ballou 2010:2) and led to this poem – the first poem in the story:

\textit{The Gramophone}

The music moves against the canvas.
I am dancing,
my skirt could be silk
and my shoes
fine sandals.

He holds me, murmurs in my ear.
I try and remember
what it was he said,
to make me leave my green hills –
my parents.

He spoke in coloured dreams
that turned my head –
stories of nomads and deserts.
Spoke in a language that
rose and fell –
an ancient music.

It could have been Africa
we were coming to,
a more different world
I couldn’t imagine.

The gramophone
is a link
to my old life,
and here I dance with him –
my feet in thick shoes,
stepping lightly
through the dust.
\textit{(Shilton 2011)}
The sparseness of the poetic image attempts to achieve what Brophy (2003:86-87) describes as breaking up the usual path of communication;

‘Poetry tends to fragment the normal progression of language, thought and experience. We are suspended upon ambiguities or upon the multiple meanings of images’ (p86).

The reader – ‘the assumed third party’ (Ballou 2010:3), brings the images to life as the words on the page mix with the reader’s own memory and experience. The spaces are filled; coloured in by the reader.

**Conclusion**

Feminist writer Adrienne Rich speaks of women’s historical role being:

> a luxury for man… served as the painter’s model and the poet’s muse, but also as comforter, nurse, cook, bearer of his seed, secretarial assistant and copier of manuscripts (1980:36).

It is Bertha’s silent life that I hope my work is giving voice to, the woman who has a quiet presence in history. As I write the poems of Bertha I return to the primary sources as a guide for the poems. These tell the story while the structure of the verse novel unfolds as a natural genre for this. The beauty of Deleuze’s image of the book written on the soul has found it’s way into the writing processes of Bertha’s story, and while I’m mindful of the debate over the validity and ‘truth’ in historical fiction, Deleuze’s concept remains a guide in imagining and writing my work. The impulse to write Bertha’s story leads to facing the silences. As Griffin has suggested (2009:8) I am looking into silence ‘not of my making’, but in doing so I hope to honour the work in giving her voice.

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**Endnotes**

1. B. Strehlow (1945)
2. TGH Strehlow (1908–1978), who was born and grew up at the Hermannsburg Mission, was a major contributor to the linguistic and anthropological understanding and knowledge of the Aranda peoples of Central Australia. His vast collection of writings, films, photographs and sacred artifacts are now housed in the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs.
3. TGH Strehlow didn’t publish his major work *Songs of Central Australia* (A&U) until 1971, by which time he had left Bertha and their children (Strehlow 1971).
5. As explored by Deleuze in his philosophical theory of ‘the two books’, that being: for every book written in ink, there is another book written on the soul (Deleuze, cited in Buchanan 2000:3–9).
6. In October 1936, not long after returning from the six month camel trek through 1000 km of desert in south west of Alice Springs, Bertha wrote a letter to her mother-in-law Frieda Strehlow, to let her know they had arrived at Hermannsburg safely. In the letter Bertha tells Frieda she miscarried on the trek and Ted had to make a frame on the side of the camel to carry her back. In the letter she plays down how sick she really was. This information comes from Ted’s diaries (Strehlow 1936 Personal Diary 3).
7. See Ballou (2010) and Brophy (2003).
9. These ‘gaps’ or empty spaces were discussed by Gail Jones at the University of Adelaide 4X4 Master class (25 August 2010), on writing fiction. Jones talked specifically of writing coming from loss, from the gaps that loss creates (personal notes; Shilton, 2010).
11. The genre has also been used to good effect by writers of YAF in ‘coming of age’ novels that favour the first person narrative (Herrick 2001; Wild, 2001).
12. As demonstrated in the synopsis of Emily Ballou’s work on Darwin: ‘saves the man from legend, bringing to light a fragile, deeply felt humanity, and capturing the textures of his work and dreams…’ (Ballou 2009).
Bertha wrote a number of articles about her desert experiences (1945 & 1949) and spoke at the 1944 Royal Geographical Society conference (1945, pp31-48). In 2006, the Director of the Strehlow Research Centre (SRC), Dr Brett Mitchell, gathered together information about Bertha from family and friends for a new exhibition. He called the exhibition *Desert Honeymoon*, (2006) and through film, photography and a brief commentary, it relayed information that focused solely on Bertha.

The idea that the unknown was the land, (virgin) land to be explored, unveiled by male explorers (McClintock 1995:22)
‘In a manner that resonates across the millennia’: slicing up Australian rock art with Occam’s Razor

Roland Dyrting

In 1984 Murray and Chaloupka presented a paper claiming that megafauna were represented in northern Australian rock art. This paper was widely disputed at the time. It still is. Two recent discoveries have, however, shown that Murray and Chaloupka’s fundamental assertions are solid. Their work may well become a cornerstone publication in Australian archaeology. If so, the implications are both worldwide and profound.

Human landfall

Human beings first came to Australia in the late Pleistocene, the most credible time currently being incontestably dated at 45,000 years BP (that is, Before Present). Alongside enlarged versions of animal species still alive today, there then also existed on the landmass ‘megafauna’ – faunal guilds represented by gigantic animals that dominated the antipodean ecosystem.

These megafauna then all vanished. Recent studies, involving undisturbed articulated fossils and the use of optically stimulated luminescence-dating, have universally calibrated this extinction to 45,000 (±5,000 BP).

Comparative studies involving other ‘closed’ ecosystems where humans have appeared for the first time and where mass extinctions have then quickly occurred – America (terminal Pleistocene), the West Indies and various Mediterranean islands (middle Holocene), Madagascar, New Zealand and other pacific islands (late Holocene) – have emphasised human agency.

Northern rock painting

In 1984 Chaloupka proposed a now widely accepted sequencing and chronology for Arnhem Land rock art. Four broad periods are delineated – based on the superimposition of images (the oldest necessarily being superimposed by the younger), similarities in style and composition, the similarities between what is being depicted, and what is now known about environmental conditions. First, there was the Pre-Estuarine Period (35,000 to circa 9,000 BP) – object imprints, large naturalistic
animals (macropods, echidnas, emus, freshwater crocodiles, thylacines, Tasmanian devils), dynamic figures, and yam figures.

In the Estuarine Period (9,000-1,500 BP), the artwork changes to the ‘X-ray descriptive’ style, featuring such animals as the barramundi, mullet, lesser salmon catfish and the saltwater crocodile.

The development of freshwater billabongs and swamps in the previously saline plains of Anthem Land introduces the Freshwater Period (1,500-150 BP). Pied geese, an astonishing variety of other birdlife, fresh plant species, and the newly invented yidaki drone-pipe predominate in this ‘X-ray decorative’ style.

In the fourth period, the Contact Period (150-Present), the artworks reflect the non-indigenous influences – Macassan praus, European ships, buffaloes, horses, crocodile hunters, and so on.

The Kimberley rock art styles and their respective dating have similarly been structured by Walsh as: Irregular Infill Style (39,000-16,400 BP), Bradshaw Style (16,000-10,000 BP), Clawed Hand Style (10,000-4,000 BP) and Wandjina Style (4,150-Present).5

There are noticeable stylistic similarities between the two chronological sequences (the Pre-estuarine and the Irregular Infill, the Estuarine and the Bradshaw, in particular). This is not surprising. Before the onset of the Estuarine period, the Kimberly and Arnhem Land were once one common landmass.

Australian human landfall, Australian megafaunal extinction, and the sequencing of north Australian rock art have, this work holds, some important inter-related implications. Three cases are pivotal, and their now attestation follows.


Site: W ongewongen, Deaf Adder Creek, Arnhem Land.

Visualisation: Imagine a wombat. Enlarge this animal so it looks like a Kodiak grizzly bear, the largest terrestrial carnivore today. Graft on to the animal a chunky tapir-like proboscis, a long black giraffe-like tongue and a flattened board-like tail. On all of its four legs, give it thick massive claws, each one the length of your hand.6

Palorchestes azael was a strange megafaunal mammal. “In body shape it resembled no other creature known,” states Riversleigh, an important compendium of Australia fossil finds.7 “Surely one of the most unusual mammals ever to have lived,” writes Tim Flannery.8 “It’s exceptionally powerful forearms, massive claws and bizarre head would surely have been enough to have inspired the legend of the bunyip.”
So aberrant is this animal that, even though it was first discovered in 1873, it took over a hundred years before an accurate reconstruction of its form was finally stabilised.

In the 1984, based on a 1977 discovery, Murray and Chaloupka wrote a paper claiming that a Pre-Estuarine ‘Naturalistic’ rock art painting depicted *Palorchestes azael* – specifically, a mother and its pouch-young.9 (Because no free online access exists of this image, it has been appended below – Figure 1).

In their discussion, they argued that Arnhem Land rock paintings of fauna could be constructively subdivided into six compositional areas: head, forelegs, back or dorsal region, hindlegs, and rump and tail. Such divisions were seen to be useful because artists, usually following fixed conventions, purposefully exaggerated special features in one or more of these areas to highlight the distinctive features of any particular species.

Following this methodology, the ‘Palorchestes’ painting has the following characteristics: the head shows a pointy protracted snout, out of which protrudes an elongated tongue; the foreleg region shows heavily clawed feet in front of two ‘breast-like’ projections; the back region shows extensive striping, probably an attempt to represent long coarse hair; the hindlegs show angled heel joints and, again, extensive claws; and the tail is flat and trapezoid.

Given this image’s breakdown, the authors now postulate six exhaustive possibilities: namely, 1) it accurately depicts a living monotreme (i.e. a platypus or an echidna) or marsupial; 2) it represents a placental species; 3) it’s a mythological construct, characterised by fused-on human-like elements (eg. human + fish, ‘mermaids’) or fused species intermingling, such as in the Rainbow Snake (snake + crocodile + macropod + catfish); 4) it’s a fortuitous blend of overlaid pictures (a chimera); 5) it’s a poorly constructed portrayal of a mammal (characterised by an over-generalisation of morphological features); 6) or it represents an extinct monotreme or marsupial.

These possibilities can now be considered.

1) Monotreme? It resembles an echidna, yet it has no spines and, indeed, has a pronounced tail. Marsupial? It’s obviously not a macropod (i.e. a kangaroo or wallaby) but a quadruped, the closest conceivable candidate being a wombat, an animal, again, without a tail.

2) This animal has clawed feet and all of the large introduced placental species in northern Australia – horses, cattle, buffaloes, goats, pigs – are all hoofed.

3) The figure’s ‘breast-like’ protuberances raises this possibility; but in Arnhem Land art human breasts are always shown as each projecting individually from both sides of the thorax (in a ‘wing-like construction), that is, never depicted together or sequentially,
even in a side-on depiction. These ‘breasts’ (especially as the smaller figure has only one) are probably a depiction of a shoulder-mane instead.

4) No pictures are abutted nearby. And the second smaller picture discounts this; surely both cannot be exact ‘fortuitous’ overlays.

5) The accurate depictions of thylacines and Tasmanian devils situated on the same cliff-face, in the same Naturalistic style, and again the depiction of the second animal, obviously the same species (and with minor variations one would expect from juvenile specimen) discount this. The second point being especially relevant in that the large figure is obviously female – as no conspicuous marsupial male cloaca (scrotum preceding penis) is depicted.

6) All immediately obvious (and distinctive) physical traits – proboscis, extended giraffe-like tongue, thick frontal thorax, immense claws, pronounced tail – systematically ascribed by reconstructive palaeontology to *Palorchestes* (before the discovery of this painting) are accurately and methodically listed in the work.

At this point of the discussion it is relevant to introduce two important concepts. First, Occam’s Razor, namely, *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* – “No more things should be presumed to exist than are absolutely necessary.”

And next, Clegg’s oft-quoted observation concerning rock art, namely: “The first assumption is that the pictures are of something … The second assumption is that while there are differences between present day and prehistoric drawings of any one species, there are similarities. Thirdly, it is assumed that the differences between species will be partly reflected in both prehistoric and present-day pictures of those species. Following these assumptions it can be stated that a picture is of that target object which it most closely resembles.”

Murray and Chaloupka’s ten-page paper is still controversial today, over twenty-five years later.

“Unfortunately, *Palorchestes* is one of the least well-known of the megafauna,” writes Professor Josephine Flood, ANU. “My verdict on the identification is [that it is] … unproven.”

In a formal rebuttal written in *Archaeology in Oceania* a year later, Darrell Lewis, also of ANU, considered the ‘Palorchestes’ painting to be simply a chance superimposition, despite the possibility already being directly addressed beforehand.
“Some researchers have claimed that long-extinct animals such as … Palorchestes are depicted in the rock art of … Arnhem Land,” comments Professor Mike Morwood. “… but these claims have not been generally accepted.”

“Strange animals do appear in some of the earliest of these [Arnhem Land] paintings … and there is a very obscure painting of a strange elongate mammal …” Professor Chris Johnson, writes recently. “The idea that early Aborigines saw megafaunal species and rendered them in artworks … is wonderful … [but there is little] real hope that unmistakable images of megafauna could have survived 45,000 years or so in rock paintings.”


**Site:** undisclosed, north-western Kimberley.

**Visualisation:** imagine a possum. Enlarge this animal to the heavy-chested proportions of an American Rottweiler, enormous block-snouted head included. Its front incisors resemble wolf-like canines, while its cheek pre-molars are fused into cleaver-like shears. Its eyes, big as pool balls, bulge out sideways almost to expulsion. Its paws have powerful retractable claws, the front pair possessing noticeable semi-opposable ‘thumbs’, giving them a strangely hand-like appearance.

Several language groups in Queensland have the word *yarri* to describe a Dreamtime animal that closely resembles the megafaunal predator *Thylacoceo carnifex*.

“The fellest and most destructive of all beasts,” wrote Sir Richard Owen in 1859, its first classifier.

“One of the meanest, most frightening animals you could ever have the misfortune to meet,” says Dr Stephen Wroe, his studies having shown that kilo for kilo it had the strongest biometrical bite ever recorded for any mammal, living or extinct.

In 2008 Tim Willing took some digital photographs of a two-metre long rock painting that he’d recently discovered in remote north-western Kimberley. Using these, palaeontologist Kim Ackerman published a paper in *Antiquity*, claiming that this painting was an explicit and detailed depiction of *Thylacoleo carnifex*. (Please view this article online.)

It is profitable to re-apply Murray and Chaloupka’s six compositional areas to this Kimberley painting: head (prominent, slightly curved ears, enormous rounded eye with maximally dilated pupil, what appears to be a protruding front incisor), forelegs (exaggerated musculature, paws with delineated talons, ‘thumb’ clearly separated from other digits), dorsal region (short, less than one-third-down, black vertical stripes running the length of the back, terminating before tail), hindlegs (relatively short,
delineated heel, splayed claws), rump and tail (erect penis, marsupial cloaca, that is, scrotum prior to penis, a thin end-tufted tail, one-third the animal’s length).

It is again now profitable to apply Murray and Chaloupka’s six aforementioned postulates:

1) This not a monotreme. This black-striped, taloned and fanged animal is carnivorous, and the only three living marsupial predators that even remotely resemble this painting are the tiger quoll (which is heavily spotted), the numbat (which has a bushy squirrel-like tail and white stripes), and the Tasmanian devil (whose coat is almost all black).

2) This is not a placental animal; the reversed scrotum and penis demonstrates that this is clearly a marsupial.

3) There are no overt mythological elements present.

4) This is not a superimposed image; no other depiction abuts the painting.

5) This is not a generalised mammal; the particular morphological details of the animal are unambiguously rendered.

6) The only extinct mammal this painting could conceivably represent is, of course, the thylacine. However, the portrayal’s distinctive features – squared snout, pronounced fangs, enlarged eye, koala-like front talons (with exaggerated thumb), full-dorsal body stripes (without any tail markings), the absence of a wedge-shaped rump, and the tufted tail-tip – collectively rule out this possibility. (To readily compare, the reader is invited to view online ‘images’ of ‘thylacines’ found in north ‘Australian rock art,’ using the terms enclosed in quotation marks. Such works are not uncommon.)

Indeed, the only depictions that the picture in Ackerman’s paper profitable resemble are two proposed ‘Thylacoleo’ rock paintings mentioned (albeit as an aside) in Murray and Chaloupka’s 1984 work.20


**Site:** **Nawarla Gabarnmung** (Yawoyn complex YN2430–2376), Arnhem Land. **Visualisation:** imagine a magpie goose, lose the head-cap and webbed feet. Enlarge this bird so that its head rises well over two metres, its back therefore level with your shoulders, its body comparable to a wine-maker’s cellar barrel. Keep the anserine feathering, but reduce its wings to stumpy appendages. Thicken its thighs. Look down – its clumpy toes have nails that remind you of hooves. Look up – the bird has tiny black eyes and a giant red parrot beak.21
Genyornis newtoni was an enormous megafaunal bird quite common in Pleistocene Australia. It belonged to a family now called mihirungs – “One of the weirder members of the Australian mob of oddities,” comments Murray, having co-authored the definitive study on this group. One of its ancestors (Dromornis stirtoni) was in all likelihood the largest bird ever.22

Initially wrongly classified as ratites (emus, ostriches, and rheas), mihirungs were instead essentially prehistoric geese that had abandoned flight, grown prodigiously, and opportunistically occupied a browsing niche similar to that of antelopes, okapi and camels, the mashing stones in their gizzard and their salt-extracting head glands advantaging them over other browsers.23

In 2010 rock art specialist Robert Gunn announced to the Australian media that Gabarnmung Rock Shelter, a rock art site re-discovered in 2008 and owned by the Jawoyn people, contained a painting depicting Genyornis newtoni. After viewing the photographs that came with this media release, much of archaeological academia remained unconvinced.

“It’s possible … that the bird wasn’t a physical bird … but part of Jawoyn beliefs,” said Bruno David, Monash University.24

“I am not aware of any painting … of an animal anywhere in the world that is more than 10,000 years old located outside of caves,” stated Robert Bednarik, Convenor of the International Federation of Rock Art Associations.25

One especially fair-minded scientist elegantly wavered, setting an admirable standard for intellectual neutrality: “You can’t be sure [it’s a Genyornis] because there’s stylistic elements [to rock art], but I can’t think of any reason it’s not Genyornis,” firmly stated Dr Prideaux.26

‘It would be a bit more convincing if they were able to detail why anatomically this is a Genyornis rather than an emu,” said Professor Mike Morwood.27

In late 2011, Gunn published a paper in Australian Archaeology detailing what he’d found – this paper, including the relevant photographs, is readily viewable online (please see).28

Because this is again an Arnhem Land rock painting, its six compositional areas should be examined: its head (a massive, almost semi–circular beak, and what appears to be a large crop at the base of the throat), its ‘forelegs’ (obviously a flightless bird), its back or dorsal region (a thick blocky torso), its hindlegs (bulky thighs, contracted hoof-like claws), and its rump and tail (truncated, almost non-existent).
We have to necessarily modify Murray and Chaloupka’s six diagnostic postulates, as these relate to mammals. However once we do, the same general system is easily applicable. We are left with the options that this painting:

1) accurately depicts a living Australian flightless bird. There are only two candidates – the cassowary (but there’s no head-stone) or emu – yet neither of these birds possesses pronounced crops, and both have elongated rumps.

2) represents an introduced flightless bird. But there are no such recorded populations in northern Australia.

3) is a mythological construct. But there are no grafted-on man-like or divergent inter-species’ characteristics.

4) is a blend of overlaid pictures. Yet no other painting directly abuts.

5) is poorly constructed bird. Its specifically denoted anatomical features – parrot-beak, crop, winglessness, stumpy toes, absence of extended rump all discount this.

6) represents an extinct flightless bird. This is now the ‘default’ proposition, given the inappropriateness of the other options. And there was only one mihirung species left extant when humans made Australian landfall – *Genyornis newtoni*.

**Discussion**

There is a curious reticence in Australian archaeology to allow that Pleistocene megafauna have been depicted in prehistoric rock art – a reticence not found in other parts of the world.29

This is strange. Rock art has often proven to be very reliable descriptive tool. In Arnhem Land, in the Chaloupkian ‘Contact Art’ phase, the providence and make of foreign ships (both European and Asian) are readily identifiable by maritime authorities; as are breeds of European livestock. In X-ray art, the differences between two closely related species (the barramundi and the saratoga, for example) are also strongly delineated.30

And native species, now extinct in northern Australia (namely the thylacine, the Tasmanian devil, the numbat, the long-beaked echidna) have been almost universally accepted as depicted – their distinctive morphology easily recognisable.31

Indeed, two newly scientifically described tropical species (the pitted-shelled turtle32 and the Oenpelli python33) were rapidly identified due to the animals’ persuasive presence in rock art.
Given the thoroughness of morphological analyses to be found in Murray and Chaloupka’s paper (the first to establish the ‘probability’ of megafaunal depiction), and given the subsequent independent finds of Ackerman and Gunn, the argument that megafauna are not represented in prehistoric Indigenous artwork is now no longer tenable.

This then follows. If one only accepts the chronology and stratification of Kimberley and Arnhem Land rock art, then the *terminus a quo*, the earliest that the *Palorchestes, Thylacoleo* and *Genyornis* paintings could have been created, is about 39,000 to 35,000 years ago. And the *terminus ad quem*, the latest they could have been crafted is 16,000 to 9,000 years ago. However when the generally accepted dates for human landfall and megafaunal extinction are considered then this artwork has to have been made approximately 45,000 years ago.

Since the publication of Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* three characteristics have been widely promulgated as being distinctively human: high intelligence, tool making, and the use of language. Yet all of these three were indisputably possessed by our closest related species – *Homo Neanderthalis*, a sentient species with which we could undoubtedly interbreed.  

One different trait however makes an entrance in the Upper Pleistocene, a time when we humans were beginning to become what we are today.

As Paul Jordan writes, “It is the art of the Upper Palaeolithic people *that so decisively separates them from all that had gone before* (my italics). Before 30,000 BP at the Chauvet Cave in France artists created cave paintings as good as any to come over the next fifteen thousand years or so at famous places like Altamira in Spain or Lascaux near les Eyzies … west European Upper Palaeolithic art … remains the most varied and vivid of Palaeolithic productions. There really is no Middle Palaeolithic art (i.e Neanderthal): only scratched lines here and there and lumps of ochre. Upper Palaeolithic art is abundant and sophisticated …”

But northern Australia was colonised by humans long before they made it into western Europe.

In 2008, commenting in an aside on Murray and Chaloupka’s 1984 paper, and obviously unaware of the Ackerman (2009) *Thylacoleo* and the Gunn (2011) *Genyornis* papers soon to follow, Steve Webb of Bond University, wrote, “If these artistic drawings do represent megafauna … and the extinction threshold is 45,000 years ago, it suggests
people were in Australia and widespread some time before that, and that the drawings have to be the oldest true art in the world.”37

That statement, bold for a peer-reviewed paper, doesn’t go far enough.

On all levels of reasonable acceptable evidence, and keeping in mind *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*, the paintings described in this essay are the oldest rock art to be found anywhere in the world. And indeed, yes, they are *oldest art in the world*. They are then, necessarily, the oldest extant artefacts of what it is to be uniquely human.

![Deaf Adder Creek, ‘Palorchestes’ painting; from Murray and Chaloupka (1984).](image)

**Fig 1.** Deaf Adder Creek, ‘Palorchestes’ painting; from Murray and Chaloupka (1984).

**Endnotes**


3 Brook, B.W. et al. (2007). ‘Would the Australian megafauna have become extinct if humans had never colonised the continent.’ *Quaternary Science Reviews*, vol 26, No 3-4, pp 560-4.


22 ibid

Retrieved: 20/02/12.

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31 Ibid


Retrieved 20/02/12.
Death of a Taxi Driver

Barbara Eather

When news broke, on 19 April 1952, that taxi driver George Grantham had been murdered, it was the biggest shock for Darwin people since Japanese bombers had flown in and unleashed death and destruction on the town on 19 February 1942. One resident said that Grantham had been ‘liked and loved by everyone from Alice Springs to Darwin’ and encapsulated the sentiments of many, ‘George has been well known in the Territory for the past twenty years. He has never been known to pull a crooked deal. If the fiends who did this ever return to Darwin, may God help them. We will not stop at a lynching.’ Other impassioned locals suggested that the culprits should be tied to anthills.

Grantham was known to be reliable and would not stay out for an overnight fare without letting his wife know. He had telephoned her at about ten o’clock on the night of Thursday 17 April and told her that he would be home after completing a midnight job. Police were concerned for his safety on Friday 18 April after they were notified that Grantham had not returned home as expected. Grantham was reported missing by a Mr K Jessop who had last seen him the previous evening. Grantham had worked as a taxi driver for Keith Jessop before and subsequent to his wartime military service with the 2/14 Battalion. It was Jessop who had assisted Grantham to buy his own taxi, a Plymouth sedan. This vehicle, with number plate NT 222, was also missing.

By the end of Saturday 19 April, widespread police alerts had produced a result. George Grantham’s taxi had been stopped on the road near Duchess by Queensland Police. The occupants of the car, two Czechoslovakian immigrants, had been detained. And George Grantham’s almost unrecognisable body had been conveyed to the morgue.

The following day, between four and five hundred mourners paid their respects to George Grantham. One hundred vehicles followed the cortege from Christ Church to the cemetery. A record number of floral tributes were received. Members of the Royal and Ancient Order of Buffaloes conducted a traditional ritual for their departed comrade.

Four days later, in ‘The News’ Classifieds, Mrs George Grantham thanked friends for their cards, floral tributes and personal expressions of sympathy. Ted Bush of EW Bush, Dealer and Commission Agent placed an advertisement that day, as he did.
regularly. His offerings on Thursday 24 April 1952 included complete houses and babies’ bassinets. And firearms. ‘Be early for these’ the newsprint urged. In the same column as George Grantham’s death notice and his widow’s expression of thanks, Independent Taxis sought two taxi drivers, perhaps not the most popular occupation in Darwin at that time.

In the meantime, Darwin police had flown to Mt Isa to interview the two suspects. Evidence, including the alleged murder-weapon, a .310 rifle, had been collected. Confessions had been obtained. It was reported widely that police were driving the suspects back to Darwin in Grantham’s taxi. Perhaps mindful of the real likelihood of encountering angry welcoming parties, the returning group secretly caught a plane from Daly Waters. On arrival in Darwin, the two suspects were taken out a back entrance of the airport.

On 26 April 1952, Novotny and Koci, handcuffed together and guarded by six police, appeared in the Darwin Police Court. They were charged with the murder of George Grantham and were remanded in custody until an inquest on 7 May. Novotny and Koci were unrepresented when they appeared at the inquest. A Crown Law Officer expressed concern that the amount of publicity the case was attracting was prejudicing the rights of the two accused to a fair trial. Acting on this, Mr J M Nicholls ordered that evidence not already published be suppressed on the grounds that the deceased was held in high esteem in the community and that the accused were New Australians.

From 1949, in response to a decline in the number of immigrants coming from the United Kingdom, the Australian government sought out workers from many of the non-English speaking countries of central and eastern Europe. Known as New Australians, often these were persons who had been displaced by the turmoil of the Second World War. The dictionary definition of a New Australian as an immigrant, especially one whose language is not English, sounds benign. In the 1950s, attitudes were not always so moderate. Anecdotally, they were mistrusted. Amongst other sins, they ate garlic.

At the end of the two day hearing, the coroner, Mr JW Nicholls, found that Jon Novonty, 19, had willfully murdered George Grantham and committed him for trial on a charge of murder. The coroner committed Jerry Koci, 20 on the same charge, on the grounds that he had aided and abetted the crime.

At their Supreme Court trial, held on 11 and 12 June, Novotny and Koci were represented pro-bono by Darwin lawyer Brough Newell. Each day, the courtroom was crowded with interested locals. It transpired that Novotny and Koci had been in Australia for about two years. They had come to the Northern Territory in 1951 and had worked on cattle stations before coming to Darwin in January 1952. One or the
other proposed that they would hire a taxi, kill the driver and drive to Melbourne where they could catch a ship back to Europe.

On 17 April, Novonty bought a .310 rifle from EW Bush Commission Agent. Between seven and seven-thirty that evening, Novotny and Koci visited the Darwin Music House. There they played gramophone records and conversed with Mrs Georgina Schombacher, one of the owners, whom they knew socially. Later, they hired Grantham’s taxi. Novotny’s statement, made in Mt Isa, left no doubt as to how George Grantham had been summarily dispatched.

‘When he stopped I shot him in the head. Then we take him from the car out. I caught hold of one hand and Koci caught hold of other hand and we dragged him into bush. I shoot him again two times. We go back to the car and Koci drive and I sit alongside him in front.’

The jury announced its decision after twenty-four minutes of ‘deliberation’. One juror was alleged to have said that the jury wanted to give its verdict immediately, but thought they’d be decent and go out for a few minutes. Shortly thereafter, Justice Kriewaldt sentenced the two to death.

A suggestion was made, by the Minister of Territories, that if the two men were executed it would probably be carried out in Adelaide. One reason for this may have been that Darwin lacked infrastructure. The gallows that had been constructed for the last official execution in 1913, had long-since been eaten by termites. But before the death sentences could be carried out, they had to be approved by the Federal Executive Council. The council was known to be considering petitions asking that the sentences be commuted due to the youth of the prisoners and the disturbed conditions of their upbringings in Europe. This had not sat well in Darwin, where there was ongoing outrage about what had been done to George. Construction of the gallows commenced in secret. Parts were sourced from various locations to hide the purpose of the work. This was largely successful, until a regular at the Parap Hotel let it slip that he had been digging a large pit at the gaol. This helped quenched the fire of those who wanted to organise a lynching. The job would be done officially after all.

The decision of the Executive Council, that their sentences would not be commuted, was conveyed to Novotny and Koci on Monday 4 August. The following day they were advised of the date of their execution. One can only speculate what their final thoughts were. Reports from the time state that neither spoke before they were simultaneously executed on Thursday 7 August, although Koci was said to be distraught in the days and hours beforehand. It is perhaps fortunate that they were unlikely to have been familiar with the words of Oscar Wilde:
‘It is sweet to dance to violins
When love and life are fair:
To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes
Is delicate and rare:
But it is not sweet with nimble feet
To dance upon the air!’

Justice had been delivered swiftly. Only one hundred and thirteen days had elapsed since George Grantham’s life had been taken from him at the relatively young age of forty-two. As was customary, the death warrants of the condemned had been sealed with black wax and tied with black ribbon. Their coffin lids were left slightly raised and quick lime was watered in before their graves were filled in. The executioner, who had been flown in from Adelaide and whose identity remained suppressed, was smuggled out of the gaol prior to the coronial enquiry and burial. Whisky was provided to the officials who witnessed the execution.

To ensure that there was no disruption by members of the public, the exact date and time of the hanging had not been disclosed, not even to the press. On the morning of Thursday 7 August 1952, the residents of Darwin woke to find that roads near the Fannie Bay Gaol had been cordoned off and police patrolled the nearby foreshore. At around the time of the execution, eight o’clock in the morning, a small group gathered at the Grantham residence, a short distance from the gaol. Once the news was out officially, one southern newspaper reported almost gleefully that the gallows had been built to last and that, ‘The Territory is not sorry that it can no longer boast, ‘No white man will ever hang here.” There was speculation that Darwin would be used as the official execution centre for all Commonwealth Territories.

Darwin never became a hanging capital. The night before Novotny and Koci were executed, Terence Charles Stapleton had been sentenced to death by Justice Kriewaldt for the shooting murder of Constable William Brian Condon in Katherine on 9 June 1952. Although Stapleton’s grave had been dug by the same work-party as those of Novotny and Koci, he escaped the gallows. In May 1953, at his third trial, he was found not guilty on grounds of insanity. Jon Novotny and Jerry Koci remain the last people to be executed in the Northern Territory. Fannie Bay Gaol ceased to operate as a prison on 1 September 1979. The termite-proof gallows are now a tourist attraction.

The deaths of Jon Novotny and Jerry Koci are acknowledged by plaques affixed to the external wall of the infirmary building at Fannie Bay Gaol. They state simply: No 1 JK 7-8-52, No 2 JN 7-8-52. Their graves receive a steady stream of camera-toting tourists who may reflect on their folly or hold a ghoulish fascination with them and
the crime they committed. But do these visitors bow their heads to empty plots? Anecdotal evidence suggests that Novotny and Koci lie buried away from the marked sites adjacent to the infirmary building and that this is supported by archaeological evidence. If their graves are not where they appear to be, just where are they? Indications are that the two are buried somewhere within the gaol walls and that place is close to the infirmary building. It is perhaps merely wild speculation that a land owner in Fannie Bay, now one of Darwin’s most affluent suburbs, has a surprise at the bottom of their garden.

George Grantham is buried at Darwin’s Gardens Road Cemetery. The cemetery closed in 1970 and is now heritage listed. Apart from cursory maintenance, it appears to be somewhat forgotten. Litter and dead possums can be found strewn amongst the graves. Grantham lies in close proximity to a golf course, sporting ovals, a casino, botanic gardens and an amphitheatre where concerts are held. Over the years, sounds ranging from Jimmy Barnes’ ‘Working Class Man’ to Handel’s ‘Hallelujah Chorus’ have wafted over his resting place. The world goes on around George Grantham, but his epitaph, etched in granite, remains constant – Remembered and Missed by All His Mates.

(Endnotes)

3 ibid.
13 ibid.


19 Information board Fannie Bay Gaol, sighted by the writer, 12 February 2011.

20 *Northern Standard*, 24 April 1952, Page 1. The Royal and Ancient Order of Buffaloes is also known as The Royal and Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes, http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/texts/buffaloes


24 ibid.


26 ibid.

27 ibid.


31 *Sunday Telegraph*, 10 August 1952, Page 40, from the files of The National Trust of Australia (NT).


37 As recounted by the writer’s mother, recalling growing up in Melbourne in the 1940’s and 50’s.


Northern Standard, 13 June 1952, Page 1.


Northern Standard, 13 June 1952, Page 3.


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*Sunday Telegraph*, 10 August 1952, Page 40, from the files of The National Trust of Australia (NT).


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Information board at Fannie Bay Gaol, sighted by the writer, 19 February 2011.


Observations by the writer, 12 February 2011.
Territory Days

Billy boiling as I sit under a tree on black soil plains. The earth cracked like maps awaiting for the rains. Mirages shimmer and tease with promises of water. Secret gorges hiding the elusive barramundi. Billabongs bursting with a myriad of birds. Crocodiles await for the opportunity of a meal and trying to dig deeper into drying billabongs. Pandanus protecting blood red finches building their nests. Pandanus thorns keep predators at bay. The smell of smoke as fires clean up the country. Hawks swoop down on fleeing creatures. Soon trees and grass will regrow, feeding roos, cattle and brumbies. Humidity building, body sweating as clouds promise rains and then disappear. Finally lightning strikes with thunder frightening.

The Build-up is here. Monsoonal rains and threats of cyclones around as we shelter from driving rains. Cars stall with flooded engines.

There is no other place that I would go. This is the Territory that I know.
We mob keep wandering around all the time restless
All the time nothing much to do asking everyone for
Grog money, cigarette money and never mind about
tucker. Sometimes someone been bring along wallaby or
beef. We get full binji then.

No more we respect ourselves, white phella no more
respect for us so why we respect us.

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

Them grog and drugs make us feel good for a short
time but other time makes us feel angry. We been argue
at each other sometimes, don’t know why. Angry for the
way we been treated like no good myall one.

We been lost our culture now learning town ways,
stealing, camping anywhere till the cops move us on.
They empty our grog out and that makes us more angry.

We hate all them white phella, that’s how they made
their money, with us black phella working our guts out
for them. The white workers always got more money.
We were the best stockman and workers in the olden
days working on the station. Our women working for
the missus. We had not much money, but had plenty of
tucker then. That station mob would let us shoot a
bullock and the whole camp would eat plenty.
Sometimes we would go out hunting for turtles, and
other bush tucker. We don’t have no car now, mainly we just sit around drinking. Don’t care as no one else does.

Sometimes them smart black phellas been to school and they been help us but they rubbish us too.

We want the good old days and be treated fair the way we black phellas. No more everyone been boss us all the time, make us angry. They don’t ask us, they tell us phella what to do. No more no more. We been finished we black phella, now we got nothing no more now. We been beaten us old phella, now them young phella smart to take our money pension day. They boss us for our money. Then we got nothing for us. Welfare no more help, we been going there too much they been say. They mob nor more understand we have to give to them bossy young black phella or they will flog us.

3

You mob white phella and smart one educated black phella make us feel no good alonga self. What can we do? Where can we go? Nothing, we finished, now we beaten. Our country taken for mining and money going to wrong black phella. Them mob never check proper phella belong im country. Wrong mob living our country and we been chucked out. We phella get into trouble with police, we always fighting when we going and living in towns. Too many mixed up mob black phella there. What we phella can do??? No one knows.
Paperbark and Lilies

Kathleen Mills

She sang a bushland lullaby, she sang a sweet, sweet song,
Of paperbark and lilies, 'round a great big billabong.
A woman and a baby, left in the bush alone,
In a little cabin shanty, a bushman's simple home.
Just a little black eyed baby, left in her tender care,
Her telegraph-working father left her in the 'little missus' care.
She cradled her and loved her, as she would her very own,
That was Jeannie Gunn and Bett Bett, two people left alone.
So she sang a bushland lullaby, a song the bush could hear,
Of paperbark and lilies, a place she held so dear.

Jeannie Gunn, the 'little missus' of Never Never fame,
Far away from Melbourne city, to the northern bush she came.
She brought with her a spirit and her very own finesse,
And she found her little 'Bett Bett', her very own princess.
Far away from love of family, and the comforts of a home,
Isolated, sometimes lonely, this brave young lady came.
Comforted by a baby that Jeannie's love did claim,
They grew as good companions, in their outback bushland home.
She would sing a bushland ditty, to this little black-eyed girl,
Of paperbark and lilies, where swamp birds love to call.

Colour has no sightly meaning when you're all alone and sad,
And this tiny picaninny made Jeannie's heart so glad.
She called to her 'little black princess, come listen to my song,
Of paperbark and lilies and a great big Kurrajong.'
Then Jeannie left for Melbourne, after Malugah had gone,
And she had to leave her princess whom she cared for — oh so long.
But she left behind instructions for her friends to take good care
And see that her small princess was assured a good home here.
She sang once more her love song of the shanty in the bush,
Of speargrass and wallabies and fancy bower birds' nests.
One day she hoped to see her when Bett Bett was full grown,
But Bett Bett never did forget her, or her Elsey Station home.
Later – Bett Bett, known as Dolly, wed a Welshman in the town,
His name was Joseph Bonson, a fine figure of a man.
They raised five little children, and she sang to them this song,
Of paperbark and lilies, her 'little missus' song.
Down through the coming years, they kept each other's hearts,
And Bett Bett kept her promise, until the time to part.
That time she did remember, her little lullaby,
Of paperbark and lilies, and oh, how Bett Bett cried.

There are memories still so precious where Elsey Homestead stands,
Of a little black eyed princess, and a lady, oh – so grand.
The Jeannie Gunn and Bett Bett tale, a legend now so strong,
Where paperbarks and lilies whisper special bushland songs.
For Bett Bett too, has left us, for that crossing in the sky,
Where 'little missus' waits for her, to sing her lullaby.
This time Bett Bett will find her, and bid her come along,
Once more to sing together, their favourite bushland song.
Dymocks Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writers’ Award
All those bike trips we took – up the road, past the swelling storm drain and the old rope by the creek that never swung in the breeze, worn and weathered and frayed but so stiff from disuse. I’m faster now.

You used to pump your legs and soar across the road, always ahead of me, your laugh buffered by the wind until it finally escaped out of your wide open mouth and slapped me in the face like a swept-up rag out an open car window. In those moments, I never saw your face. You never looked back.

I bet your eyes were clear and bright, though. Wide open. Or maybe, on that stretch of dusty path by the growing creek, you closed your eyes when you lifted your hands from the bars. When you let them hover above the rubber, head tilted so far back the air rushing past threatened to peel open your eyelids.

I was always so slow. Short legs, stumpy fingers, all that baby fat. Slow and awkward. But I got to watch how your shoulders loosened and your bones shifted under your skin, eyes fixed on the bumps of bone pedalling their own path up your spine.

I couldn’t keep up. Young, fumbling, and barely able to reach the pedals, toes slipping. I didn’t watch where I was going, just you. I followed, but when you lifted your arms and spread your hands and the shadow of them stretched and fractured like wings and feathers, mine stayed clamped around the handlebars. Sweaty, nervous, paralysed. You laughed when I asked you not to let go, because you made me worry.

But I’m faster than you now. I pedal and pedal and pedal and pedal. Now I have long legs and strong fingers. I’m the tallest of all the boys. The tallest, the biggest, the strongest. The fastest. I’m faster than even you, now.

Do you remember that time I caught the bus home, because of the rain? You shrugged it off, and I felt like a coward sitting in the dry, warm seat next to the streaked window. I’d never been on the bus before and it annoyed me that the windows were blurry and the outside world indistinct. What was the point of going somewhere if you didn’t know where, you used to say.

They say that rain – the heaviest all year – swelled the creek so much that it spilled over that old bike track, that one stretch we know as well as each other. They say you were so fast coming around the corner that you could never have stopped. So, so fast.
They say you slipped right under the water, bike and all, the current dragging you down so deep, so far, so fast. So, so fast.

But I know what really happened. You came around that corner, so, so fast. Hands high in the air and fingers spread, and I wasn’t there for you to worry about, so you lifted from your seat. You flew up and up and away and so, so fast. Your wings pushed you higher and higher and higher…

I’m faster than you now. I ride down that same stretch, the one we know as well as we know each other, and I pedal so hard my legs ache when I get wherever I’m going. You’re not in front of me, I can’t see you, and your laugh never slaps me in the face.

But I know you’re right behind me, so I open my mouth wider, laugh louder, smile bigger, and sometimes I close my eyes and tilt my head back so far the wind threatens to peel back my eyelids.

But I never look back, and I never let my hands hover above the handlebars. I never stretch my arms out high and spread my fingers against the rush of the air, clear and uninterrupted by another bike in front of me. My shadow won’t stretch and spread and silhouette the parting of feathers.

Because I’m only faster than you on the ground. I’m the fastest in the world on the ground.

You’re not on the ground. I wish you would come out of the sky, one day, and fold your feathers so I could show you how I’m faster than you now.
My ANZAC Journey

Nadia Craven

My Journey through the ANZAC experience

Have you ever felt proud about your family? Either of what they have done or what they have sacrificed? There is nothing wrong with a little pride; you have the right to be proud of your family member’s achievement. I do have something I am proud to keep in my family and to tell everyone out there about it. Something that other families may not have.

“Being a hero is about the shortest-lived profession on earth.”

I completely agree with that quote. My grandfather went on a fight in Indonesian War. He was one of those people who were brave enough to go and fight for Indonesian people.

I grew up in Indonesia and knew nothing about the Australian history. My mum got married in 2008 with my step-dad who’s from Australia. We moved down to Darwin at the end of 2008. I could hardly speak English and I knew nothing much about the Australian history. My school – which was called Palmerston High School at the time – did a commemoration of ANZAC Day, with wreaths of flowers and the Last Post. At the time, I did not know why they were doing those celebrations.

My great grand-father, Frank Craven, wasn’t old enough to go to war. He was 17 – the minimum age to go to the war was 18; but he put his age up by two years, so he could volunteer to go to war.

As I write down this story, many people are now talking about the Bombing of Darwin. They are remembering what happened on the 19th of February, 1942. It is a shame not many Australians know about this one of the wars that happened in Australian history.

My English got better from day to day. I started to learn quite a lot of the ANZAC traditions from what I learn and discuss in the class with the teacher and my mates. All of the sites that have been built around Darwin – such as the military museum at East Point, have helped not only me, but all other people to gain some knowledge about the history side of Australia.

My step-dad and granddad also talk about the ANZAC traditions and how did all happened. I was interested to learn more about the ANZAC history and what it’s all
about. While asking these questions, I learnt some things about my dad too. Of how much he loves me by the way he talks to me and explain things patiently and carefully – to make sure that I am actually understanding of what he’s saying.

As I research some information from the World Wide Web about ANZAC, I found this quote:

“Regardless of religion, racial background, or even place of birth, we gather not to glorify war, but to remind ourselves that we value who we are and the freedoms we possess, and to acknowledge the courage and sacrifice of those who contributed so much in shaping the identity of this proud nation…”

The quote makes me to remember about the heroes who have died and served in their counties name. In Indonesia, the title of National Hero of is awarded by the government of Indonesia to people considered to have made a significant influence to the fight for independence or the development of the nation.

“…The term Anzac has transcended the physical meaning to become a spirit, an inspiration which embodies the qualities of courage, discipline, sacrifice, self-reliance, and in Australian terms, mateship, and a fair go. This is what Anzac means to me”- Major General Mark Kelly

Our heroes have protected us, fought for us – for all citizens and our friends; also for the sake of our country. If it wasn’t for all being willing of sacrifice and the morale of our heroes – then our home country, Indonesia - will be ruined forever.

ANZAC Day was created to remember those fallen at Gallipoli. It has been remembered as a national day of commemoration since 1916 for Australians who fought many wars in their country’s name, Australia.

On ANZAC day, 25th April – every year, we remember the brave soldiers who have served our country in times of war, to remember all the people who have died or suffered in wars so that we might live freely.

“It’s important to remember and attend Anzac services because of the sacrifices made by the men and women through service. Lots of mates who served with me have since died.” – Mr Amos

For me, it is a good sign for Australia that we care about our people and our history. It is also fascinating to note the importance of sharing experiences in terms of what mateship means during the war. The Australian soldiers were known as ‘the diggers’
- came to symbolise the qualities that Australians value, they became known as “The ANZAC Spirit”.

This does not only apply for ANZAC, but also for other wars. For me, every war is significant to remember - but though, it is not something to be glorified. It's important caring for our history and reminding ourselves of all the people who died and fought for our world peace and freedoms.

My grandfather in Indonesia is one of many men who survived during the Indonesian war. If he had not survived I would not be here now, or I could still be living under a cruel brutal rulers being slaves.

Wars have taught me quite a lot, for example – not being satisfied and taking freedom for granted. Everyone has to learn to resolve our differences and never to allow all crazy and insane rulers and dictators to rule and dominate nations ever again and not to allow extermination.

From what I think, the ANZAC Spirit has developed especially amongst the younger generation due to the current action by our defence force – not only in Australia, but in overseas operations. I see the ANZAC spirit everywhere – TV, magazines and newspapers. The current Australian population are more aware of our defence work throughout the world.

The ANZAC stories and the current action, the death of some of our troops help keep the memories alive and make Australian society aware of the ANZAC tradition. When it comes to ANZAC Day, Australians get the ANZAC spirit. They appreciate and respect our defence people, our grandparents and older people that served, volunteered and fought in these many wars.

I have come to believe that the increased awareness and participation of our generation in ANZAC are due to media coverage of Defence involvement in International war areas - starting in 1965 when Australian soldiers fought in Vietnam. We entered in Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Australian troops were first in, when East Timor sought independence from Indonesia. Australians troops got sent up to help with their internal conflicts.

Indonesia was colonised by the Dutch for 300 years. After Sukarno and Hatta – (the president of Indonesia at the time) proclaimed the independence of August 17, 1945, the Dutch sent troops to Indonesia or the Netherlands East Indies, Indonesia called on the Dutch colonial era. The people of Indonesia were to fight. For Indonesia, this time is a time of revolution or the war against the Dutch who will occupy the back country.
There are still Australian troops in Afghanistan. Not defending Australia, but keeping Australia free of terrorism and the threat of terrorism – this is what the Afghanistan war is all about.

School assemblies all over the nation on ANZAC Day teach children from an early age about the significance of commemorating the ANZAC's. The Simpson Prize competition (supported by The History Teachers’ Association of Australia) and ANZAC Spirit competition (supported by each state’s government) stimulates interest and student research into Gallipoli/ANZAC Day. A lot of ANZAC stories are now spread all over the World Wide Web; photographs, their personal diaries, letters from the soldiers, even the videos. Being able to see these aspects are what make ANZAC Day increased in popularity.

This increased activity of our defence force has encouraged our younger generations to be more aware of what the original ANZACs endured – of what they did to defend our country and how that tradition has continued. Australians have been involved in many conflicts and a lot more people and families have become very proud.

For the last 30 years, the Government has allowed children and wives of the defence personnel to represent their fallen family member. A lot of them are proud to wear their grandfathers’ and their fathers’ medals – marching in the ANZAC Day parades to represent them in respectful remembrance.

The original troops who went off to fight in the First World War were all volunteers. There was no conscription at that time, people left their homes and their families to go and support England – our mother country. A lot of Australians at that time were from England – so when England called for assistance from the colonies, people would volunteer. Some walked or rode horses for hundreds of miles to join up. To those young men at that time, it was a great honour to them to be able to serve for their country.

“I’ve been involved with Anzac Day since I was eight years old, in the Boy Scouts and later in the armed forces” – Mr. Amos

My grandfather in Australia - told me about his dad, Frank Craven; which I state to be my great-grandfather – he went out to fight in Gallipoli. His brother, Harry Craven – gave him the permission to go to war, being his guardian.

My great grandfather had some knowledge and skills in medicine. He helped the wounded soldiers, some of them got carried by the Simpson donkey, some by carts and some were carried by the other soldiers. He got shot in his shoulder in 1916 while he was rescuing the soldiers. Because they didn’t have any technologies to remove the
bullet from his shoulder, he had to carry it for a long time. The bullet got removed in 1952.

I am not a part of the British Empire, but the inspiring story that has been passed through each generation of my family - made me realise of how important ANZAC Day is to remember. I will keep and pass this story to my next generation – my kids and my grandkids.

All these stories about the ANZACs, especially Gallipoli and the ANZAC Legend, my family have told me – especially my dad, this has made me to learn more about him too.

Gallipoli has developed a mythological status since 1915 – inspiring thousands of Australians and other non-Australian people to make this trip at least once in a lifetime. We celebrate or commemorate that they fought on through pain, discomfort and hardship with a little bit of help from each of their mates. Those diggers died not only for the events of their time but for a future Australia that we now define. Gathering of defence personnel to remember their fallen mates and action they have been involved with one another. We show our thanks to the people who let us live in freedom. ANZAC is such a special day – it has become one of the most significant days on the calendar.

The qualities that have been assumed by people throughout the nation – to define us - the Australian character such as Courage, Endurance, Bravery, Larrikinism, Mateship and Sacrifice.

My ANZAC Journey is not over yet. There are still a lot of things I will be exploring. The story of what both my grandfather and great-grandfather have sacrificed will always be kept in my family through each generation. It is definitely something to be delighted of.

I may be living in Australia, but I haven’t got any thought about changing my nationality to be an Australian citizen. I am proud of the country where I was born, Indonesia. But that does not mean I would not like to be an Australian. I am proud of my own country, and I think everyone should be too.

Indonesia is a multicultural country – with different cultures and religious, where all religion teaches the truth. We form strong and advanced principles in which we already have a lot of potential in Indonesia. The Indonesian peoples who fought the colonists for over 350 years; a time and place where every day for many Indonesians and their friends - they were stabbed with a piece of bamboo or were killed and
injured. I respect all of the people who have built our country just like the ANZAC spirit has built Australia.

The independence of Indonesia is really meaningful to me. When combatants were dying they smile to their death – they were told: “Kebebasan istri dan anak saya akan menjadi milik mereka suatu saat nanti” which translated something like this: “The independence of my children and wife will flourish one day”. I am pretty sure most people are proud of the country where they were born. I am proud to live in Australia and being part of the society here and be proud to be a part of the ANZAC tradition and teach the next generation about the ANZAC spirit.

I will teach them that ANZAC Day is not to glorify war, it is the day to recognise, appreciate, and realise the sacrifice of ordinary soldiers. The memories of those men have not faded away. But what they stand for has strengthened. The returned soldiers have become symbols. They reflect times and attitudes gone, handing over something of what it is to be Australian.

Lest We Forget
Distorted Mirrors

Lauren Gillam

When you ask people to point to the beginning of the end, their fingers find their way right over the 21st century. When humans were carefree and, despite warnings, never thought about the consequences. As always, it started small: with clones of relatively harmless animals, like ‘Dolly’ the sheep. They found it a success, and, after a while, began to move beyond animals. After all, humans were never very good at handling temptation, were they?

It wasn’t the cat that curiosity killed.

They moved beyond cloning soon enough, dabbling in the genetic make-up of the human race. It started in an insignificant, virtually unknown group of scientists that grew to be known as the Genetic Disorder Foundation and encompassed most of the world. They took seventy years to ‘perfect’ humanity as far as genetic diseases went and in another fifty, they were changing what a child would look like, using their parents as a genetic blueprint.

They determined what the child would look like on their death bed before they even had eyes to open.

Humans weren’t content to be perfect. They began to look around them, becoming jealous of the animals. Those that were faster, stronger, lighter, had better eye sight or resistance to extreme climates. Their wonder twisted, shattered and darkened, becoming hatred towards those that was better than they were.

In short, they had to be the best of the best. They couldn’t handle second place.

Of course, the first few years were failures. Feathers of all colours protruding from all over the body. Bones that were too thin, snapped and shattered, not able to carry the weight of the owner, causing constant agony. Teeth sharpened to a point and ripped into the tongue. Pupils compressed to slits, spines extended painfully into tails. Nails hardened and lengthened, sometimes curving into claws. Human temperament shifted, causing noticeable animalistic behaviour, becoming territorial or having a breeding season. Even this didn’t dissuade them.

They ignored the warning sirens, like they ignored every other red light and blaring alarm.
Generations later, after the mistakes of playing God were thought to have been ironed out, the real consequences were revealed. No one really knew what it was at first. They didn’t think that the problem could be connected to something that was so much a part of everyday life. Not the spike in crime rates and a rise in the committed insane. That couldn’t conceive that this could be connected to something so mundane. They blamed parents, friends, siblings and schools for the bodies piling up on the streets.

But problems arise when the real pieces start to show up, creating an even more grotesque picture.

One by one, the real pieces slotted into place, in such a way that, once started, no one could dispute the facts. Humans pointed fingers. They said it was the fault of the first group, the Genetic Disorder Foundation. They pointed at their ancestors for wanting what they themselves had taken for granted. They pointed at doctors, geneticists and the people who combined their children’s genes under their own orders. They even pointed at the animals whose genes were grafted into their own.

Never once seeing three of their own fingers pointing back at them.

People grew into their potential for cruelty. Even the most kind, gentle and placid person grew into it, although not by choice. At a random age, a random time, the animal genes dominated the human’s, causing a complete flip in behavioural patterns. They were more animal than human.

Unlike humans, the change in genes did not discriminate between cultures, colour, belief, gender or anything else.

Years ago, the concept of humanity was debated. What is it? How does it shape us? Is there really anything that sets us apart? Now we know the truth.

Isn’t it funny – how we only discovered the essence of humanity after we had it surgically removed like a cancer.

Suzie shivered in the night air, trying to snuggle into her worn jacket. It was slightly too small for her, but no one really cared about correct fitting any more. Her great-grandmother had made it, and it was the best she’d ever had.

The icy wind blew sharply from the west, adding to the miserable conditions. Her breath puffed in her face for a moment before drifting upward and disappearing.

She was on guard duty tonight, forced to protect the town against the creatures that stalked them. The town was little more than four thousand people, the only strong
structure being the wall that surrounded them. The mutated were never completely inactive. Not in the day, not at night. Not during dusk, dawn, spring, winter, summer or fall.

She was about half way through her life, almost an elder at eighteen. The fairy tales of people living to seventy were long gone. Lost, like a slowly dying myth. No one wanted to hear about those days. No one cared for those types of stories.

The stories most often passed around weren’t the happy-go-lucky of old. They rarely had a happy ending, never a happily ever after or even ‘what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger’. No, the ones told were cautionary tales, those that held similar circumstances to themselves. Stories such as Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, or Frankenstein.

The story of Dr Jekyll reminded them that they all had the darkness within them. Only, they didn’t need to drink some potion or another to turn into it. They just were. It told of the spiral into the darkness where their humanity no longer was dominant, and no longer wished to be.

That day was yet to come, but they were all sure it was fast approaching.

Dr Frankenstein’s mistake reminded us not to go poking our noses where they didn’t belong. True, his mistake was an honest one, but it could have been prevented. Not just by picking a different brain. It just shouldn’t have happened. Just like our own story.

Sure, humans had the best eye sight, hearing, night vision and reaction time. They may have been stronger, faster and smarter, but they knew they were prey. Fighting against something with the exact same DNA coding as themselves would have been hard enough. But add to that hardship the knowledge and instincts of how to use those assets, and you can’t win. Not when you’re afraid of the enemy, and they see you as tasty.

Suzie was just unlucky that night. It wasn’t anything else. Her hair whipped in front of her face, blocking her vision to the point that she didn’t notice the edge of the wall before she fell over it. She heard the wind rush past her as the hair that had been covering her face finally allowed her to see. If anyone had been able to make out her face, it would have gone from shock and confusion to realisation and acceptance. The fear was always present on everyone’s face. Her back hit the ground hard, painfully forcing all the air out of her lungs. She lay gaping like a goldfish for a moment, staring up at the night sky. After the moment passed, she rolled to her side and coughed up a small amount of blood that splattered onto the ground. Her hair clung to her face as she tried to catch her breath.
The others on the wall could do nothing for her. To lower a rope down would be suicide, and more than likely kill the whole town. If a human could climb a rope, so too could the numerous creatures that were waiting in the dark. They could do nothing but hope she had a swift death. One person even lined up a shot at her head to assure that was what she would receive. Suzie saw this, and nodded her head, silently both thanking them and telling them to get on with it. However, before the shot was made, Suzie was dragged out of sight by a force that none on the wall could make out. However, they didn’t need to see it to know what had happened.

Suzie didn’t feel the gravel that ate at her back, or the twigs that jammed into it, carving gaping wounds. She was staring at her twin brother. One who had become a monster, one who had lost all the chains and collars that civilisation had bred into humans. He didn’t care about the laws that stated that you couldn’t murder, rape or steal. He only knew the laws of can and cannot. Kill or be killed. The law of Mother Nature.

The intelligence was still there, the young genius. He just didn’t care to play by the rules. His lips were twisted into a feral smile as he pushed out a noise that could have passed as a hissed sister.

Those in the town could hear her agonised screams throughout the night and well into the day before her throat was ripped to shreds.

Humans once thought they’d been made in the image of some great being. They’d called him God. They’d thought themselves special.

As Suzie died screaming, she retreated from the pain into her mind, and began to think. Not of how to escape. She remembered someone cradling a book, once. She’d asked him about it and been told the story, one she didn’t really care to remember, about humans being created in the image of something else. She realised that humanity had created something in their own image. Like the great being of God had created them in his own. And, like humanity, God must have been horrified and disgusted by the results. That, or humanity had ripped him to shreds.
The light of the day fades,
The moving sea stands still,
And in a split second, the world stops in terror

Planes cover the hot sky,
With wisping bodies they dive
Releasing seeds of darkness that erupted into soil

Soon, an uplift of panic comes from the suffering land
Destroying poor souls that are only young,
But is anyone hearing the terror that is coming from within,
The walls of the bleeding town, that is now crumbling to the ground?
And yet thy souls survives to see the glorious sun.
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