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

They cultivate a prosperous creative writing industry in the Territory by recognising talent and by fostering and inspiring a new generation of writers. The Awards encourage the telling of stories that reflect who we are, where we’ve been and where we’re going, and recognise the importance of literature to our identity and to celebrating the diversity of the Territory.

The Northern Territory Library supports the creation and telling of Territory Stories in all their forms, whether born of research or products of the imagination, true or fictional, and the development of literacy throughout our society.
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IT’S A PRIVILEGE TO LIVE IN ARRERNTE COUNTRY

Jo Dutton

The other day a man came to my door badly dressed and drunk. It was about 42 degrees and that was in the shade.

He wanted a lift. To a house in a camp. I knew his mother-aunts who lived there. I was not going to do them the favour of dropping off one of their pissed son-nephews and I have a policy of not giving rides to drunks. There are exceptions. If the woman has a baby I take them so they’ll get where someone sober can help out or if I have a soft spot for them. Like the old man, long dead who taught my sons everything there is to know about how to make and use a Shanghai.

This fella was not impressed.

You’re living on Arrernte country he said. You work with Arrernte women. You fucking got to help us. I said there was no rule book in either of our cultures that said I had to do what a drunk man demanded. Tomorrow he’d be embarrassed, so go home. He would not. He stood on his sacred Arrernte ground and told me he wasn’t fucking going anywhere, this was his place and he’d do what he liked.

It’s a privilege I said to be living on your country. Its beautiful. I looked out over the river. The gums were grey, olive green, their thin leaves pointing to the ground. Tears of sugar bag were melting in white waxy drops from them. When my kids were young they’d lick them greedily, until their pink tongues were coated white. The paved path the council had put in for us to walk on like the bush was a city park, glistened, covered in sugary juice and thick sticky amber sap from limbs splitting under pressure. Oh, we just want to breath the big trees sighed.

Today a lady lay in the long grass. Two men sat against the trunk of a ghostly ninti tree. I imagined the red seeds lying in a mandala made by ants and wind around
them. One man looked south, the other north. What they hoped to see I had no idea. Behind them Mt Gillen was out of shape in the heat, the snout of the big dog smudged by a purple glaze, furry green from the grasses sprung like whiskers after rain on its ears. Big scared dog from the dreaming.

When I’d first come here I’d sat on the dirt outside a respected old man’s camp, a lawman long dead now and he’d drawn in the pink dirt the path of those dogs, marked the fights. He had me drive around town and look at all the little puppy dog’s lying hard and cold in orange stone on soft round hills I couldn’t stop thinking of as breasts.

Fucking take me home the drunk fella shouted not amused. I told him again. I couldn’t. I wouldn’t. He took a seat at my verandah table more morose than mad for a minute or two.

You hate us, he said. You hate us Aboriginal people.

No I said I didn’t.

You do, he objected. You hate us.

No. No, I don’t. His dark eyes scanned me like it might be possible to read something in my white freckled skin, in my green eyes. Work out what my gym clothes meant. Get some insight. He inspected me steadily. The time it took felt like forever. It was intimate. Silent. Like a child I wanted to wriggle.

He came to a decision. You’re a fucking slut and a cunt he announced. And you hate me.

Now he was proper mad and I a little unnerved at his insistence to have a war stepped back.

That’s my uncle’s Toyota he claimed like I’d just stole it. You’re pissed I said and all mixed up. Go and sleep it off. Come back.

Fuck you.

He stepped into my space.

I kept my eyes travelling past him careful not to look at his pain, not to shame him with the futility of his clenched fists, because he wouldn’t hit me, we both knew that.
I couldn’t be felled for everything gone before even if he really wanted to. And I could see how he ached to lay a punch. I couldn’t blame him. I’m living in the big house on the river with the five rooms and the two cars and the gym clothes and the daughter with the braces on her teeth who’s come to the door in her lycra too, shiny as a model to see what’s going on.

We’re not going to gym, she says deflated taking a seat on the edge of the leather couch to keep an eye on things which are not right.

Maybe not.

The drunk fella turns to walk out, makes it to my car then stops.

It might have been the butcher bird laughing roughly, or the look of one of the men who’s turned his head to us, or the lady who’s inched her way forward to listen. Our conflict’s their amusement in a town not short on drama.

Whatever the provocation he turned. It could have been the indignity of me still standing at the door as if I needed to watch him all the way off the property. I was scared he might put a rock through the windscreen because that’s a simple tried and true way of giving an exclamation mark to fuck you! around here. I was hoping he chose the car with the already cracked screen, not the other one if he had to. If indeed he felt it was entirely necessary.

The other mob who’d been playing cards to the north on the long grass had moved closer too, all chatter stopped.

The lawman had told me if drunks went walking about over the puppy dogs, all the dogs in town would bark. Couldn’t be shut up. People don’t know, he said, the things they should. People don’t know less these days I thought.

When I first stood at this door twenty five year ago the trees were shorter and I could see all the way clear into town. There was a fluorescent red love heart on the ford plaza. The old shopping centre on the old stuart arms pub, the first grog shop ever in town that’s had three retail reincarnations since and today is again a shopping centre, white and cavernous as any mall. I was sad when the love heart went. It was a white fella kind of sign but every time I saw it I was happy because that’s how I felt about living here. There’s not much to love about the actual built town. It’s a shocking
nightmare of bad planning decisions and questionable tastes. But the country. That’s to love.

The day I arrived in town at the bus station which was at the back of the ford plaza. I looked out at the hills, those scared animate beings and fell in love. It was like coming home mad as it seems and I made it so.

The drunk fellow is storming back in a rage. You fucking slut he tells my daughter. She shrugs. She’s spent her life in a private school with wannabe princess bitches and she’s inured to personal insults.

Look I tell him, I’ll have to call my husband.

Yes, he agrees, get uncle, he’ll back me up. He’ll give me a lift. In his Toyota. He points out my car.

I call husband, who’s annoyed I can’t deal with a little humbug. Call the police he suggests.

And when did we start running to the cops to sort out neighborhood issues?

He says, when I got busy.

I thank him for nothing and as I anticipate he arrives in seconds all the way from the other side of the river where he works. Plenty of people in Canberra would say Husband is just the type of parasite feeding on indigenous problems they’d like to rid the Territory of. He’s part of the problem, they reckon. There’s a delicious irony in the fact the longer and closer you work with the dispossessed the more you’ll be treated like them.

Husband gently suggests the fella goes. Uses his name. Knows him. Why am I surprised? He knows every one. He does the reasonable routine with the drunk man who’s not buying.

This is not his uncle. This is not the solution. He’s not sure how this trickery has happened.

My husband tells me I taught this man when he was a boy and ashamed I look again and see his sweet face under the ravages of hard living.
You got to go he says.

She hates us, he says pointing at me and she is a big slut. The fingers denote my daughter. Husband’s old fashioned and insulted. He tells the man I used to teach to fuck off and if he doesn’t he’s calling the police. While husband has a long chat to the police, counseling the officer who’s at a horrific domestic and can’t attend he walks off.

The lady by the road who’s been watching gets me to call a taxi now there’s nothing to entertain her.

It’s too late for gym but daughter and I go anyway and throw ourselves into the frenzy of the last twenty minutes of class. Daughter stays for the next session then runs an hour afterwards. She’s more affected than I thought. I pencil in a ‘talk’.

That night I drop husband at cards at the senior citizens. He’s called a boy there and he often comes home a winner. Happy.

An old friend is sitting on a bench with her aunts. I give them a lift.

I tell them what happened. They are shocked. Insulted. They chat amongst themselves in language I’ve been listening to all these years but hardly understand and speak like a baby. They are going to tell him off. I’m not to worry.

I forget about it. There’s plenty to worry about.

I’m back from the gym. Exhausted. Just had a swim in the pool. Dinners cooking. Rice and red fish curry. A recipe from the weekend magazine of the paper I refuse to read.

A knock at the door. An Arrente woman I vaguely know. We’ve met at funerals. She’s a cousin sister of my friend. She thinks I’ve got another name and after some negotiation agrees she’ll use the name I insist is mine. She gives hers. I tell her a rude nephew of hers was around the other day. Drunk. Made a fool of himself and I’m not feeling partial to helping out with whatever her problem is.

Yes she knows. She’s got him here. She makes him step out of the shadow. He’s so much more the boy I once failed to teach very much to a long time ago. My fault not his. He came every day. Excited. Jumping with energy. I spent so long trying to get him to sit down I lost him to football and staying home.
He offers his hand. An apology. I take it. I put my hands on my heart after we shake and say I totally utterly and absolutely accept. His mother says we’ll be off then. Go home. We’re right now. All finished.

I go inside and lie on the bed next to husband. I cry. I can’t believe how powerful those women are. How culture is in tact underneath all the rubbish.

The next day I take kangaroo tails to my friend. I haven’t bought them for a while. They are moving the way of lamb shanks to the top of the table. Curse the foodies.

I take them to her house. In the camp where long ago an old fella told me the dog story. I still know only a handful. I’m like little kid when it comes to Arrernte ways.

The camps got less facilities than it had that first day I visited a quarter of a century ago. No running water. No electricity. A few tin sheds, one old demountable. I think of all the ideas and hopes people have shared with me. All the work I’ve seen tossed out time and time again. Hard work, people pulling themselves up like everyone says they must, only to be smashed by some new white fella idea of what will save them.

My friend greets me. We hug. I give her the present.

What for?

I tell her.

She laughs. So he should. He’s lucky she didn’t hit him.

You are a powerful woman, it’s a privilege to know you I say.

She wonders at the fuss I’m making. She’s just doing things right. Like she has always. I look about and see she’s not going to be stopped by getting nothing, or not being heard or point blank dismissed. We’re Arrrente she tells me. This is our country. We know what’s right.
Pablo’s anxious voice draws me out of sleep. I pull the llama-wool blanket over my face, shielding my eyes from the sun filtering through our plastic sheeting and reed-matting roof.

“Quién?” I mumble. Who’s escaped?

“Rita. Del hospital.” Rita. From the hospital.

I push the blanket back and meet Pablo’s black eyes. They slope down at the outer edges, giving him a permanent beseeching look. I touch his smooth cinnamon cheek which refuses to grow a beard, relenting only to a handful of straggly whiskers when he tried.

“Chinaman,” I called him and he eventually asked me to pluck out the hairs.

“You’re too young for all of this,” I think, and curl my fingers in his black hair.

“Y el bebe?” I ask. What about the baby?

“Lo dejó en el hospital.” She left her in the hospital.

“Shit,” I mutter, “shit shit,” and kick my legs out of the bed. I dress quickly to the background noises of street dogs snarling, roosters crowing, and plane engines screaming their descents into Jorge Chavez airport. Chickens squawk and scatter as I fling the flimsy bedroom door open and storm down the stairs.

“Shoo!” I yell at them. “And stay out of my room!” I add as a warning. Pablo’s mother Maya is in the kitchen filling baby Alexia’s bottle with powdered milk, white sugar and tap water. She looks worn and crumpled, like a discarded leather jacket. At
forty, Maya Santos Anchante is already old. Once a vivacious beauty, giving birth to nine children and raising them and their numerous offspring in relentless poverty has had its toll.

I help myself to a roll, split it in half and fill it with fat black salty olives. The pumping beat of Puerto Rican salsa blares from the next room. Pablo’s little sisters Juliana and Savana are sweeping yesterday’s debris into the street with reed brooms and sprinkling handfuls of water to settle the dust on the rough concrete floor before leaving for school.

She ran away from the hospital, Maya tells me, furiously shaking the bottle.

I'm not sure of what to say. I glance outside through the iron bars. The sky is the same grey colour of disappointment it has been every day since I arrived. I pull my long dirty red hair into a rough ponytail and decide to boil a pot of water later today to wash with. I light the element and place a small pot of water on to boil for tea. Pablo comes down the stairs and I pass him a roll. Enamel tubs of fresh maize litter the kitchen floor. I remember that we are making tamales today.

I ate tamales for the first time the morning I arrived in Peru. I was so excited to finally be in this country about which I had heard so much but knew so little. While Pablo was held up in immigration, I was left to meet his family alone.

They arrived bursting out of a hired mini-van – like too-many circus clowns tumbling out of a mini – all dazzling white smiles and rapid-fire questions. Mother, grandmother, sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews, cousins, neighbours. I was given a seat in the van and a leaf-wrapped parcel of pork and chilli maize. I nibbled at the tamale as I fielded the rat-a-tat up-close questions from too-many people. When Pablo was finally released I grabbed his hand tight and used him as a shield.

We pulled up at a haphazard pile of bare bricks and metal bars, shocked at the misery of the place. I had not expected much, but even Pablo was disappointed. I looked down the street. There were no windows in any of the houses – casualties of football louts on a rampage after a big win. Or loss. I forget which. I could see no trees, no grass, no flowers. Not one green thing, just brick-and-board shanties strewn over a flat desert landscape.

Inside was a drone of activity as the neighbourhood came to welcome Pablo
and his tall gringa girlfriend. I met Pablo’s father, who I was acquainted with through his frequent letters to Pablo outlining his son’s filial responsibility to send his earnings to his father instead of to his mother and siblings whom his father did not support. I stretched my mouth into a thin line.

In the kitchen I met a solemn, pig-tailed girl with skin the colour of dried autumn leaves. Hers was the single unsmiling face in the house. She sat at a small table sorting rice, uncomfortable with her swollen belly as if it were not a part of her but a soccer ball shoved under her dress she was forced to carry. Her eyes avoided mine.

Maya introduced her as Rita, Jaime’s girlfriend. Her parents had thrown her out and Maya insisted that her grandchild would not be born in the street.

Jaime, Pablo’s brother, who has defected from compulsory military service, cannot work or venture far from the house in fear of being caught by police. This has not stopped him from fathering three children with two girls. He is seventeen.

I swallowed hard and tried to concentrate on the festivities. I had waited so long for this moment I did not want it to be spoiled for Pablo. The return of number one son after three years living in Japan, working to support his entire family. He is twenty-three.

We ate cebiche and tamales, drank Cusco beer and Inca cola, and danced to salsa. My self-taught Spanish lacks proper grammar and I was shy in speaking. A neighbour laughed loudly at my conversation and increased her volume, as if I were deaf. Others spoke openly about me in front of me. A sweaty, over-friendly cousin stuck his face in mine and asked me to give him my baseball cap. I removed it slowly, patting down my matted hair. A sister felt up my jacket, having already claimed a toy gorilla Pablo had given me as her own in the van without asking.

Let’s unpack, she suggested, her eyes longingly surveying my suitcase. I looked around for Pablo but he was lost in the crowd. My head spinning, I snuck out of the room and lay down on my bed. Through the wall and despite the noise, I heard Pablo’s father loudly boasting that I am going to take him and all his family to Australia.

Why do you think I want them to marry? he shouted and everyone, especially himself, laughed raucously.

*****
I visited the hospital the day after Rita’s baby was born. Pablo’s younger sister by nine months, Ximena, and I found Rita in the hospital corridor trying to leave the hospital. She was hopping from bare foot to bare foot, her huge swinging breasts visible through her thin cotton nightie.

They won’t let me out, she complained, clenching fistfuls of her nightie. Her parents had to sign the hospital release documents because of her age.

My sister-in-law is here. Can’t she sign the forms? she asked the security guard. The guard stared past her at the wall.

“No,” he said.

But my parents don’t want me! She started to cry.

Where’s Jaime, why won’t he come? she sobbed, pulling at her nightie. I wanted to shake the guard. Instead I swallowed my anger and followed quietly behind Ximena as she led Rita back to the ward.

I pitied this fifteen-year-old girl. She was at the mercy of a family she barely knew, forever linked to a boy who doesn’t love her by a baby she doesn’t want.

In Rita’s ward thirty beds, all occupied, were spaced a few feet apart in two rows. Signs warning to pay money only to the proper authorities lined the concrete peeling walls. Shiny-shoed fathers with black, slicked-back hair proudly held their babies.

But Jaime cannot visit his baby. It is too risky for him to leave the house. Instead his sister-in-law and I have come. Rita picked up her baby, her nose crinkled in reluctance as she posed for a photo without smiling. She held her bundle as if she were afraid of it, her eyes flickering around the walls. I handed her a small parcel. As she unwrapped the baby’s bottle I was sadly aware that it was the baby’s only possession.

Ximena took the fussing baby from Rita and unwrapped the blanket. I got a fright when I saw the scruffy red flailing baby inside. Her head, shoulders and back were covered with black hair.

Newborn babies are ugly, Ximena informed me matter-of-factly, and I was relieved that I wasn’t the only one to consider her ugly. I thought newborns were supposed to look like beautiful angels. Reality was hitting me hard in Peru.
Ximena, who has four children of her own, efficiently wrapped the baby up into a tight, football-shaped bundle and handed it back to Rita.

She’s nice and snug, like in the womb, Ximena explained with a kind smile. To my right, through a doorway, I caught sight of a woman strewn across a bed like a rag doll. Her vacant, haunted face startled me.

Her daughter was born with no hands, Rita, noticing my stare, told me. I quickly looked away.

When Ximena and I returned home from the hospital I gave Maya the money to pay for Rita’s hospital bills. She thanked me and everyone agreed how kind I was but I didn’t feel kind. Juliana visited me in my room and told me that Rita had been locked up in a juvenile detention centre on at least two occasions which is why she was going crazy in the hospital.

She’s suffering from trauma, was Juliana’s diagnosis. I was surprised at this insight from a fourteen-year-old still in primary school. She sat and watched TV for a while with me. I had developed a fondness for Latino soapies. Their far-fetched plots and melodramatic characters were soothing in comparison to the real-life dramas of Pablo’s family. When things got too difficult, usually between two and ten times per day, I locked myself in the half-finished bedroom, sat on my nice clean bed – the only clean space in the entire house, tuned in to my soapisies and out of everything else.

*****

The water has finally boiled and I prepare tea.

We have to get that baby out of the hospital, Maya says to Pablo. Alexia gazes up at her grandmother as tears begin to drip onto her head. I am uncomfortable seeing Maya cry. I realise that she is upset about Rita’s baby but Maya usually faces the daily onslaught of family crises with an optimism I do not possess. I hug her. She is loose bird bones in a jumper.

We’ll go down later, says Pablo, heaping the fourth teaspoon of sugar into his cup.

We are going now, Maya insists.
“Mamá, qué te pasa?” he asks. What’s the matter?

Maya is slow in answering. Then she tells us. She had another child. Last year. A little girl. She didn’t want him to know. She knew he’d be mad. She was ashamed.

“Pucha!” exclaims Pablo, one hand shaking in the air.

“Con mi papá?” With my father?

“Sí.”

“Y el bebé?” he asks. And the baby?

She died. Her name was Rosa. She lived for three days. They made me come home. There weren’t enough beds in the hospital. The doctors don’t work on the weekend and she died. Maya struggles to form her words.

Pablo is crying now too. I am holding my hands over my mouth. I am shocked and astounded. Shocked that Maya would sleep with the man who beat and neglected her for twenty-four years, and astounded by the fact that she kept the baby a secret from her eldest son. I know that contraception has never been an option for her, due to the Catholicism of Pablo Senior (only in matters of contraception, it seems). Even if she were permitted to use contraception, few people can afford it. I am secretly grateful that this is not my life, that I have another in Australia where I have choices about my body and my life. I miss this life now.

I release my breath slowly and leave the two of them to talk. I walk up the stairs and sit on my bed. An Argentinean soapie is playing. I try to focus on the melodrama unfolding on the screen but it doesn’t block the pain. Tears run down my cheeks and onto my blanket. I cry for Maya and for Pablo. I cry then for Rosa, for Rita, for the nameless baby alone in the hospital, and, finally, I cry for me. A couple of hours later, when I venture downstairs, Maya has left for the hospital.

The first time Maya went to the hospital to pay the bill she returned empty-handed. The administration staff had seen me visit Rita and increased the bill by five hundred per cent.

They think you are a rich American woman come to buy the baby, Maya explained. This time she returns with the baby in her arms, and is calm.
Rita is found the next day and brought back to Maya’s house to be reunited with her daughter. She asks Pablo and I to name her baby and Pablo suggests “Amanda”. I think that Rita should choose a name, but she says she is happy with Amanda.

Rita seems both thankful and resentful towards me.

Can’t you have kids? she asks me one day. All the women ask me this question. At twenty-five with no children I am a rarity here.

I don’t know. I suppose so. I want to get married first, have some money saved, I say. Rita and Juliana look at each other. These are concepts foreign to them. Their world is so different from mine. I sometimes hear myself speaking in Spanish and wonder who this woman is. I had thought Japan was far-away and exotic when I moved there but nothing is as strange to me as this place.

Meeting Pablo three years ago in Yokohama had completely changed my world. His Incan and African mix of features fascinated me. I loved his musical speech and although I could understand none of his language, his black eyes captivated me. After just one kiss I remember thinking that I would follow this mysterious man to the end of the earth. It now felt like I had.

*****

I wake to the usual din of dogs, planes and roosters. Two chickens are sitting on our bed. I shoo them off angrily.

Those chickens have got to go! I warn Pablo. He shrugs in response. We later catch a taxi into Lima to see a movie. I am excited to get out of the house.

Even though the movie showing is an action disaster, and the reel catches fire midway through, I enjoy hearing English being spoken. Walking out into the night air, I am happy for the first time in weeks. Pablo, by contrast, is irritable since he couldn’t read the out-of-focus subtitles. I remind him that if he wants to move to Australia he needs to learn English.

We peer into the shop windows as we stroll through the night markets, pointing out things we would like to own. We pass an electrical store with white goods on display.

Let’s buy Mama an iron, suggests Pablo.
I am skeptical.

Yes, she’d love one, he insists.

I tell him I don’t have any money left and that soon we won’t even be able to eat. Buy one, go on, then Rita wouldn’t have to go to her cousin’s house, he pleads. Why do the baby’s clothes need ironing anyway? I demand hotly.

This is a popular topic in our house. Rita, once located and brought back to live under our roof, is only permitted to venture out to do the baby’s ironing. Considering the paltry amount of clothes the baby owns they seem to me to require a lot of ironing.

We leave the store with the cheapest model available. On the way to catch a taxi we pass a family in traditional clothing seated on the cold cobble-stones, blowing into bamboo pan pipes. One is singing. In front of them a little girl of about four is dancing. Her dirty face is scared and exhausted. It looks as if someone has wound up her legs and she can’t stop them. She is trying hard to move her feet rapidly to the haunting music while beseeching onlookers to put money in her tin cup. I drop in a sol. There is one other small coin in the cup. Fifteen or so people are watching and laughing at the miserable girl’s pathetic dance. I blink back tears and pull Pablo away.

When we arrive home Pablo gives Maya her iron. She loves it. Over the last couple of months I have bought her many gifts, all of which she has politely thanked me for but the iron she is ecstatic about. I immediately regret buying the cheap crappy model and feel mean and stingy. Pablo’s triumphant face makes me feel worse.

Maya happily points out that Rita doesn’t need to go to her cousin’s house to do her ironing anymore. Rita says thank you and I look up to smile at her. I notice then that she is glaring at me with an accusatory stare. I realise with a jolt that I have just locked her into another prison.

I go upstairs and sit on my bed for a long time. I leave the TV off. When I come down for dinner, I notice that the chickens have escaped again. I am glad. I hope that they are lost or stolen. I sit in the middle of the bench at the solid wooden table between the kids. I look down at my bowl. Reaching out of my soup is a yellow curled chicken’s claw.
On New Year’s Eve, Jennifer wrote in her journal:

Go somewhere for six months.

Don’t take many things.

Write.

Jennifer didn’t think that it was unreasonable to expect that the Fishermen’s Paradise Municipal Library would be a quiet repository of books, maps and photographic collections. And maybe, between the hours of five in the afternoon and nine in the morning, when it was shut for the night, it was. But on a Tuesday morning Jennifer’s first foray there coincided with the weekly Books and Bubs gathering when screaming was encouraged by a Dorothy the Dinosaur hand puppet clearly on speed. Not having a bub and being new to town, Jennifer attracted attention.

‘Can I help you?’ a perky library assistant asked.

‘Yes, I’m writing a history about when the South Sea Island workers were in the district. Do you have anything in your collection that would be of help to me?’

‘I think you’ll find that’s already been done. One of our volunteers has written a very good book all about that.’

‘Great, can I borrow it?’

Miss Perky’s eyes no longer smiled.
‘It’s in our special collection. You can only read it in the library. And we need photo ID. I’d get it for you, but we close for lunch at twelve. Maybe you should come back another day?’

‘No, now will be fine, I’m a fast reader.’

Wedged in a corner of the library, as far away as she could place herself from small fingers wielding Iced Vo Vos, Jennifer skimmed through Deirdre Prosser’s *My Family and Their Kanakas*. It was an innocent work filled with photographs of happy slaves, as well as noble pioneers - most of them Prossers. Pondering small town racism, Jennifer wrote her favourite Buffy Sainte-Marie line on the first page of her new notebook – *Honey, you can still be an Indian down at the ‘Y’ on Saturday nights.* And then, as Dorothy the Dinosaur was telling everyone it was time to go home and have a sleep, that is what Jennifer did. She exchanged Prosser’s book for her driver’s licence. Miss Perky handed it back to her with a look on her face that told Jennifer she’d googled her. All that was missing was a cheery, ‘Come back never.’

**The Cottage**

The weatherboard cottage up the quiet end of Mariners’ Way had a rusted roof and 1950s plumbing but it was just what Jennifer had been looking for. After driving two thousand kilometres with a car jammed with more than just a few things she wanted to stay in the one place for a while. The house, next to the rehearsal hall of the town band, faced the river. A caretaker lived in a caravan out the back of the hall. She wore voluminous floral dresses and spent most of her time cleaning and gardening. And keeping an eye on the neighbourhood. The instant Jennifer ventured into her back yard she was interrogated over the fence.

‘So you’re the historian?’

‘I guess so. Who told you that?’

‘I’m Deirdre Prosser. They tell me you’ve been reading my book. People used to steal it before they put it in the special collection.’

‘It was very interesting. You obviously put a lot of work into it.’

‘Yes I did and don’t think you can come here and fiddle with the truth. They tell me
you’ve gone to other places and re-written history. Well, my people have been here for five generations and we know stuff that’s not written down anywhere.’

‘Well, you never know, I might just turn it into a novel.’

‘A novel! So you can tell lies without feeling guilty? That television crew came and did all these reconstructions. Lies I tell you, all lies. I complained to my local member but he said he could do nothing, even though they made my people out to be murderers. You see that program?’

‘Yes, I did.’

‘Well, what did you think of it?’

‘I thought it was very interesting.’

‘Very interesting! Is that what you say about everything? They tell me you’ve signed a six-month lease. Well at least you’re staying longer than most blow-ins.’

**Underground**

Back before 1900 Higgins’ Farm at the end of Bean Tree Road had been one of the busiest in the district with its fields of waving cane and a shanty-town of indentured workers. There they lived, those lured from the Solomon Islands, Samoa and Vanuatu. And there some of them died, for if you had livestock you had deadstock too and sometimes those people were treated worse than animals. And when they died they had to be buried somewhere and why not near where they had lived? After all it was convenient and besides, they were not welcome in consecrated ground.

Not everyone was happy with what young Pete Higgins had done. Selling up to Taifolis & Sons all but the heart of his farm was fair enough. These days with cane it was either get bigger or get out and Pete wanted to chase the mining money out in the West, using the old plantation house as a base to come home to - even though there were skeletons under the mango trees. But calling in those cemetery people with their radar machine? And the media?

Some said there must have been money in it for him with all those Islanders turning up in coaster buses and having ceremonies there. Those who understood Pete Higgins knew otherwise. Unmarked graves had lost souls and he just didn’t want them
rattling round his weekender. But still, over the bar of The Crown Hotel, the vitriol flowed.

‘Next thing they’ll be declaring sacred sites everywhere and the cane industry will be buggered.’

‘Too right. And they’ll want visiting rights so they can sit down and drink and wail and leave all their rubbish behind for someone else to clean up after them.’

Taifolis & Sons, who had the most to lose, said nothing. They’d bought up a string of farms, Prosser’s included, not that there was anything left for Deirdre after she had buried her father and paid off the bank. Nino and his boys did what they had always done, worked hard, went to Mass every Sunday and wove their life around family. It wasn’t their business what had happened in the past.

After the last of the cane had been fired for the year the town square filled for the harvest festival. Jennifer tossed some gold coins to the busking sousaphone, queued for octopus tenderised in a cement mixer and wondered if the trombone player she’d left behind somewhere north of somewhere ever thought about her.

**The Writing Life**

Jennifer wrote most days, sitting in a high backed wooden chair padded with a soft cushion that she’d picked up at the trash and treasure stall at the Saturday markets. In the mornings she worked on the front verandah, but mornings were not always kind to her writing and more often than not she read the newspaper until it was too close to lunch to start anything. In the afternoons she moved into the second bedroom, marginally cooler, for the sun did not hit that side of the house. Her desk faced the window and from there she looked into the back yard of the band hall. If Deirdre’s caravan hadn’t been there, it would have been a half-pleasant view.

On warm afternoons she tapped out truncated thoughts. Warm afternoons were soporific and usually ended in sleep. Late most days she strolled to the town pool and did some laps. On the way home, just after dark, her feet crunched on the leaves strewn from the mango trees lining the street. Sometimes she saw shadows that didn’t always look like shadows and she wondered if she was being followed. Late into the night, when curlew wails chilled her blood, she wrote at her best, blanketeted in the
solitude. Yet, she wasn’t alone. When she shut down her computer and turned off the light she could see the glow from Deirdre’s cigarette, there is the blackness, watching, looking, pointing. There were ghosts in this town, alive and dead. But what worried her most was whether the one good sentence she had written today would be worth keeping when she looked at it tomorrow.

**The Band Hall**

After the last flood, The Herbert Prosser Memorial Band Hall, home of the Fishermen’s Paradise Brass Band, had been painted bright yellow with pink trimmings. Someone had donated the paint, someone who was either colour blind or malicious. The band rehearsed on Thursday nights. From her front verandah Jennifer watched the players arrive. As they carted their cases inside she laughed to herself. Like dogs and their owners, brass players resembled the instruments they played, particularly the tenor horns, short and fat and prone to squealing. And there was something going on between one of the trombones and the little blonde triangle player with the pert breasts. Jennifer had seen them lurking in the car park after rehearsal one night, him old enough to be her father and, worse still, plunging his tongue deep within her mouth. Disturbingly, he was also one of the civic leaders. According to the ‘Bandit’ column of the ‘Paradise Star’, he’d been elected to the town council at the election two years ago. Since then he had been embroiled in every dodgy decision concerning property development in the shire. The woman running the Blue Bird Café had whispered to Jennifer that he had plans to demolish the band hall and replace it with a tourist resort overlooking the river. But for now, Jennifer kept all she knew a secret, including her greatest affliction, that she played the cornet, using her practice mute whenever she had a blow. Once you became a member of a brass band you were possessed by something bigger than religion and right now she didn’t want anything to interfere with her writing.

The band was thin on numbers, and not particularly musical. The lead euphonium sounded like a pelican with distemper and the drummer needed to be sedated, but occasionally, just occasionally, something stirred inside Jennifer and she found herself, in the privacy of her own lounge room, waving her right hand like a conductor, gritting her teeth when they crashed and burned every time they blundered
into the trio in Slaidburn. Bingo was held on Tuesday and Friday mornings. That attracted a few more lost souls than the band did. Deirdre told her not to mow her lawn on bingo mornings,

‘The old dears can’t hear my call with you rattling and roaring in the background. And we need the money to pay for the restumping.’

The Visitor

Jennifer knew she wasn’t imaging things. Someone had been in her house while she was at the pool. Nothing had been stolen, but she was particular about how she laid her work out on her desk and she knew it had been moved. And although she hadn’t locked the back door when she left, there was a knack to closing it so that it stayed shut. When she’d returned, the nib was no longer in the hole chiselled into the doorframe. She thought that maybe the wind had opened it, until she remembered the swarm of mosquitoes that had wafted onto her in the stillness of the dusk as she’d walked home. That had been Friday. The next evening she laid a pillowslip on the floor, just inside the back door. She left by the front door, locking it behind her. When she returned, the pillowslip had been swept aside. Someone had been back and they were of this earth. Late that night, as she split infinitives and mixed metaphors with her head silhouetted perfectly in the window-frame, she wondered whether Deirdre, just over there in the dark clung to that quaint rural tradition of owning more firearms than necessary.

One Good Sentence

On Sunday Jennifer typed twelve words:

*It was rumoured that Herbert Prosser was descended from a Samoan washerwoman.*

She upped the font size to 18, printed it out and placed it so that it was the only page on her desk. At around the usual time, when the sun dipped toward the horizon, she picked up her swimmers, grabbed her towel, banged the front door, clanged the gate and headed to the pool. Give it ten minutes, she said to herself. After all she was entitled to change her mind half way there and go for a short walk instead. So what if she wanted to get home early to watch a rerun of Sea Change. And it wasn't like she
was doing anything wrong. After all, she was the victim here, having her stuff spied upon and missing out on her swim. It had become a habit, her daily languor through tepid water, rehashing in her mind what she’d written, somehow making sense of what wasn’t working, loosening the tight construing and tightening the loose construing until, more often than not, what hadn’t been falling into place fell and what needed to be culled was culled. But anyway, today she didn’t need to swim because she knew already that she had written one good sentence.

**Showdown on Mariners’ Way**

‘Deirdre! To what do I owe this pleasure?’

‘There were some kids in your yard, I chased them off.’

‘Where did they go? I didn’t see any run down the road.’

‘Over the back fence.’

‘Into Bob Pearce’s yard? Into the salivating jaws of his two German Shepherds and his new Doberman?’

‘Well they were fairly flying.’

Jennifer eyed Deirdre over her front fence. Ordinarily this wouldn’t be unusual had she been in her yard and Deirdre had been on the footpath, instead of the other way round.

‘I don’t know if they’ve been inside or not, but I think I scared them off good enough.’

‘Thanks Deirdre, that’s very kind of you. Now if you’ll excuse me I have things to do.’

Deirdre didn’t seem inclined to leave. Maybe an evening alone in a caravan out the back of a band hall was less appealing than chin-wagging with a neighbour intent on digging up misery.

Deirdre’s arms hung like dead dugongs, ‘How’s your book going?’

‘Slowly.’

‘It’s hard work writing. And in the end no one thanks you. Your lease is up soon, I guess you’ll be leaving?’

‘Well you know Deirdre I was thinking I might stay on for a bit longer. I might even
dust off my cornet and come and join your band.’

Deirdre stiffened, regally, as though she had been captured in sepia.

‘Well, you’ll have to audition. We can’t just let anyone in.’

‘Deirdre, don’t bullshit me twice in the one day, you know as well as I do that you’re desperate for players.’

Deirdre barrelled out the gate, stomping on a rotten mango in her path. Fermented flesh smeared across the carpet of dead leaves, raising an odour like the scent of a lover who’d been on the rum all night. She faced up to Jennifer.

‘She wasn’t a washerwoman you know. She was a princess. If you play half as good as the fairy stories you write, you might just pass the audition. Rehearsal is on Thursday. You know what time we start. Don’t be late. And there’s a working bee next Sunday, if that’s not too beneath you.’

In the canopy above them a fruit bat screeched.

‘That one of your people Deirdre?’

‘Nah, sounds more like you on a cornet.’

Swirling bats tore at the twilight. Across the river a fingernail moon rose. Close by, the call of a stone curlew curdled the air, making them flinch. For the first time ever, they laughed - at and with each other.
Everything is still. No wind rattles the fences or ripples through the grasses, the air as crisp and sharp as the first bite of a granny smith. Off in the distance three specks appear over the rise. In front a jumping, whirling black blur, first dashing forward then doubling back to a larger, awkwardly moving blue blob. Just behind the blue shape a graceful red shape, larger still. And as the specks get closer and take form as mother, child and dog, noise enters the landscape.

The indistinct black of the dog bounds into sharp focus, a Huntaway. It barks and leaps, catching a ball on the full before racing back and nudging the child to throw it again. The child fumbles to throw with his mittened hands. His puffy blue jacket is slightly too large, giving it the faint air of a hand-me-down. Between throws he huffs out icy smoke rings: “Look mummy, like grandad”. The woman claps her hands together in muffled mitten applause. She stops by the rosehip bush and bends to examine it.

Overnight the rosehip bush has armoured itself. Icy spikes jut menacingly from its branches and even the plump red berries have sprouted white fuzz and small white spikes. A spider web sparkles in the feeble sunlight. Perfect but sterile, no insect life—hunter or the hunted—mars the pristine lace web. A vast bridal veil drapes the landscape, smothering the colours.

As she looks at the rosehip, red shrouded in white, she remembers how the blood, first dripping then pouring had contrasted so starkly with the white tiled floor. Beautiful, she had thought vaguely, even as a life had bled away.

“Iggy, come look at the rosehip.”

He crunches over the frozen ground. “The berries look like hedgehogs” he says, reaching to pluck one. Quicker than him she bats his arm away.
“Just look Iggy, don’t touch. I’m going to take photos of it. This is called a hoarfrost.”

He wrinkles his nose and widens his eyes, focusing them on the tip of his nose. She doesn’t notice his new crossed-eyed trick and he stops when they begin to ache. He wonders why grown-ups, who can do anything they want, always seem to insist on the boring—look not touch. Then he brightens, “For a painting?”

“Yes sweetie, I want to paint it just as it is now.” Iggy is not really interested in the idea of freezing a moment in time, but is pleased at the thought of the paints to come. He likes the acrylics best, the bright colours glug satisfyingly out of the tubes like toothpaste onto the small palette his mother gives him, his canvas and easel set up beside hers. What he would most like is to dip his fingers in the goo and use them to trace out lines and swirls but his mummy tells him the paint is too expensive for childish games.

*It was Dan who had found her slumped on the bathroom floor. Just popping in with some shortbread his mum had made, he had said, but she knew he was checking she was okay now that Tyson had buggered off.*

Dan, her best friend since the first day of kindergarten when they had fought over the tutus from the dress-up box. Not that he liked to be reminded of it. She had won. A sharp kick to his shin securing her the pink one. But he hadn’t told on her and he had hung around.

“What colours would you use to paint this Iggy?”

Iggy thinks hard. “I’d use some ultramarine blue, maybe some burnt umber, titanium white, some grey...” He trails off, noticing that she is peering distractedly across the paddock.

*He had scraped her up, bundled her in a blanket and called an ambulance. How soft his large hands had felt as they stroked her cheek, a whisper of warmth in all that coldness. She remembers how all the colour drained from the world and his voice seemed to come from so very far away as he told her not to worry about Iggy. Such gentle strokes.*

Iggy’s teacher, Mrs McCafferty, had marvelled at the way he described colours. “Why Iggy, I don’t even know what burnt umber is, aren’t you a clever boy! Is this a picture of your doggy?” He had told her it was the dead possum he and his mummy had seen, with its guts spilling out on the road and the white squiggles were the maggots writhing
around in it. “Oh my, aren’t you a...funny wee thing” Mrs McCafferty had said. When he reported this to mummy that night she had spluttered out some of her fennel tea. He thought she was laughing, but she sounded serious when she said “Don’t let them make you colour their rainbows inside the lines. You keep saying the right names for colours and you paint what you see.” Iggy was not quite sure what she meant, but he guessed she liked his painting even though it only got a smiley face stamp and one tick and Mason’s picture had got a gold star sticker and a certificate.

His mummy is the most beautiful person in the world. Mason says that Iggy’s mummy dresses wrong and asks weird questions, but he likes her questions. And he knows Mason is just jealous of his mummy because she is beautiful with her silky scarves and skirts and auburn corkscrew curls.

Tyson had called her My Beautiful Swan. Until that time when her belly started to puff out. She had quacked at Iggy and flapped her arm wings as she waddled around the house cleaning and tidying. It was during the duck phase that Tyson had left for the final time.

Guitars, amps, sheets of music all stuffed into his rusty Valiant. “Sorry Vanessa but I didn’t sign up for this domestic gig. I fell in love with an artist, not a mother duck.”

---

A farm bike hums across the field, skidding a little as it stops beside them. Two new Huntaways bark out enthusiastic greetings before sniffing the other dog, who sticks his tail end in the air, paws stretched long in front, prelude to a running-chasing game.

“Hi Dan. See Vincent’s downward dog pose. Think he could teach a yoga class?”

Dan looks mystified but grins anyway. A burly man, deep lines etched from nose to mouth.

*Spring and summer spent swallowing tears whenever Iggy came into the room, guilty at the relief when he was at school. She padded the house in trackies and slippers, lank hair scraped into a ponytail, pretending not to hear the doorbell. Avoiding the casseroles and well-meaning comments since the time Deirdre Phillips had dropped off a shepherd’s pie and told her it was a crying shame at 19 weeks but she was still young and needed to think of Iggy.*

“G’day Nessa, yeah looks like Vince is doing okay. You need to show him who’s boss
though, they’re working dogs. Seems like Jack and Tom still remember him at any rate. How’s tricks Igs?”

Vanessa and Iggy’s answers tumble over each other, colliding in a jumble.

“Good, can I have a go on your bike?”

“Well, he seems to be doing well Daniel. He doesn’t seem to be pining for you too much.”

“Told you a dog would be good company, didn’t I? I’m glad you didn’t call him some crackpot artist’s name like your cat. Vince is a good honest name for a dog.”

Vanessa swallows a laugh before it escapes like an unwelcome burp. “It’s Vincent actually, or VVG if you must shorten it, and I don’t think Salvador Dali would care for your tone.”

Iggy looks at her in surprise. She’d let Dan away with calling her Nessa. Usually she insisted on Vanessa, sometimes spelling it out in a loud voice. He wondered if it was because of all the shortbread Dan had brought round since Tyson left and mummy stopped being a duck. Or maybe it was because he gave them Vincent.

*Dan had kept coming. Knocking and knocking until she shuffled to the door. Hanging around as he always had, even when she told him to fuck off.*

“He’s the runt of the litter, needs a little TLC” Dan had said, handing over a warm bundle of soft fur and wet nose. “But he’ll be a good dog. You know our bitch, Lady—he’s one of hers.” She had been about to protest that they didn’t need a dog when a small pink tongue had licked her hand. Three sets of eyes all looked at her so hopefully, begging her to say yes. All that time Dan and Iggy had spent huddled together talking intently, breaking off whenever she came near. “Fine, fine” she had said “but you’re going to have to feed him, Iggy.”

“Well, me and Igs had best get on Ness, lots of work to do still. Might see you later though.” She smiles her agreement to Iggy’s ride. Dan pauses, “And you’d better get cracking on those photos. You know the thaw’s coming. Look how bright the sun is now.”

She laughs. The sun is still weak, barely warming her flushed face.
# NT WRITERS’ CENTRE

## Poetry Award

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TERRITORIAL NIGHT

Penny Drysdale

i

gunfire and

missiles whistling

light thrown like rock

above rooves

a black inland sea

hanging over our heads

necks bend forward

and back

colour born and quelled

so quickly

the stars go pale
light our wicks
    and run backwards

we love this frontier
    until someone loses an eye

sirens chase the danger
    it is way out in front

we peer over still
    smouldering rockets

want a better look
    at what went wrong

we want to know
    there is somebody

out there to blame
children wave and point
ten new toys

machine guns from
the show

we pay to have the shit
scared out of us

we pay for permission
to scream

we pay for our cages
to be turned upside down

meanwhile country music plays
the ocean of love

guitar notes bending
under the weight

of all this
we make these beasts
    of light

ignite to jump and bark
    away at darkness

for what we cannot see
    expands by stealth

the sirens subside
    but in our beds

we lie rigid
    in you darkness

feel you swelling
    under our covers

under our lids
The night before the rains
I ask you to grieve with me.

The sheets are barometric;
the pressure rising
falling in our throats

Imprinting my neck on your bicep,
I rehearse your hips;
storying your scent.

Have you not yet learned
to read the wind? Perhaps

the monsoon signals
something else to you.

Lightening severs
the horizon; breaking
us with the storm.
IN OUR TENT

James Purtill

This is somewhere on the east coast of Australia.
This is somewhere,
This switching out the light,
The darkening sounds of raindrops
Of animals
Licking barbecues.
The dusk the black wind the square light of home.
The way we say the word submarine.
The way it hates
From deep inside its head.
The long dark spill of an ocean.
The way we are raised to hunt in the dark.
Rain opens the dark like spiders open triangles.
We are ever falling
Through our own search cordon.
We are the international community we have sent to find us.
Through the jellyfish, the souls of tortoises.
We are the black box studying
The laughter of our final mayday broadcast.
I walk out under the stars in clean white.
We are seventy per cent water and thirty per cent ice.
None of us will ever be together.
THE ROAD AT NIGHT

Leni Shilton

It is one of those nights, long and clear
we move dreamlike through the house
Make a path to the car, arms over-filled,
calm child tantrums with hushed voices and food,
the cold inching through the open house.

Night duty packing, and us, awake dreaming
we imagine a newness
that speaks from the rocks
redden figs in stony clefts
and prickled bush tomatoes on the sand.

Then we pack the children into car
drive all night into our spots of light
down the dust road.
The children start to sing
young voices finding a harmony
with the engine’s diesel drone
until, wrapped in blankets,
a huddle of pillows in the back seat
the song falls to quiet
lulled by the vibrating road
And for a moment
we are adults alone with each other,
our outside world becomes a longing we move through.
we hold hands,
as our minds part the darkness,
and we drive into the morning.
WINNER

Barbara Eather  Fire in the Furnace  46

FINALIST

Roland Dyrting  Grenada, 2006.  54
'You like walk in rice field, you like walk in rice field?'

He is fat, greasy and shirtless.

‘You like walk in rice field? Many pretty bird.’

I could move on, point my nose towards one of Ubud’s many cafés fifty metres away, but I’ve been gripped by a revelation. The Warung Sanje is no more! Yesterday it served rice and noodle dishes, satays and longneck bottles of Bintang. Now its thatched roof and bamboo struts sag, blackened and waterlogged. Inky puddles ooze across the concrete floor. Shattered glass hangs in charred frames. That dream last night where I’d smelt smoke and heard breaking glass and wailing sirens had been no dream. The real world had layered itself into my sub-conscious, had played with the niggling fear that if terror had come to this island in the past it could come again. I hadn’t been able to tell the difference.

‘You like walk in rice field, you like walk in rice field? Very cheap, very cheap.’

‘Tidak tidak,’ I snap and stride off. I step around two dogs, one black, one white, lolling on the footpath. They look benign but I’ve been warned about the dogs of Ubud. Over breakfast I read yesterday’s Bali Daily. In the Tabanan Regency restrictions have been placed on tourism development to preserve its dwindling hectares of rice fields. And rabies is killing people. A full broadsheet page emblazoned ‘Bali’s Most Wanted’ startles me. Criminals at large? No merely listings – accommodation, cars, land, and even puppies. I count thirty villas available for rent or sale.

I slurp a Papaya Lassi, followed by coffee, and pancakes coated with palm-sugar syrup and cream. The café is on the edge of a ravine. A Breadfruit tree towers above me. When I lean my head over the wrought iron railing I see that its trunk
plummets far below me, so far that is lost in a tangle of greenery. A rat scampers along a branch and disappears into the eaves of the café.

Monday

I am awake at four in the morning. Wide-awake. Useful perhaps when flames are devouring the warung next door, but right now, just annoying. Classes start in five hours. I’m here for that, not to be awake now. Even the roosters of Ubud are asleep. I sit on the balcony and stare into the blackness that hides the adjacent rice field. Fireflies dart past. The paddy roars with life. Night birds chortle. Insects chirp. Water trickles along bamboo irrigation pipes. Something screeches as though it’s in trouble. I inhale a whiff of charred warung. The more I listen the louder the rice field becomes. I go back to bed. It’s riotous out there. In desperation I heave myself upright, shut the door and flick on the air conditioner. How do you explain rationally, ‘I was kept awake by insects. They should cover them all with villas.’

Hours later, sleep deprived, I stroll down the street. The fat-greasy-shirtless man hails me.

‘Hello, hello, you here again, where you from, you like walk in rice field?’

I don’t make eye contact and detour off the footpath to avoid a white truck parked out the front of the burnt-out warung. A team of workers sweating in the morning humidity is demolishing the remains and loading them onto the tray-back.

Outside the front of the vacant shop next door a man wields a lumber plane. He works on two life-size wooden horses, although their faces don’t seem long enough. I suspect they are sarcophagi to be used in the mass cremations occurring all over the island this week. Some of those being cremated may have died months or years ago but are only being farewelled now because it can take a while to save enough money for the ceremonies.

Over breakfast of French Toast, and a beetroot, carrot and mint juice, I read the Bali Daily. Pneumonia, avian flu, dengue fever, tuberculosis, malaria, as well the ubiquitous rabies, are serious dangers here. I linger over a second cappuccino. Over the other side of the ravine, beyond the adjacent ridge, a thick haze covers the sky. Somewhere in that shroud looms Mount Agung, the highest point of the island. The
Mother Temple of Besakih, the largest and holiest temple of the Hindu religion in Bali, sits on its slopes. It will be busy there this week. Mass cremations boost ancestor worship.

In our first class we explore the un-layering of embedded memories. The twelve of us are blindfolded, to deny us our sense of sight. We listen to music - Gurrumul, Handel’s baroque flourishes and Guns and Roses. We inhale nutmeg, lemongrass, ginger, nail polish and vegemite. We differentiate unpleasant from pleasant senses. We don’t all think the same. I recall a television interview I saw once. A tank commander from World War II told how that, even as an old man, the aroma of a slightly over-cooked lamb roast took him back to the field of battle and the smell of human flesh charred inside incinerated armoured vehicles.

Tuesday

I wake late. Last night’s dinner tour to the zoo ended after midnight. Under a quick shower I laugh out loud at how I’d shoved corncobs up the trunk of a kindly but exasperated elephant, convinced, as I was, that heffalumps sucked their food like vacuum cleaners. And that was before I’d got stuck into the rice wine.

With little time before class starts I don’t make it to breakfast at the café with the view. I eat in the hotel. The coffee tastes burnt. There is hair attached to the bacon and the toaster has two settings only - premature or cremated. The Bali Daily informs me that another Australian faces drug charges here.

In class we explore the colour, texture and taste of words. My sharpened HB pencil flames across the page:

*Lions roar, tigers pace, elephants plod, hornbills eye, gibbons glance, cassowaries crouch, deer nuzzle, peacocks parade – deep in the forest of my ancestors. Tonight, in the midst of those who surround me, and those of that other world I eat fire. To the clang of the gamelan and the throb of the drum, I eat fire. Let the spirits of the forest claw at me. I repel them with my searing breath. Glistening torso, bulging eyes, pounding feet - I eat fire. In my trance, I feel no pain, I do not burn, I have no earthly existence. I eat fire, and all those that surround me hear my silent scream, and inhale all that intoxicates me in this world, and the other.*

After that hyperbolic effort I sleep for most of the afternoon.
Wednesday

The street is deserted when I make my way to breakfast. I order *Nasi Goreng*. I am half way through my second *Papaya Lassi* when it arrives, a steaming plate of fried rice topped with an egg, its white part brown and crispy around the edges. A headline in the *Bali Daily* jumps out at me – Bali Seeks to Reduce Rice Dependency. Annually, four million residents, three million international tourists and four million domestic tourists are consuming more rice than the island can produce. ‘There’s a push for corn, cassava and sweet potato to be eaten instead. ‘But they don’t taste nearly so good,’ I mutter between forkfuls.

On my way back to the hotel I see that the sarcophagi maker has made progress. Covered in black felt, the two horses look less like horses and more like bulls. The *Warung Sanji* has been stripped bare. The two dogs that live in this part of the street have reappeared. The black one saunters through the morning traffic. The white one blocks my path, ignorant rather than aggressive but still, my path is blocked. I can’t veer to the left, what was once footpath is now an open drain, possibly harbouring cholera. My only alternative, two steps to the right, puts me in touching distance of, ‘You back, you back! You like walk in rice field? Where you from, where you from?’

Shirtless again, he’s perched on an oil drum, a roll-your-own dangling from the left corner of his mouth.

‘Not today thank you,’ I clip at him.

‘Tomorrow then?’

I shake my head and keep moving.

After the morning writing class I walk the two kilometres down the hill into the centre of Ubud. I pass the village meeting hall. It is filled with a herd of sarcophagi, black bulls decorated with red and yellow flowers and glistening sequins, all ready to be paraded through the streets on Saturday. If black bulls are used for royal cremations then what I’ve heard might be true – that almost every Balinese is descended from traditional kingdoms – they’re all royalty. I buy enough gardening shirts to last me three years, without convincing the vendor that I deserve a bulk discount. Feeling
ripped off I am determined not to succumb to the calls of ‘Taxi? Taxi?’ For the first two hundred metres my resolve holds strong even though I am walking slightly uphill, facing the afternoon sun and lugging a bundle of shirts that are becoming heavier with every step. I weaken. One taxi driver quotes an outrageous fare and sneers at the price I suggest. I snap, ‘I’d rather walk.’ Further along the road I don’t have much haggle left in me. I agree on a price that is only slightly more than what I’ve been told is the going rate.

It should only take a few minutes to drive to my hotel but we’re caught up in a traffic jam. My driver motions for me to fold in the wing mirror so that cars and motorbikes converging do not snap it off. Trapped, I am asked many questions, personal questions, as is the Balinese custom of trying to understand how you fit into their world. I’ve been through this before. It is better to be a liar than to be pitied. I acquire an instant husband and give birth, painlessly, to two clever children, a doctor and an engineer.

‘And they are beautiful like their mother?’ he asks.

‘Of course!’ I laugh back.

He mentions that the traffic is so busy because we are near a cemetery where families are involved with exhumations.

‘Cremations this week,’ he says, ‘very special time. You are lucky to be in Bali to be part of this.’

He tells me that cremation releases the soul of the deceased but it is only one aspect of returning to the cosmos the elements that make up the body. At death the final breath releases energy. Burial returns solids to the earth. Liquids are disposed by throwing the ashes into water and prayer and ritual disperse ethereal space. When we get to my hotel I pay him the price that he quoted first. It seems fair for forty minutes of air-conditioned comfort and a cultural lesson.

**Thursday**

He’s there again, him with his sweat-swathed chest.

‘You like walk in rice field. Today you promise I take you?’
‘No thank you.’

‘Ha, you Australian, you like walk in rice field. I show you kangaroo.’

I toss back, ‘I’m right mate. I’ve already been to the zoo.’

Too smart for my own good, I nearly step on the black dog, but all he does is open one eye and close it as I do fancy footwork centimetres from his head. Walk-in Rice-Field-Man laughs. So do I. And then I laugh some more. The Warung Sanji has risen from the dead. Its blackened terrace has been scrubbed clean. Charcoal has been replaced by freshly cut bamboo poles. A team of workers is laying new thatch. By morning teatime the Bintang will be ‘Nice Cold Piss’ – and there will probably be a sign up proclaiming so. Next to the warung the sarcophagi maker is there, putting the final touches to his two black bulls. Soon they will be cinders.

Over breakfast of crispy bacon on toast, I skim through the Bali Daily. A Malaysian citizen faces fifteen years in Bali’s Kerobokan Prison for drug offences and ten thousand tonnes of rice are being imported from Vietnam and India.

I struggle with the second last day of writing classes. Why do I bother when we all end up dead anyway? Maybe this is not a good week for me to be in a Bali gripped by funeral fever. And worse still, everyone is meant to be happy. Postcards of roaring funeral pyres are for sale everywhere. Camera toting tourists are encouraged to attend the cremations. We’re told that it’s all happening in Ubud and across the island on Saturday. If you’re heading to the airport, leave early. The roads will be clogged - with the living and the dead.

In the afternoon I walk to the Neka Art Museum. There I am transfixed by a photograph taken in 1939 of a cremation in Tabanan Regency. A vast sea of men supporting long bamboo poles across their shoulders hold a corpse-bearing tower aloft as they process to the cremation grounds. I count seven tiers, each topped with a thatched roof tapering ever smaller to a flag-bearing spire. I read that clan and class determine how many tiers are allowed. Royalty and the brahmana, the high caste priests, command seven and eleven respectively. At the gift shop I buy prints that I have no wall space for and books that will overflow my bedside table. We only live once.
Friday

I’m out early. Walk-In-Rice-Field-Man merely smiles and nods at me. Today he wears a shirt, but the buttons are undone. The sarcophagi are gone but the terrace of the Warung Sanji overflows with deliveries, pallets of Bintang and panniers of leafy greens. Over an omelette crisp on the outside and fluffy on the inside I read about the Tukang Patri, a man who travels around soldering broken kitchen utensils, just like his father did before him. Soon I will return to that dreadful world where I have to make my own breakfast and read a newspaper that lives on crocodile stories and testosterone-fuelled sports.

In writing class it’s sensual stuff. To put it bluntly, sex, with knobs on, written competently and badly, with all shades in between. We read an earthy scene from D.H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover. At the line, ‘All was dense and silent, save for the awed dog that lay with its paws against its nose,’ I laugh to myself about my two most recent cats. The one who died two years ago would flee from the bed at the hint of any horizontal folk dancing. Her replacement clings to the covers, no matter what, eyes glowering at the inconvenience. I want to be home, gripped in the arms of the living, even if it means being ogled by Kelly the cat as incantations are hurled at the ceiling.

At the writing group’s farewell dinner that evening it is gleaming silver, crystal glasses, fine bone China and starched white everything else. A precision drill team of twenty waiters in traditional dress delivers our meals simultaneously. I tell myself it’s one of those moments that will only happen once. I can come here again but there will be no replica. The sequences will be different. The characters will change. The sentences will not be the same.

Saturday

For my last morning in Bali I book myself into a beauty parlour. It’s peaceful early. The warung is not open but the spread of Bintang bottles on its terrace tells me that last night was a good one. The two dogs are in their usual spots, but Walk-in Rice-Field-Man is missing. Not here? How dare he! Today of all days I have the time, and the inclination, to let him take me on a walk, even if his dress standards have appalled
me. But he must have funeral obligations too. I wonder what he looks like today. If he’s
dressed in Balinese regalia he probably looks good enough to strap to my body and
smuggle through customs.

While I am caressed gently with hot stones in a dimly lit upstairs room a
vehicular assault roars along the street. People are pouring into Ubud for the funeral,
getting here before the procession gridlocks the town. Motorbikes and cars scream
past, horns honking gaily. Deep-throated lorries trundle by.

After my massage I walk blinking against the glare into a street deserted,
except for one taxi driver who runs across the road and gestures as though he is
holding a gyrating steering wheel.

‘I take you. I take you. You late for funeral.’

I have enough trouble attending the funerals of people I know. I shake my head
and keep walking, right into a café that boasts the best barbequed, charred, grilled
anything.

While my order is cooking I sit alone on the terrace overlooking the street.
The white dog twitches in her sleep. The black dog wanders over. My meal arrives.
It’s chicken satays, blackened around the edges, moist in the centre and smothered in
peanut sauce. The black dog inches closer. I flick through the Bali Daily. Yesterday
one hundred and thirty-six bodies were cremated in Gianyar Regency. I think back to
my father’s funeral sixteen years ago. It was so quick, so Anglican, forty minutes from
when the church service began to when I shook hands with the last of the mourners
leaving the cemetery. I had looked at my watch and thought that it must have stopped,
but it had been only forty minutes. Then I was expected to get back to normal. But I
wasn’t normal, not for a long time. I look up into the clouds. There are souls up there,
trying off into the cosmos today, or maybe not. Some souls never leave us. The black
dog is next to me, his breath hot on my right leg. I stare into his non-rabid eyes. He
licks his lips. I flick him a sliver of charred meat.
GRENADA, 2006.

Roland Dyrting

1. one morning

I’m drifting off to sleep in the Caribbean, and night in rural Grenada is loud. Grunts, yowls, beeps, drones, blips, buzzes, chirps, whoops — the white noise of some serious biodiversity.

I’m staying at The Twelve Apostles, a family guesthouse. I’ve snuck in through the backdoor, slunk into my room and had an authentic vegan dinner — two cans of Red Stripe beer, a mango, and a spliff that smells like basil mixed with mummified human faecal matter.

The cannabis is splendid, and I genuflect. I somehow make it to my bunk. Everything is all and all is independent, so I have to convince my limbs to all obey. At all.

Once I am on my bunk, I am alone, and also only with myself, and it is now, and only in the now that is happening at the moment. I think something because something is thinking me, I think. To think is to be something, because there’s some things you need to think of. And something is inside the dreams of the giant Galapagos tortoises, they who are boxy-shaped, and wise, and have chunky, stumpy legs.

My bedroom door slowly opens with a ludicrous Draculean creak, as always. Humidity and endless paintwork have fattened the wood so much that just about everything around here sounds like this.

Someone rustles into the room and grabs me by the front of my t-shirt, yanking me upright so I’m sitting. Still holding my shirt he brusquely pushes and pulls me forward and back. I open my eyes. It’s a skinny black guy with bad breath and a nose that belongs on a racehorse.

“Hey, maaan, wake up now!” he says, still shaking me, “Hey, get deh damn boo-boo outta yuh eye!”
“Aah pish off, juss fugg off,” I say. He lets go of me, leaving me incongruously now rocking sideways.

He cocks his head. “Yuh look at dis, yuh look at dis, yuh look at dis, maaan,” he says, wiggling his left hand’s fingers in front of me.

I look at the fingers, idiotically locking onto his left hand’s jiggling. He grunts, and with his right hand he belts me one straight into the middle of my face. My own nose explodes. Clean agony.

Big-nose yanks me out of bed. He pulls me down a corridor, and downstairs into the living room. The guesthouse’s lights are off, and the only illumination is from three candles on a side table. He shoves me down against a wall, where two other people are now slumped — Miss Dorothy and Cookie, both of whom are gagged and bound at ankle and wrist with silver electricians tape.

Miss Dorothy is wearing only a cotton Victorian nightdress. Her head is bowed and her face is wet.

Cookie is bare-chested, clad in board-shorts. A black cobra tattoo coils out from his groin, hood distended, mouth and fangs arched. There’s a horrific old burn scar melted onto his left bicep.

I register two other individuals. One is Mr Campbell, the owner of the guesthouse. He’s sitting at the table with the candles, intently concentrating on its surface.

Another guy exists beside Mr Campbell. He’s a short crisp Indian man dressed in a business suit, bow-tie included.

“Strap dat tchupid Austrian tourist down, quick now, Russell,” he orders. “Me aaand Mr Campbell here shall now step into deh outside, an have us some caaanversation.”

They leave. Big-nose quickly tapes my ankles and hands. He then tries to tape to my mouth but the blood from my wimpy nose is everywhere, and he gives up after a few attempts.

He stands back and I notice that there’s this pistol shoved into the front of his brown trousers, nuzzling up against his reproductive apparatus. And it’s — oh, daddy —
gargantuan, the biggest hand-cannon on the planet. It should be mounted on an attack helicopter, where it belongs.

Big-nose props himself against a window sill. Nothing happens for a while, and then it does again.

I’ve pissed my boxer shorts somewhere along the line. And none of this is really happening, of course. If it were, I would at least have had some sort of subtle warning — fast, grim reality can’t just appear out of nowhere and do what it pleases.

Outside, a car engine backfires. The three of us on the floor ripple.

Cookie moves his taped hands into his board-shorts pocket and pulls out a cigarette packet. He places it between his legs. He pokes a hole through the layers of tape wrapping his mouth, using his thumb. He inserts a cigarette into his face and ignites with a lighter tucked into the packet. When he finishes, he spits the fag-end out, letting it smoulder away on the floor. What is this guy – a fucking werewolf?

I then realise this mustn’t be the first time he’s shared time with a bad man with a pistol.

Mr Campbell walks in. He ignores us and walks down the corridor to his bedroom. After awhile, he comes out with a wrapped bundle under his arm. Miss Dorothy then freaks out, mewling and thrashing on the floor.

Mr Campbell passes her and goes back outside.

A few minutes later, a voice shouts from the driveway, “Okay, Russell, we-a got wha we caaame for! Leh we go now an give deh people back to demselves!”

2. Apocalypso … it’s a special dance.

Grenada, the Spice Island, is part of the Lesser Antilles of the eastern Caribbean. It was sighted by Christopher Columbus on the 21st of November, 1498. He ignored it thereafter.

In 1609, its first European settlers were a swarm of well over two-hundred English farmers who hoped to make a financial killing by setting up extensive tobacco plantations. In less than a year, these farmers were themselves all killed.
They were slain by the Caribs — the island’s Amerindian inhabitants, an indigenous Nation who for hundreds of years had idyllically co-existed with their exquisitely balanced ecosystem.

The Caribs followed a strict Palaeolithic Diet — macrobiotic, low GI, low salt, polyunsaturated, and high in amino acids, both essential and non-essential. So, after they murdered these intrepid Englishmen they often ate them — they eviscerated and split-roasted them over dug pits, usually smashing open their tibias and femurs next, so to suck out the nutritious inner marrow.

It’s all too easy to be harshly dismissive of the Caribs’ preferred dietary intake, but surely this was their own lifestyle choice to make — indeed, they apparently had admirably low rates of obesity, cardio-vascular disease and Type 2 diabetes.

(An aside: Besides the term ‘Caribbean’, the Carib language has provided English with such useful loan-words as ‘hammock’ and ‘maracas’, as well as ‘cannibal’ and ‘barbeque.’)

In 1650 the French bought Grenada from the Caribs — paying them with some metal axes, glass beads and two bottles of brandy. They established Port Louis, a thriving trading station that soon sank into the bottom of a lagoon. The Caribs for some reason then discourteously reneged on the sale of their homelands and began to attack French settlements like there was no tomorrow, which for them unfortunately there wasn’t.

Because by 1651 the French sent in troops who exterminated the whole population, eventually driving the last remnants – men, women and children – off over a tall cliff.

The French imported African slaves and set up plantations. The English invaded. The French and English then invaded and re-invaded each other for a few decades. The situation stabilised in 1783, when the island finally became consolidated as English real estate, although some rich and powerful French plantation owners remained.

In 1795 these Gallic businessmen kidnapped the British Governor and some of his official retinue, and executed them all, before roaming the land as ferocious bandits. They were then all tracked down and intensively aerated by both localised musket-fire and cannonades from an off-shore English naval fleet.

Its first President was an intense young black man named Eric Garity, a well-educated Socialist, powerful orator, and respected union-leader. His cabinet was a dynamic force, consisting of ministers who had attended the most prestigious universities England had to offer. Surprisingly, however, his government soon became increasingly incompetent, corrupt and dictatorial.

To enforce its shaky rule, the Garity regime then started using a secretive group of psychopathic, cocaine-fucked thugs known as the Mongoose Gang, who dressed immaculately while killing, raping, and disenfranchising at will.

But in 1979, while the President Garity was abroad, the Opposition Party, led by Maurice Bishop, another well-educated Socialist, powerful orator, and respected union-leader, staged a bloodless coup d’état. (Although many foreign journalist who reported on this event had seven shades of shit beaten out of them along the way.)

This peaceful revolution was greeted with much cheerful civilian enthusiasm, while armoured personnel carriers, sandbagged checkpoints and troop-enforced curfews enforced harmony throughout the island.

Bishop established state-run primary schools, medical clinics, credit unions and Workers’ Co-operatives. He nationalised many privately owned businesses, and erected massive colour billboards of himself lifting his head skyward and blissfully smiling away at something or another.

Soon, powerful capitalists in the USA and elements of Bishop’s own military backers, thought all of this state-funded do-goodliness was way too Communistic for a man who’d always professed to be only a well-educated Socialist, powerful orator and respected union-leader.

Both groups increasingly froze him out. Bishop sought financial aid from the nearby Cubans. They selflessly helped him no end, and also began to build an enormous airport on the island, even generously providing a host of well-armed military advisors for free.

In 1983, President Bishop was suddenly overthrown by the Grenadian military, and he was placed under house-arrest. His house was arrested as well — and two tanks were constantly parked on its front lawns to make sure it wouldn’t try to escape.
A crowd of over thirty-thousand citizens immediately swamped this house, however, and liberated their popular, non-elected President. Everyone and Uncle Bob then marched on to Fort George’s, a strategic military base near the capital. Soldiers shot indiscriminately into this mob, killing anywhere between forty to over a hundred-and-fifty people and eventually re-captured the President.

The military lined Bishop and his upper ministers up against courtyard wall near a flower-shop and executed them all with semi-automatic gunfire. Two senior officers administered the coups de grâce.

Because this turn of events threatened Protestant Christian Democracy on the North American mainland, the US then swiftly invaded Grenada. The Americans lost well over forty soldiers, but still managed to wipe out seventy-plus Cubans, and about a hundred-and-seventy Grenadians — including twenty-three psychiatric patients accidentally cluster-bombed while residing in a mental institution.

Clint Eastwood later directed and starred in a movie about this incursion, but it was a ripe old load of shite.

By 1990s, however, most of this US military apparatus departed, due to savage budget cuts, and things have been pretty calm in Grenada ever since, apart from the three or four Category Three or Four hurricanes that predictably whiplash the island every rainy season.

I shut the Lonely Planet. Grenada, an island the size of a golf course, with a population of just over ninety-thousand, made Lord of the Flies seem like an afternoon tea on the lawns of an Adelaide vicarage.

3. the tenth apostle

At The Twelve Apostles guesthouse there are twelve rooms, each door labelled with one of the holy posse. There are only two guests here at the moment. Mr George Cookson — a shaven-headed Scotsman with shoulders like a cenotaph, who everyone calls Cookie — and me.

He’s in Room 1, so he’s the apostle Simon Peter. I’m in Room 10, so I’m the apostle
Thaddaeus, a man famous for his insignificance.

The guesthouse is run by Mr Campbell, a pensive widower, and his eldest daughter, Miss Dorothy, a pensive widow. You get breakfast and dinner. For breakfast, Miss Dorothy usually makes porridge with milk and honey, but every now and then she cooks saltfish with ackee, or a fish soup with toast. Dinner, or ‘supper’ as its called around here, is whatever this small frugal family eat themselves.

On the second day there, I rent a motorcycle from Winfield Braithwaite’s Automobile Services, a Yamaha 250cc — basically, a dirt trail-bike with delusions of illusion.

The bike’s mottled with rust. “Hit’s deh daaamn sea-hair around here, maaan. Nottin yuh can do bout dat,” says Mr Braithwaite.

The back brake doesn’t work. “Hit’s dem frickin English backpackers, all-a dem let dose fat-ass girlfriends sit on deh back seat, O Laaaard!”

The speedometer is forever locked on zero. “If yuh goin too fass, juss keep yuh damn eye peeled open, maaan.”

And there’s no safety helmet. “Wuh? Yuh some sorta gladiator, now? Yuh Mr Russell Crowe in aaall his devilish finery? No, me got no elmet, an me got no sword and trident, as well. Fekk yuh, maaan.”

And so, off I fekk.

Riding around St George’s, Grenada’s capital is a superb assault on the senses. Most of the place is strictly analogue, and olden wooden buildings dominate. All of the glass, aluminium and concrete is concentrated in the touristy southwest.

Everyone’s black, of course, and everyone who isn’t is obese and British, with bright-coloured board-shorts and bodies made from blue-vein cheese.

And it’s damn noisy, a cheerful pandemonium. Horns tooting incessantly, either in greeting or in assertion, hawkers calling, madmen bawling, women shrieking and laughing, dogs snarling, loudspeakers blaring, steel-bands tinkling, and sirens everywhere, even on top of bakery trucks. On one street corner, a man — a busker, I hope — dressed in a white Rhinestone cowboy outfit, cracks two cattle-whips above his head while furiously tapdancing.
My ears hiss that late afternoon as I lie in my bunk.

At the end of the day, at the beginning of supper, Mr Campbell asks Miss Dorothy to say grace, and she says, “Emmanuel, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the Brightest Light of the Morning Star, let us give thanks. We ask you to bless our fellowship, our family and our visiting friends. We thank you for giving us the means of strengthening and refreshing our bodies, and for the means of drawing us closer to one another and thee in Jesus’s precious name. Amen.”

The next day I head off to the parish of Saint Patrick’s for its yearly Fiesta.

The roads are sealed — and winding, wending and wriggly — most about the width of a caravan. The numerous potholes look like they were punched in by meteorites. I ride slowly.

The vegetation that hugs the roads reminds me of far north Queensland, but it’s so lavish and shiny and fronded and big-leafed and metallically green and explosively flowered it looks like it’s all some fruity fakery. Can wild helliconia grow on the side of a road and still be so healthily monstrous?

Grenada’s flag features a nutmeg pod, and it should. I putt-putt past numerous spice plantations, their aromas filling the air like an outdoor market — nutmeg and mace, cinnamon, garlic, ginger, dried chilli, cloves.

I stop at a roadside stall, with a Jamaican flag brightly drawn on its front face. I can’t understand most of what the vendor says, his accent has entrapped English and made it his own. I buy a quarter of barbequed jerk-chicken and some sky-juice iced cordial. He then attempts to appeal to the stupidest part of my tourist mentality by trying to sell me three spliffs rolled in yellow paper. He succeeds.

I reach Sauteurs, the capital of the parish of Saint Patrick. It’s perched on the same cliff where the last of the Caribs died. The Fiesta is in full swing. There’s a band playing on every second street corner and the music is so West Indian I don’t know what it is — reggae, socca, calypso, ragamuffin, ska, those definitions don’t seem to mean much when you’re at Ground Zero.

At a bar near midnight, wasted after dancing all by myself like a lonely jackass Westerner, Dylan’s ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ bizarrely starts to play. I love the man, but each time that
song’s chorus rolls in it seems as if I’m the only clown who gets the joke.

A brown-skinned woman with Asian eyes and wearing a tight Fifties dress sits down in my booth and utters something easily snatched away by the next song.

“What?” I ask, leaning forward.

“I said, I deserve better but yuh gunna hafta do.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Yuh waaan and come and be wit me in deh bushes? Up near deh boardwalk?”

4. one morning, after

The morning after, Cookie shouts everyone breakfast at Mr Wabi Abraham’s Establishment, a café near Edith’s Beach. Mr Campbell and Miss Dorothy look like they need it. I look like I need a holiday in a hospital.

“Fook mae, after all thah fannying abou’, let’s just greet tha dawn with a grin,” he says. “Tha breakfasts are all oon mae. I need some egg and chups, with tonnes of HP sauce.”

I’m not hungry, but I order a hamburger. When it arrives it’s pathetically modest — a supermarket bun enclosing a pineapple ring, a Kraft cheese slice, some jalapenos, and an innocuous pattie obviously cooked by one of Mr Abraham’s sensible aunties. It’s the best meal I’ve ever had.

History will never last long in Grenada. The island smears itself into your face with such gigantic stupidity you end up just trying to find blessings wherever you can, no matter what the Past may have been.

That wretched Paradise made me appreciate the small heavenly gifts of cynical cheerfulness, mad verdancy, roadside gunja, intelligent complacent idleness, offhand trenchant defiance, grace at a supper table, an idiotic ramble, and slow, her-on-top sex with a woman who abided one man’s blatant limitations.

I get up and set out for a beach-shack bar nearby to grab a quick beer, the sand busily scratching beneath my bare feet.
WINNER

Adelle Barry

Not at the end of the world: creation stories and apocalypse in Alexis Wright’s ‘Carpentaria’ and ‘The Swan Book’  

FINALISTS

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NOT AT THE END OF THE WORLD: 
CREATION STORIES AND APOCALYPSE IN ALEXIS WRIGHT’S 
CARPENTARIA AND THE SWAN BOOK

“It was strange what a view can do to how people think”
Alexis Wright The Swan Book (p.11)

Adelle Barry

Constructions of ‘hope’ in literary discourses are slippery and, as Australia has experienced, creating frameworks for ‘hope of a better future’ has left the most vulnerable subjects ‘hopeless’ marginalised and oppressed. Early Australian society for example was literarily hoped for – it was created through language by writers such as Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson who affirmed a national identity from a dominant white perspective. As a result, a hopeful society was created (for particular subjects), but one which did not consider the ‘hopes’ of racialised others. Modern Australian Indigenous writer Alexis Wright challenges mainstream paradigms of hope and recreates the ‘future’ from an anti-utopian Indigenous view. In her recent novels, Carpentaria (2006) and The Swan Book (2013) she critiques humanities’ projects, reconciliation and ‘closing the gap’ as problematic discourses which ‘hope’ to heal race relations, but articulate ‘hopelessness’ for Indigenous subjects when using a language of assimilation, appropriation, solidarity and interventionist politics: “These were past times for kicking Aboriginal people around the head with more and more interventionist policies that were charmingly called, Closing the Gap” (The Swan Book, p.49).

Wright points to the continued colonisation of Indigenous people when reconciliation means one people belonging to one nation, speaking in one voice. Her vision of future society thus prefers exclusion to inclusion, ideological polarisation to assimilation, and living in ‘hopelessness’ rather than facing ‘extinction’. The Western dualism of society being either ‘hopeful or hopeless’ is reduced in these texts, suggesting such concepts are not always oppositional or mutually exclusive, but coexist in the cultural and
spiritual understandings of Indigenous beliefs about creation and continued cultural existence. Therefore, imagining outside white mainstream values of hope that have been bequeathed from early Australian writers may allow Indigenous authors to think, speak, write, believe and dream differently in imaginary worlds. What does it mean, however, for white readers to see and feel these ideological distances as they enter into Indigenous texts? How does one read of ‘hope’ in new ways which contradict familiar literary representations and challenge colonial constructs of hopefulness for white subjects? Does confusion about what is hopeful for some and hopeless for others prevent reconciliation being a story to be hoped for and believed in? Perhaps this lacuna created by Wright is space in which to acknowledge that reconciliation offers both tensions and choices for post-colonial nationhood which may be found sometimes in historical, political and economic paradigms of ‘hope’ but also in spiritual contextualisations of hope.

Interestingly, Wright offers a vision for society through the unfamiliar ‘impulse’ or literary genre of dystopian literature (Fitting, 1995). This genre first emerged with the publication of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and J. Max Patrick’s *Quest for Utopia* (1952). Yet in the Australian literary context, Wright seems to join this genre, although through her Indigenous view, by incorporating (un)familiar themes and unique poetics to disempower, undermine and transform the imaginations of oppressive societies by representing new cultural symbols and motifs about nation (and its end).

Wright’s texts can be aligned with the genre of dystopian fiction, and even though her poetics unusual, she engages with typical dystopian themes, such as corrupt government, police control and the use of vigilant media propaganda to critique a society with an ideal vision. Her dystopian narrative undermines technological advancement – a theme which was common in dystopian texts written after the industrial revolution. In *Carpentaria* for example, weather forecast machines fail to detect the approaching cyclone that destroys a whole town. While in *The Swan Book*, climate change wreaks havoc on the entire world (p.129). Wright explores the ways nature is imagined to transform (even obliterate) society and how its members think, speak and behave in relation to others. The personal and the natural, for example, act as vehicles to social transformation by negotiating the complex motifs of hope and
hopelessness as ways of seeing future places and others. Wright uses utopian/dystopian names and symbols to portray ‘place’ as both hopeful and hopeless in her novels. In *The Swan Book* the swamp is incongruously named ‘Swan Lake’ – it is a place with a strong military presence, but this presence cannot guard off ‘Mother catastrophe of flood, fire, drought and Blizzard. These were the four seasons which she threw around the world whenever she liked’ (p.6). The natural climate is intrinsically linked to the social climate in her literary world and, used as an alternate theme to ‘technological advancement’ often associated with this genre.¹

The strong military presence at the swamp is ordered during the government’s period of intervention to uphold its political ideals of reconciliation and closing the gap. We read however, that the army comes into direct conflict with the ‘natural’ governance of this place, and the army destroys the natural protective/healing qualities for the people here. For instance, the tree that sheltered Oblivia from her petrol-sniffing abusers is: ‘destroyed by the army on the premise that this nexus of dangerous beliefs had to be broken, to close the gap between Aboriginal and white people’ (p.79). Despite the physical destruction of the tree however, Oblivia continues to hold great power over her own thoughts and the spiritual connection she has with place. She understands how the swamp remains, albeit ‘a place where here vision had been reduced to a keyhole view, of being slung back into the roots of the ancient eucalyptus tree...’ (p.276). Ancient voices and creation myths inform hope in a time of ‘hopeless’ politics and sustain the survival for Indigenous subjects in this dystopian fiction. Myths and creation stories are new attributes in this genre and there is growing appreciation for what Black writers, not just from Australia but from all over the world, are bringing to this dynamic genre of speculative fiction.²

Wright’s literary craft is not haphazard, it is most deliberate and her textual ‘anomalies’ represent possibilities for ‘seeing’ and ‘being’ in new alternate worlds. The unconventional literary tropes and epic mythopoetics of hope(lessness) reconstruct ideologies of ‘hope’ which were once only hopeful to the white subjects who constructed them. Both *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* are hopeful of a new world

¹ See Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* trilogy for comparative example.

² See Toni Morrison’s *Sula* for examples of how apocalypse is used as both structure and theme to define her writing.
order but show the difficulty of achieving this without society’s willingness to start all over again, to proceed into the unfamiliar, strange and unknown world of the other.

This new start manifests in the theme of apocalypse: a motif in both texts, representing the need for significant ends in order to generate new beginnings for Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjects. These beginnings are not always clear however, and Wright offers only partial visions for the future suggesting that hope is often tangled in hopelessness, speaking through chaos, destruction and disorder in order to bring about social transformation. She points towards the possibilities of reconciliation but only as a new and unbeknown beginning that explores ‘strange’ transcultural ways of thinking about others and being in place. Popular political and intellectual discourses for example are critiqued as language belonging to the oppressors – ‘A nation chants but we know your story already’ (Carpentaria, p.1) while a virus continues ‘vomiting bad history over the beautiful sunburnt plains’ (The Swan Book, p.1). Instead she writes of Indigenous spiritual and cultural views about people and place, suggesting there are psychological, spiritual and emotional objectives to achieving reconciliation that will endure the end of time. Similarly, Michelle Cahill writes in her review of The Swan Book: “...the reader experiences language as invasion, as appropriation, as indoctrination...” and “Wright subversively takes irony and parody to extremes as a way of destabilising not merely language but concepts of nation, deconstructing the colonial currency” (Cahill, 2013, p.1) Reconciliation is represented as a “change of heart” as well as a “change of consciousness” in the recreation of nation in these texts.

In Wright’s imaginary worlds ‘hope’ for the subaltern ultimately lies in the sacred connection with their ancestors and creation. She concedes: “having learnt how to escape the reality about this place, I have created illusionary ancient homelands to encroach on and destroy the wide-open vista of the virus’s real estate...This is the quest to regain sovereignty over my own brain” (The Swan Book, p.4) Her ‘strange’ narratives empower ancestral voices and embrace Indigenous representations, showing the continuity of past, present and future. As Brady notes, for Indigenous Australians “the land speaks of community and continuity, linking past and present in a continuing story which goes back to the origins of life itself and connects the individual life to that of the cosmos” (Brady, 2010, p.) For example, in Carpentaria the serpent is a mythic creation being which pervades, not only the text’s front-cover and initial pages, but
from its beginning right through to its final pages. For example, Norm feels the “sea dragging him towards home” (p.515) to “the same piece of land where his old house had been, among the spirits in the remains of the ghost town, where the snake slept underneath” (p.519). Similarly, Wright’s subsequent novel, *The Swan Book* invokes the image of the serpent in its closing paragraph: “Maybe Bujimala the Rainbow serpent, will start bringing in those cyclones and funneling sand mountains into the place. Swans might come back. Who knows what madness will be calling them in the end?” (p.334). Not only does the serpent connect the endings of these novels and their themes of hope, destruction and renewal; the recurring symbol of the serpent creature suggests that *The Swan Book* could follow as a sequel to *Carpentaria* – both belonging to a larger and continuous line of songs, stories and myths interconnected with past, present and future representations of people and place.

There are further comparisons to make between these texts which are significant to understanding their contribution to apocalyptic and postcolonial fiction.

*Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* represent a pastiche of meta-narratives: poetry, myth, song, text-book citations and traditional language to show the yawning chasms between white and Black societies, particularly in language forms. Colonial language forms for example are contrasted with her Indigenous cultural and spiritual ways of thinking and speaking about people and place: Banjo Paterson’s poem on black swans is cleverly referenced in *The Swan Book* to show the contrasts in writing about Australia’s natural landscape. Wright describes the perpetual strain of colonial poetics which attempts to canvass the nation’s landscape as strangers ‘trying to find the quickest way out of the place’ (p.332). How can Indigenous representations of nature within dystopian fiction free Indigenous subjects from the limits of mainstream textual representations but also free White readers from the psychology of homelessness? Hope for Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjects may not be found in colonial discourses and language forms but could appear through a prism of hopelessness at the end of the world. For example, colonial writers (and artists) once designed and created a nation for settlers at the beginning of Australia’s colonisation through mass publications of their creative work. It was this ‘event’ or the textual theme of beginning life in a new country which allowed for particular writers to colonise the national imagination and imbed a dominant culture. Similarly, apocalypse in Wright’s writing can be seen as the
modern textual event which allows for exploration of another beginning: a vision for new world order and starting again as nature (rather than technology) intends it.

How can a white reader appreciate the twisted helix of ‘hope and hopelessness’ when its combined elements are counter intuitive to values of resolution in reconciliation and closing the gap? Alison Ravenscroft argues that *Carpentaria* puts forward deliberate and incomprehensible gaps about the Indigenous other which the white reader can acknowledge but never fully define. She writes: ‘It is one way of thinking about *Carpentaria*: as art, as art that makes the gap in all knowledge appear, but as a gap. The holes cannot be filled’ (Ravenscroft, 2012, p.79). This implies perhaps that the white reader and Indigenous author may never see ‘eye-to-eye’ but the effects of these ‘gaps’, which neither invites the reader in or locks them out, offers a space to feel the possibilities for spiritual and emotional shifts in public consciousness, new views about dominance and control, and paradigms of hope and hopelessness as a result of psychological transformation.

Cultural gaps are made apparent in Wright’s language forms but the possibilities for spiritual, emotional and psychological transformations of nation are gestured towards in her representation of nature. For example, the main character in *The Swan Book*, Oblivia is a selective mute – she chooses not to speak. Her thoughts are communicated to readers through interior monologue and the narration of other characters, including animals, ghosts, objects from the natural landscape and the sound of music which the reader cannot hear but perhaps still feels its power. For example, Wright articulates how:

> The swamp’s natural sounds of protest were often mixed with lamenting ceremonies. Haunting chants rose and fell on the water like a beating drum, and sounds of clap sticks oriented thoughts, while the droning didgeridoos blended all sounds into the surreal experience of a background listening, which had become normal listening (*The Swan Book*, p.54).

Possibilities for social change (‘protest’) are eluded to here; felt through language but not in language itself, suggesting that perhaps hope and reconciliation also escape representation, and do not have a ‘language’ that can ever be owned. Reconciliation is felt between black and white characters, for example, but resisted a language which could potentially continue the domination, assimilation, appropriation and intervention of Indigenous people in Wright’s literary worlds:
This was why Mozzie Fishman knew he could not stay with the white people teaching them about reconciliation, and moved the convoy on. He never saw himself as a target and would never get used to the idea of being used as target practice either (Carpentaria p.131).

And:

In the end, black and white were both crawling on the ground in reconciliation. Both saying they were plain jack of each other. So, the old people said, We have to keep it a secret (Carpentaria p.62).

In these examples, the future of race relations cannot ever be determined, it is unknown – it is never revealed as a conclusion in Wright’s stories – ‘the end’ becomes the end of dominant culture itself.

Should readers be frightened by texts that invoke apocalypse: ‘the end’? Or is there hope in Wright’s proposal of new possibilities, new life? In Carpentaria for instance, Hope believes she can find Will after the cyclone has destroyed everything. Yet Norm is unsure he will ever see his son again. Hope has seen Will in her dreams – floating on another island she calls “junk pile island”, trying to reach out for them, but drifting further away (p.512). The longing to seek, build and believe in new beginnings is therefore possible through a double impulse of destruction and renewal brought by the cyclone in this text. Laura Joseph, argues in her reading of Carpentaria however, that the storm represents what Bachelard calls a “poetics of anger” and that the concept of a unified nation is rejected when “the waste of the modern nation forms new islands that float away from the continent” (Joseph, 2009 p.6) Yet Joseph fails to comment on what Wright’s textual vision for the future is. Is it both hopeful and hopeless by way of starting again? Is there reconciliation with non-Indigenous people or does her dreamed world manifest a place of division, anger and violence?

If we read Carpentaria as a novel which invokes ‘the end’ for Indigenous and non-Indigenous co-existence then this means interpreting the text as a model for apartheid – a model which may be offensive to Black readers and writers all over the world. On the other hand, ‘the end’ may not imply that black and white cultures are incommensurable but will inevitably experience hope and hopelessness as they transform and evolve. For example, Carpentaria tells us that although the cyclone
“wrecked [the town] to smithereens”, not all the white people were killed – only one person died: “It was the lawbreaker” (p.480). According to Wright, assimilating or ‘breaking’ with Indigenous cultural ways of seeing and feeling means the extinction of her people so there must always be gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures to ensure cultural diversity. There is hope however for white readers who understand that gaps create tensions and choices which are necessary for social transformation. Gaps encourage the psychological shift of how one thinks about place and how they share it with others.

Both *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* resist order or resolution at the end of their worlds, presenting ‘strange’ conceptualisations of hope(lessness). At the same time, however, these texts offer psychological negotiations about place and nationhood between the oppressed and their oppressors. Wright’s ‘strange’ or unfamiliar view allows white readers to think about race relations and humanities’ projects through, not only a political and discursive lens, but spiritual, emotional and psychological views linked to Indigenous existentialism. It is when characters fail to be reconciled and, cultural gaps are widened rather than closed in a dystopian realm, that psychological transformation of a nation is possible through spiritual and emotional articulations of place – revealing to white readers that place is generative – it has potential as well as being actual, temporal. Apocalypse is the textual ‘event’ which pushes a nation’s imagination to a critical point of undoing colonial constructs of what is ‘hopeful for all Australians’ and allowing literary representations of a nation to start all over again. Unlike the writing of early settlers, it is natural disasters, war, destitution, displacement, destruction and death which offer society hope – an opportunity to remap the intercultural zone through a vision of ‘the end’. This mad, strange and unfamiliar dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers and readers may never end, reach a conclusion, resolution, reconciliation or a final ending as the long and many stories remind us transformation is possible only when “Armageddon begins here” (*Carpentaria*, p.1)


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ON “CAPRICCIO”: THE LOST POEMS OF TED HUGHES

Dina Davis

Capriccio, Ted Hughes’ collection of twenty poems about his relationship with Assia Wevill, was produced in 1990 as a beautiful leather-covered boxed volume. At approximately $400 a copy, and printed on hand-made paper, this small sequence of poems was designed to be rare\(^1\). It was more like a collector’s treasure than a book for public consumption. Each of the fifty volumes was signed by Hughes, and also by the illustrator, Leonard Baskin, whose company Gehenna Press was the publisher. (Ironically, ‘Gehenna’ is the Hebrew word for ‘Hell’, perhaps a reflection of the dark themes of these poems.) It seemed, even thirty years after the affair between Ted and Assia, that Hughes was not ready to share these poems with the general public.

In the many biographies, reviews, and scholarly works on Ted Hughes and his poetry, the sequence Capriccio barely gets a mention. It is seen as a minor work compared to such better-known collections as The Hawk in the Rain, Lupercal, Gaudette, Birthday Letters or Crow. For example, Diane Middlebrook, in her biography of Hughes, devotes a whole chapter to his Birthday Letters, Hughes’ other autobiographical collection, and his homage to Sylvia Plath; yet she gives only a few lines to Capriccio\(^2\). It was not until 2003 that the sequence was published in its entirety, in ‘The Collected Poems of Ted Hughes’ edited by Paul Keegan, Faber and Faber, 2003. Thus they were virtually lost to his readers for many years.

The title Capriccio has several interpretations. Hughes’ version of the word comes from seventeenth century Italian, and is made up of ‘capo’ (meaning ‘head’) and ‘riccio’, (meaning ‘hedgehog’). Hence, ‘capo-riccio’ means hedgehog-headed, and describes a head with the hair standing on end. Thus the title foreshadows shock or horror. The word also

\(^2\) Middlebrook, Diane, Her Husband, Little, Brown, 2004
indicates caprice or whim, from the Latin *capra* – the goat, as well as being a musical term for a fast, intense and often virtuosic piece. Dictionary definitions refer to an artistic work in free form, a musical improvisation, or a work full of sudden changes.

‘None of these definitions is appropriate,’ writes Ann Skea, the reigning expert on Hughes’ work, ‘either for Ted’s opening poem [*Capriccios*] or for the whole sequence, both of which are carefully structured, and serious in mood and theme.’ In the poems of Hughes’ *Capriccio* sequence, the reminders of fate in all its capriciousness combine with horrific images of mass murder, suicide, and infanticide.

Overall, the title of Hughes’ *Capriccio* suggests unmotivated, purposeless acts, as well as horror, and helplessness in the face of destiny. The basic idea throughout the sequence, is that no-one is free to deviate from the script fate has written, and that *Capriccio*, like *Birthday Letters*, is Hughes’ case for the defence against the accusations that he, and he alone, was responsible for the deaths of the three victims of fate: Sylvia Plath, Assia Wevill, and Shura Hughes Wevill.

‘Possibly’, writes Dianne Middlebrook, referring to Hughes’ theme of the power of destiny, ‘this is the idea signified in the unsettling title, *Capriccio*, that Hughes gave to the book [of poems] he addressed to Assia Wevill.’

Next to Hughes’ award-winning *Birthday Letters*, the autobiographical nature of *Capriccio* went barely noticed for many years. In 1990, when the book was published, few people knew of the affair between Ted Hughes and Assia Wevill. Five years later, when eight of the twenty poems were reprinted in *New Selected Poems, 1957-1994*, there was still no revelation of Assia as the woman addressed in *Capriccio*. Hughes himself said, in a letter to Seamus Healey in 1998, that his poems about Assia were ‘written very differently’ to those about Sylvia. Indeed, Ted Hughes told Assia’s biographers that he felt the poems were so obscure, most people wouldn’t realise he’d ‘given his secret away’.

It is now universally agreed that the thirty poems of the *Capriccio* sequence deal with the six years of his life, which Ted Hughes spent with Assia Gutmann.

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4 Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, ‘Lover of Unreason,’ NY, Carroll & Graf, 2007
Wevill. In 1969, almost six years after Sylvia’s suicide, Assia took her own life, and that of her and Hughes’ four-year old daughter, Alexandra Tatiana Elise Hughes Wevill, otherwise known throughout her short life as ‘Shura’. Assia Wevill used the same method to end her life as did Sylvia Plath, by turning on the gas jets in the kitchen of her cold lonely flat in Clapham Common, London. Assia’s sprawled body was found holding that of her lifeless daughter, on the morning of 23 March 1969.

Some reviewers see the tenor of *Capriccio* as bitter and accusatory towards Assia, who was the woman who came between Hughes and Sylvia Plath. Ronald Hayman, in ‘The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath’, describes these poems as ‘a relentless assault’ on Assia, who, he writes, was ‘harshly anatomised’ by Hughes in *Capriccio*. Throughout these poems, Hughes enters a plea of ‘not guilty’, seeming to exonerate himself from the responsibility of three deaths.\(^5\)

Other biographers and reviewers interpret the *Capriccio* poems differently, as a recognition of Assia’s connection to the Holocaust, which she narrowly escaped as a child. Assia is pictured as the victim of historical and political circumstances. Hughes writes as if Assia’s end was predestined, blaming her for ‘consciously burning herself on Sylvia’s funeral pyre’ and disassociating himself from Assia’s suicide, describing it in *The Locket*, one of the twenty poems in *Capriccio*, as a *fait accompli*, as if she were doomed, unable to escape the fate of her fellow Jews in spite of her having escaped Nazi Germany with her family as a six-year-old child in 1933.\(^4\)

Some critics detect a strain of anti-Semitism from Hughes towards Assia; Ronald Hayman writes that *Shibboleth* and several other poems in *Capriccio*...display considerable revulsion against her Jewishness. ‘Her Jewishness is made to seem like an avoidable error.’\(^5\) However, Hughes’ fascination with ancient Jewish texts, and his biting contempt for the bigots at the party, give the lie to accusations of anti-Semitism. Indeed, his closing line in *Shibboleth*, ‘lick of the tar-brush?’ is a sneer at the prejudice he detects in England’s upper classes.

The exotic stranger at the party, whom Hughes describes in this letter (and in the poem *Shibboleth*) is clearly Assia, although Hughes does not name her. He writes that the ‘stranger’ had no defenses against the veiled bigotry, ‘being a jew [sic] born

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Assia was a displaced person, having been born in a country, which was shortly afterwards, at war with Britain. In the common English parlance of the time, she came from the ‘other side,’ although the polished British accent she had acquired since leaving Germany disguised this. Hence the veiled hostility by the English upper classes towards her.

In a letter to his translators written in November 1997, Hughes refers to the ‘fringe-aristocracy’ guests at that party, who were disturbed by a very beautiful foreigner who spoke ‘an elocutioner’s English more lofty than the élite English who sat around her’. The other guests at the English country house tended to affect ‘violently racist and often quite anti-Semitic attitudes’, Hughes writes in the same letter, thus disassociating himself from their sentiments. His words certainly don’t sound like one who is himself anti-Semitic and racist; rather, they express his disgust at those very attitudes evinced by his countrymen. In this letter of Hughes, we detect far more compassion and affection for Assia, than is shown in any of the more vituperative poems of the Capriccio sequence.

In these poems, there is little mention of Hughes’ own destructive influences. Hughes appears to argue that he’s biologically predetermined to be Assia’s prey, and that the winds of fate brought them together (The Fate she carried sniffed us out). The fact that it was he who pursued her, and persuaded her to leave her husband, David Wevill, as evidenced in the Letters, somewhat weakens his case for attributing the relationship, and its tragic outcome, to Fate.

Some take a kinder view of Hughes’ motives in writing ‘Capriccio’. Elaine Feinstein writes that ‘In [Hughes’] memory, her beauty has not diminished, nor has she lost the power to arouse his desire.’ ‘Her saliva: instant amnesia’, Hughes writes in the Mythographers. There is further evidence that Hughes genuinely loved Assia in his recently published letters to her: ‘I’ve concentrated all my life now on these two children & on what you and I might do... and if now you stay with David I don’t know what I shall do, he writes in a letter to Assia, dated 27 March 1963. This one is actually signed ‘Ted’. (Most of Hughes’ letters to Assia went unsigned, and he urged

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6 Letters of Ted Hughes, selected and edited by Christopher Reid, NY, Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 2007
7 Ted Hughes, Dreamers, from his ‘Birthday Letters,’ Faber and Faber, 1998
her to destroy all his letters.) ‘My feeling for you ...is complete, and you can rely on it completely...but it’s up to you now to choose’, the letter continues. He says ‘this last six weeks’ [since Sylvia’s death] might well have moved his feelings [for Assia] but on the contrary, it’s shown me how final those feelings are.’

Elaine Feinstein writes that in Capriccio, Hughes still remembers Assia’s beauty, and her power to arouse his desire, as in the Locket: ‘Your beauty, a folktale wager/ was a quarter-century posthumous.’ There is further evidence that Hughes loved Assia in his letters: ‘Assia was my true wife and the best friend I ever had,’ he wrote to Assia’s sister, Celia Chaikin, after Assia’s death in 1969.

Hughes called on his vast knowledge of mythology, in particular the ancient Hebrew texts of the Kabbalah, in writing the Capriccio sequence. The incorporation of these ancient myths and legends throughout these poems could be seen as a distancing strategy, making them less personal, and also less confessional, than Birthday Letters. Ann Skea describes Capriccio as the first stage of Ted Hughes’ journey through the ancient Hebrew texts of the Kabbalah; thus the sequence of poems had a purpose beyond his remembrance of the turbulent years he spent with Assia Wevill. Notes found in Ted Hughes’ loose leaf notebook in the British Library summarise the story of a Jewish Talmudist, Rabbah bar Hannah, who set down his life story of perilous adventures, etching them onto a rock. Throughout Capriccio, Hughes references the thirteenth century Kabbalistic text, the Zohar, particularly in such poems as Shibboleth and The Mythographers.

Carol Bere, in her learned article Complicated with Old Ghosts (a line taken from Hughes’ letter to Assia’s sister, referenced earlier) gives an interesting analysis of each of the poems of Capriccio, and sees the poems as a set of myths which serve to distance the writer from emotional involvement, and perhaps allow a way for Hughes to come to terms with the relationship. She describes the sequence of poems as ‘a mosaic of ancient myths and historical events’. In keeping with Hughes’ reluctance to name Assia in his letters, this interpretation suggests either that he felt some shame about the relationship, or that, after all those years, he needed to keep his affair with Assia a secret.

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In his article *Sorrow in a Black Coat*, Jonathon Bates describes Hughes as a man torn between confessional biography, and one who draws on ancient texts to create characters of mythic power. Bates calls *Capriccio* ‘the short book of dark poems inspired by Assia Wevill.’ He describes the poem *Opus 131* as a ‘bitter little poem... pronouncing on the unimportance of the menopause’ and typical of the tenor of *Capriccio.*[^9]

Whether or not Ted and Assia were the pawns of capricious gods, as Hughes suggests in the poems, the fact is that he and Assia did fall in love, even though, in poems like ‘*Capriccios*’ and ‘*the Mythographers*’, that love is often portrayed as a nightmare.[^3] Yet it is revealed in Hughes’ letter to Assia’s sister Celia Chaikin, that he had argued with Assia in their last phone call on the day she died, and that he wished he could have given her more assurance, thus himself accepting some responsibility.[^6] ‘If I had only moved, only given her hope in a more emphatic way’, he writes to Celia, clearly blaming himself for his part in the tragedy.

At the time of the deaths of Assia and Shura, Hughes was writing *Crow*, a major work, which he had frequently discussed with Assia. Indeed, he penned the last verse on the train leaving Manchester, on their last trip together, when they’d been searching for a house where they could live as a family, with all three children, Frieda, Nicholas and Shura. Yet he found himself unable to continue work on *Crow* after the deaths of Assia and Shura. In fact he told friends that all his writing stopped, effectively blocking Hughes’ creative output for the subsequent two years. When *Crow* was finally published in late 1970, the dedication read: *In memory of Assia and Shura.*

Why did Hughes wait thirty years to publish these poems? Why did he tell Assia’s biographers, Eilat Negev and Yehuda Koren, that these poems were perhaps ‘not the ones I should have written’? Was this work an apologia for Hughes’ role in the life and death of Assia and Shura, intended to show destiny as the culprit?

I contend that, rather than being accusatory and cruel towards Assia, the *Capriccio* sequence is Hughes’ attempt to explain her presence in his life, with a certain amount of respect, and with compassion for her doomed past. By portraying Assia as a mythical force, Lilith, the dark side of the feminine in the Kabbalah, he is able to come

to terms with the relationship between them. The poems in *Capriccio*, intense and painful as they may be, do not appear to reflect his true feelings towards Assia. Rather they are a cleverly constructed sequence using religious imagery, and legends from mythology, which distance him emotionally from the crucial years he spent with Assia.

In my forthcoming biographical novel, *Capriccio*, I have borrowed Hughes’ title, in recognition of this profound but often overlooked sequence of poems. In a further attempt to explain the events of this period, I have followed the trajectory of Hughes’ poems, and tried to show the genuine love, complex and fraught as it may have been, between Ted Hughes and Assia Wevill.
THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

A Practical Study

Scott Savage

This content is not intended to offend anyone’s religious faith or beliefs in a Divine Creator or deny that Moses was genuinely inspired by God to accomplish his tasks....

Introduction:

The scope of this chapter is to determine if the Ark of the Covenant (built approximately 3500 years ago according to one reckoning of chronology\(^1\) was capable of producing some form of realistic power that couldn’t have been accurately explained in the era, and if so, what claims that have been made about it can be demonstrated in a practical and quantitative sense.

Hollywood and exaggerated stories aside, the available extent of the technical construction and capabilities of the Ark are described or at least mentioned in the scriptures of the three Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. However, the majority of information pertaining to it is found in the Jewish Tanakh and Midrashim. Using this information and applying some knowledge of electrical principles, a plausible theory of operation of the Ark and an explanation of the tabernacle is being presented. Also, an experimental (approx 1/100th scale) model of a theoretical version to demonstrate some similar electrical properties, albeit on a much smaller scale.

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Background:

The Ark of the Covenant is generally described as being the golden chest that was built to retain the stone tablets with the 10 Commandments inscribed on them. After breaking the first set of tablets, Moses hewed out a second set\(^2\) and brought them down from Mount Sinai. The Covenant refers to an agreement between God and the Israelites to obey His Commandments and He would bless them as a nation\(^3\).

The Ark was built according to God’s instructions\(^4\) and said to be 2.5 cubits x 1.5 cubits x 1.5 cubits (approximately 130cm x 80cm x 80cm). It was made of shittam wood, clad in inside and out with gold, had a gold crown around it and two gold Cherubim mounted at the ends of the mercy seat, or lid. The Ark had two gold-clad poles fitted through gold rings mounted to its corners to carry it.\(^5\)

Inside the Ark were two tablets, a pot of Manna and the Staff of Aron, however, by the time of King David it only contained 2 tablets.\(^6\)

It is suggested in Midrash Sifre Bamidbar 82 that there were two Arks, the first made by Moses, and the second by Bezalel under Moses’ instruction. One resided in the tabernacle, and the other, containing the broken tablets, was taken in to war with them\(^7\). It may be that David had possession of the second Ark\(^8\).

The tribe of Levi was chosen to carry the Ark while the Israelites wandered the desert for 40 years and it was used to conquer the land of Israel.\(^9\) The power of the Ark was said to be able to smite the enemies of the Israelites, it burned serpents, scorpions and thorns, and sparks flew from the cherubim and from underneath it\(^10\) and they carried it into

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2 Exodus 34:1
3 Exodus 19 to Exodus 24
4 Exodus 25:8-9
5 Exodus 25:10-22 How to build the Ark
6 Exodus 16:33-34, Hebrews 9:4
7 The Legends of the Jews by Louis Ginzberg, Volume III Pages 331,332. ISBN 10:1406809403
8 I Kings 8:9
9 Jewish Virtual Library - www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/ark.html
10 Cantiles 3, Midrash Tillin Terumah, T. VaYakhel 7, "Midrashim, Hebraic Literature", et. al. p. 249
war with them against their enemies such as at Midian\textsuperscript{11} and Jericho\textsuperscript{12}.

When travelling, the Ark would be covered with a veil made of animal skins and blue cloth to hide it from the eyes of the people and it was kept a good distance away from them\textsuperscript{13}.

The tabernacle was a tent-like structure which was used as a portable place of worship. It had a floor of gold and the wall sections were made with upright boards clad in gold and held in silver sockets. The curtains between the wall sections were held together by gold hooks or clasps, and a linen and animal skin covering was used for a roof\textsuperscript{14}. All items within it were either gold or gold clad, including the table, plates, bowls, menorah (lamp holders) and other objects\textsuperscript{15}. Instructions on how to make gold wires and to weave them into linen garments was also provided\textsuperscript{16}. These ‘golden garments’ or robes were worn by the high priests who were allowed to approach the Ark\textsuperscript{17}.

When King David reclaimed it and was transporting it back to Jerusalem, one of the oxen pulling the cart stumbled, the Ark shook and Uzzah put his hand forth to try to steady it, and was struck dead\textsuperscript{18}.

Two other deaths attributed to the Ark were that of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, when they offered some incense that burned in a strange manner and a fire consumed them\textsuperscript{19}.

\textsuperscript{11} Numbers 31
\textsuperscript{12} Joshua 6:6-16
\textsuperscript{13} Numbers 4:5-6
\textsuperscript{14} Exodus 26:1-11
\textsuperscript{15} Exodus 25:23-31
\textsuperscript{16} Exodus 39:3
\textsuperscript{17} “Yad”, l.c. v. 12; Yoma i. 2; Tamid 67b; see Rashi, Yoma 60a; comp. 68B, Leviticus 8:7-13
\textsuperscript{18} 2 Samuel 6:6
\textsuperscript{19} Leviticus 10:1-2, Numbers 3:4
In 587 BCE, the Babylonians raided the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Although the biblical record mentions treasures being carried off, the Ark was not included in the list.

The Ark eventually disappeared into history and its location is unknown. There has been considerable research and speculation as to its whereabouts, with some Jewish scholars believing that the prophet Jeremiah moved the ark to safety in a cave on Mt. Sinai. Another tradition is that when Solomon rebuilt the temple he constructed it in a way in which the ark could be lowered into an underground system of caves. Others claim that it resides in the church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Axum, Ethiopia.

**Assumptions:**

For the purpose of the theory being presented here, there are some reasonable assumptions that are being made.

1. As the ancient scriptures have been handed down in oral and written form over a very long period of time, language has progressed significantly along with changes in use and context. Oral traditions aren’t very secure, and many sacred writings have been lost or destroyed, so it is likely that these old stories and writings have suffered some degree of loss of information, misinterpretation, misunderstanding and/or errors due to human factors. Therefore the scriptural details of the construction and capabilities of the Ark of the Covenant may not be entirely complete and accurate.

2. There was nothing paranormal or supernatural about the Ark and it didn’t have any abilities that broke any of the laws of physics. What non-technical people of a very simple era saw and recorded would be unlikely to be the same as what we today would see and record. But it was an exceptional piece of engineering for the era and it harnessed enough energy to be a dangerously lethal piece of equipment.

3. The extensive use of gold (Au) on the Ark and tabernacle was due to its physical and

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20 The Ark according to Hebrew traditions, Bible Discovered - www.biblediscovered.com/lost-holy-ark-of-the-covenant/the-ark-according-to-hebrew-traditions/

electrical properties. It is an extremely versatile metal that is malleable, relatively inert, doesn’t rust or corrode and is an excellent conductor of electricity. Silver (Ag)\textsuperscript{22} was also used in many places because it also has excellent physical and electrical properties.

4. The tablets (with the 10 Commandments inscribed on them) are presumed here to have been naturally formed piezoelectric crystal slabs and subject to the properties of piezoelectricity\textsuperscript{23}. One aspect of the piezoelectric effect is utilised inside electronic lighters. When operated, a small hammer strikes the piezoelectric element which then generates a high voltage spark to ignite the gas.

5. Using the principle in 4 above, the piezoelectric elements inside the Ark would have been capable of generating high voltage energy using excitation from man-made and natural sources. From the simple descriptions given in the scriptures, it could be presumed that if sparks flew from it and clouds gathered above it, it was capable of producing high voltage ionisation. Consequently, it also electrocuted quite a few people.

6. As deserts are generally fairly dry places with poor ground conductivity, a good electrical earth can be difficult to obtain. The tabernacle was constructed to maximise the available earthing through the extensive use of gold in the floor. As such, it formed a safely grounded/earthed enclosure in which the Ark could be safely kept.

7. The Rod of Aaron is considered here to have been made of metal. (This would be an example of presumed missing information from the scriptures, as mentioned in point 1, and some electrical theory is used to bridge the gap). One of its purposes may have been to discharge the Ark by short-circuiting the capacitive elements (the inner and outer gold cladding of the chest) that were connected to the cherubim.

Or, it could also have been used as a rudimentary rectifier diode. For the purpose of the experiment, it is considered to have been used as a rectifier diode.

**Theory:**

After the Exodus from Egypt, Moses and his people followed the pillar of smoke by

\textsuperscript{22} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silver

\textsuperscript{23} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piezoelectricity
day and fire by night\textsuperscript{24}, which may have been the visible effects of an active erupting volcano. His search eventually led him to the area where he located Mount Sinai and also the tablets.

If Mt Sinai were situated in a volcanic region, the area would have been capable of producing the high temperatures, pressures and long cooling period required to create large piezoelectric quartz crystal slabs.

Moses very first observations of the tablets on Mount Sinai may have been the effects of triboluminescence\textsuperscript{25} and piezoelectricity\textsuperscript{26}. It would seem that over the period of 40 days and 40 nights\textsuperscript{27} he was able to learn and understand some of the attributes of these materials, such as applying mechanical stresses on them, or noticing the effects of resonances in the cave on the tablets, then applying this knowledge in a practical way. Until this time, perhaps the closest understanding of electricity, grounding/earthing or electrocution that anyone had would have come through the observation of lightning strikes in the area.

The gold-clad chest was constructed as a component of an overall device which improved the performance and efficiency of the tablets. Any energy generated due to force (such as being applied by the two carrying poles), acoustic resonance, vibration, percussion and even daily temperature variations, was able to be collected between the inner and outer gold cladding on the Ark. As such, the chest formed a capacitor that was capable of accumulating and storing a potentially lethal charge\textsuperscript{28}.

Although storing a charge would require AC to DC rectification. As various oxidising metals were available at the time, a basic type of voltage rectifier could have been easily constructed, or early style of Mason Jar Diode. Rectification could have been provided by placing an oxidised rod into the Pot of the Manna to form an oxide diode. For example, the cuprous oxide on a copper rod would

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Exodus 13:21-22
  \item \textsuperscript{25} \url{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triboluminescence}
  \item \textsuperscript{26} \url{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piezoelectricity}
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Exodus 34:28
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Capacitance, \( C = \frac{(K \times E_0 \times A)}{D} \), where \( E_0 = 8.854 \times 10^{-12} \)
have formed one part of the junction (cathode) while the other part (anode) would have consisted of the gold pot filled with the manna.

During transport the Ark was generally covered with a veil, badger skins and blue cloth^{29}, which would likely act as a thermal insulator and assisted in keeping its temperature more stable throughout the day. If the Ark were extremely hot then this heat would be transmitted through the metal-work and carrying poles to the hands of those carrying it.

The ‘golden garments’ would have allowed bypassing of any dangerous electrical currents to ground, instead of conducting them through the human body. Unlike Uzzah, who put his hand to the Ark^{18} and would have created an electrical path from it, through him, to ground. He probably became one of the first recorded deaths by electrocution.

The Ark was usually kept in the back room of the tabernacle, like the powerhouse. The tabernacle had 4 layers of coverings over it for a roof – fine linen, goats hair, rams skins dyed red and badger skins. The rams skins dyed red^{30} could indicate the use of copper oxide impregnated into the skins. If this were the case and the rams skins were connected between the Ark and ground, the oxide would have functioned like a load (or bleed) resistor. And the cloud that covered the tabernacle and filled it so that not even Moses could enter^{31} may also have been the first brown-out in history due to an electrical fault.

With this type of knowledge and power available to the Israelites, it could only be speculated as to the number of ways that the Ark could have been able to be used as a weapon against their enemies while they were conquering the land.

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29 Numbers 4:6  
30 Exodus 26:14  
31 Exodus 40:34-36
Such a device would also be very useful for the ignition of combustible fuels. Nadab and Abihu’s demise\textsuperscript{32} may have been due to discovering something that combusted very quickly. One possibility could have been a strange incense of sulphur, charcoal and saltpeter (potassium nitrate) that came up with gunpowder, or some other unnamed explosive substance.

**Extract from Experimental Tests:**

The following component substitutions were used -

Stone tablets – the presumed piezoelectric quartz crystal elements were substituted with Lead Zirconate Titanate (PZT) ceramic elements due to their similar piezoelectric characteristics. The two smaller elements were later used in conjunction with the larger elements to test a piezo-transformer configuration.

Two elements each 150mm x 75mm x 4mm (large)
Two elements each 75mm x 75mm x 4mm (small)

Shittam wood chest - test boxes of various sizes were constructed to accommodate different configurations of either two or four element models. These boxes were made from Perspex due to its dielectric properties, flexibility and as a reasonably easy material to work with.

Gold cladding – was substituted with aluminium foil as a suitable cheap alternative working material. The cladding between the inner and outer sides of the box creates the capacitor in which to store the charge.

Corner Rings – small eye-bolts were used to enable a mechanical connection to the chest for the fibre rods.

\textsuperscript{32} Leviticus 10:1–2, Numbers 3:4
Carrying Poles - fibre rods were used through the eye-bolts in the corners of the models to apply force on the ceramic elements within.

Cherubim – were substituted with banana style sockets so that test equipment an other components could be easily connected during the experiments.

The Pot of the Manna and the Rod of Aron – were substituted with 1N4007 silicon rectifier diodes.

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33 Sample pics from construction and testing

1. Mk1 inner-cladding only, standard test lid.

2. Mk1 outer cladding. 32x10pF

3. Xenon ionisation resonator - unrectified Input power = 1.025 watts

Circuit Diagram

33 See test procedures pages.
Results:

High electrical voltages could be generated and/or stored in any of these small scale models. Most notable was the ability for enough power to quickly accumulate to deliver a sharp electrical shock if handled carelessly. When discharging the test box, it was possible to draw a small electrical arc between the electrodes on the lid as it was shorted. As a resonator, the models formed highly selective filters at their resonant frequencies.

Other than intentional man-made excitation, these test units also generated power due to environmental changes, such as overnight temperature variations or when taken from the shade and placed in direct sunlight.

As such, the Ark would have been able to continually re-charge itself or be manually recharged quite rapidly under a number of different conditions.

Another method of producing power in the test model was by use of an aperture and neck fitted to the lid. By blowing across it, the test box worked as a Helmholtz resonator and provided some excitation to the elements.

Conclusion:

From the test results on the models, the Ark could be considered to have been a form of power generator that converted mechanic and thermal energy into a stored high voltage electrical charge. The Israelites found many uses for this power, from ceremonial to safety to warfare.

It could be reasonably compared with descriptions in the scriptures, that a scaled up version to the same original dimensions of the Ark would have the realistic ability to develop enough power to deliver a lethal electrical shock. Similarly it would also have been capable of causing electrical burns, igniting combustible materials and starting fires, as stated about its abilities to ‘burn serpents,
scorpions and thorns’ and produce ‘sparks flying from the cherubim’.

There have been genii who have come through the generations of history, the likes of Galileo, Da Vinci, Newton, Maxwell, Einstein, Hawking, and others. And then there were those who were exceptional, Prophets the likes of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and others. Moses would have been that exceptional genius of his generation and would appear to have had the intelligence and capacity to understand the physics of the Ark. And in a time of more abundant natural resources, all the necessary materials were readily available to construct it.

Whether they are miracles mentioned in the scriptures, or miracles like the Oklo Gabon natural nuclear reactors in Africa, there is a rational explanation for all of them. So in their own search for the truth, whether its by revelation and experimentation, religion and science are not that far divorced from each other.

References


WRITING THE LANDSCAPE AS A PERSONAL JOURNAL

A journey into writing the poetic story of Bertha Strehlow (1911–1986)

Leni Shilton

Writing the landscape

Journalling the landscape has long been the practice of travellers and explorers to Central Australia, and their writing has made the landscape more ‘palatable’ for other settlers who followed (Sturt 1847; Spencer & Gillen 1899; Carter 1987). For these largely white travellers to Central Australia, were looking for the familiar – points of reference that resonated in the landscape (U’Ren 2014). The metaphysical internalisation of the experience of journalling the travel results in a retelling and a rewriting of the experience as the writer records it in their journal over and over again. I have found this too, that with each rewriting in the journal, a different effect is created and a new depth of creativity is reached (Bacon 2014, p. 1). Even though I may see an unfamiliar part of the landscape, it becomes filtered through my mental images of ‘known’ landmarks. In some ways this enables me, as the writer, to make a claim on the landscape because I start to view it as familiar (Carter 1987).

My experience of almost 30 years of living in Central Australia has filtered into the writing of Bertha Strehlow’s experiences, as my lived experience becomes hers to some extent. After being in Central Australia for this length of time, the lens through which I see the world is informed by the desert, made up of red sand and dust. This is expressed in the poem ‘In search of mint’:

I only know that world is clearer
seen from here,
when I leave I can’t see the desert anymore
and am afraid
(Shilton 2009, p. 116).
Further, on several occasions throughout the course of writing Bertha’s story, I travelled to remote parts of Central Australia, especially to the west and south of Alice Springs, the same part of the country Bertha travelled in. These trips involved gaining permission from the community of Kaltukatjara (Docker River) the traditional owners whose land I was visiting. The reason of travelling into the desert for me was to be ‘in country’, which quite simply means travelling to a place where it is possible to camp for a number of days. Throughout these trips, the process of regular journalling was fundamental to the creation of my work. The writing process I engage in on location is a style of ‘informed’ stream-of-conscious writing, a practice taught by Melbourne playwright, director and drama teacher Jenny Kemp (2008). This practice allows for deep engagement with the project while enabling the initial creative work to be generated without constraints of the internal editor.

This generative writing process follows a great deal of research in the form of immersion into Bertha’s articles (1940, 1945 & 1949), her letters to her husband Ted (1935–1960), and letters to her mother-in-law Frieda Strehlow (1936), a process suggested by poet Jan Owens (Magee 2009). Research for the project included reading the work of many poets, some of whom have work based in Central Australia, but also other poets I am drawn to. This reading enables a type of freedom in the writing, a technique noted by other poets (Goldberg 1990, pp. 1–7). For example, when interviewed by academic Paul Magee, poet Jenny Harrison said, ‘I research by reading other poets’ (2009, p. 3). The combination of reading and being ‘in country’ contributes to my poetry because I, and thus my poetry, am ‘present’, more than just physically, in place. This is achieved by observing the impact of place on the senses, a writing practice which focuses the work on concrete imagery. Focusing the writing on the senses sight, sound, touch and taste has enabled the poetry to be grounded both in place and history, especially as the narrative moves into the metaphysical when Bertha becomes extremely unwell.

As Bertha’s experiences on the camel trek of 1936 become more and more dire, to the point where she is facing death in the desert, the poems demonstrate that the two experiences of country, mine and Bertha’s, and our voices mingle. In the creative work this is expressed most clearly with the poem ‘If I speak from under the earth’ (2014, p. 62). This is a metaphysical poem in which Bertha comes to terms with the desert and the landscape in a new way:
I speak from under the earth, the desert a red beast over me. History is layers of time on my voice; broken sand, dust air and cloud blur. The sky pushes into me until the life I had before this moment dries up, gone on hot wind... (Shilton 2015 p. 62)

The ‘prose poem’ format, provides a demanding physical arrangement on the page as a metaphor for Bertha’s experience of the solidness of the earth, as she does when at her most vulnerable. The concepts explored in this prose poem are linked to Jungian academic, Amanda Dowd’s discussion regarding the need for a greater awareness within Australia for the importance of landscape (2011). This awareness is what Dowd describes as an understanding of the ‘saturation of meaning’, which Aboriginal people identify as being within the storied landscape (2011, p. 126). The exploration of this concept is fundamental to Bertha’s story, because, despite being written about and explored in greater depth in recent times, knowledge of storied landscape is still mostly restricted to Aboriginal Australia (Wright 2011, pp. 234–5).

**Sacredness**

For Bertha many of the events on the camel trek were different from anything she had experienced before. One such event, recorded by Ted in his diaries, occurred when Bertha and Ted were deep in the Petermann Ranges with their party (1936, p. 36). Ted writes in some detail that one of the camel handlers named George recognised the footprints of a man he had seen in Alice Springs several months earlier, and the next day they found this man with a larger group of people and camels. This other group was travelling through the Petermann Ranges en route to a station in the north (p. 36). Even though the Petermann Ranges were isolated in many ways, they were also populated with Indigenous people who were travelling through and hunting (Latz 2014, p. 17). 1936 it was a time of drought in this region; the waterholes were low and this affected the numbers of people travelling through the Petermann Ranges area. But despite these drought conditions, the local Aboriginal people visited specific sacred locations throughout the season and conducted cultural activities. Further, as it was a mountainous area, it contained a number of spiritually significant places, hidden within rocky gorges and waterholes which were visited by the traditional owners (James 2009, p. 20; Layton 1986, p. 456).
The concept of sacredness of the landscape is clear to Aboriginal people, as is the idea of telling the stories of the land, in which voice and song are intrinsically linked to place. Such a concept and idea were little known or understood by white travellers in Central Australia. Aboriginal landscape artist, the late Billy Benn Perrurle, said, in explaining what he saw when he painted: ‘I look back with my spirit and see the land before man’ (2010, p. 2). Time and landscape are a continuum, incorporating the present moment as well as all that has passed. Perrurle, who painted his homeland from memory, saw this innately in his landscapes. This is evident in his ‘Artetyerre’ series, where he uses thick textured paint which conjures up the idea of ‘how one might remember a place’ (NG Art Gallery Exhibition catalogue 2010).

My writing arises from my experience living within this landscape and a constant striving to gain an understanding of Aboriginal view of place. The act of writing landscape poetry creates a space to write about ‘a sense of place’ without having to overtly explain the work and its meaning. It results in the reader listening to the resonances in the language which will reflect the sounds of the land. The meaning arises from an understanding that the Australian landscape represents the movement across the land of ancestral beings who created the formations in that landscape as they went. The Central Australian Aboriginal elder and teacher MK Turner explains how she perceives sacredness. She says,

It doesn’t matter where I might be in Australia, I could see the sacredness in this or that Land...I could feel it and I could see it...the sacredness in that Land to these (sic) people...that’s how every Aboriginal people sees (sic) every Aboriginal people, it’s seeing the goodness inside each other. Seeing it, feeling it and really looking inside those people. (2010, p. 7)

Turner’s writing, and indeed her style of language use provides a ‘way in’ for non-Indigenous people to ‘see’ the land and the landscape with new eyes. Greater numbers of Aboriginal writers are exploring this traditional concept through memoir, often expressing the generous sentiment of having written the book as a way of teaching the non-Indigenous population about Aboriginal concepts, beliefs and ideas. This is an acknowledgement that those concepts, beliefs and ideas have been largely ignored for the past 226 years. Discussing the underlying sacredness of the landscape is a sensitive area but it is being tackled in consultation with Aboriginal elders by white academics
such as Amanda Dowd (2011) whose work is redressing the lack of commentary on Aboriginal belief systems. Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose also explores Aboriginal belief systems in her writing, and in doing so she also writes extensively of the damage in the land and within Aboriginal communities caused by the colonial and post-colonial disregard for the concepts of sacredness and importance of the land. She says:

The disenchantment of the world happens in many places and context, and it surely happens here [in Australia] where violent ontological discontinuity sunders social and ecological relations as it thrusts its way into time-space and human bodies and spirits, piling up death in the world of the living.

(2004, p. 162)

My poetry of Bertha’s story also attempts to convey the sacredness and the importance of the land by showing Bertha in the landscape where she is vulnerable but aware of the life in the land formations.

‘Place’ poets

Australian poets such as Martin Harrison (2008), Meg Mooney (2005), Peter Minter (2000), John Kinsella (2009), Coral Hull (1997) and Emma Lew (2000) have influenced ways of thinking about place. A feature of this writing is immediacy in the language, such as in Lew’s ‘Marshes’:

‘I don’t know the language of this country.

It begins in mists, sombre wild bees

(2000, p. 173)

These poets developed a reputation for poetry that focuses on the impact of the landscape on the senses. Among them and many others is an acknowledgement of the need to bring the concept of the land and its importance into focus. This focus, expressed by Martin Heidegger as a song ‘which names the land over which it sings’ (2001, p. 95), demonstrates an increasing sensitivity and developing appreciation of the sacredness of the land. Australian poets both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal are incorporating this sensitivity into their writing as a way of talking about their place (Kinsella 2009, pp. 5–6). The ‘disenchantment’ spoken of by Bird Rose is gradually
becoming more commonly acknowledged as non-Indigenous artists and writers express the conscious sense of fracture felt about identity and belonging (2004, p. 162; Tacey 2009, p. 147).

Bertha Strehlow herself showed a great depth of understanding in the importance of the landscape, as expressed in her writing and letters. In 1960 she writes to Ted who is in Central Australia on a research trip: 'People have come and gone, and those who have remained have changed but the tjurunja¹, and their resting place remains the same untouched by time' (Letter to Ted, 9 July 1960). By discussing the tjurunja in this letter, she was responding to Ted’s joy at being shown the sacred objects intact in a secret location by his Aboriginal guides. Bertha understood the importance for Ted of being shown the sacred stones, and was aware of the significance that they were ‘untouched by time’ because so many of these objects had been taken (including by Ted) and sold off to collectors, in Australia and overseas, in the years since the settlement of Central Australia (Griffiths 1996, p. 176).

**Writing setting and character**

A strong factor underpinning my interest in Bertha’s story was a familiarity with the setting. The country to the west of Alice Springs is an area of the landscape I know intimately, from the shape of the terrain to the distances and the conditions of the unmade roads. It sits in my mind’s eye as a map. Because of this familiarity, I had a strong sense of Bertha from the outset and could ‘see’ her journey. This is where the writing started as I also had an affinity with Bertha’s experiences of pregnancy and miscarriage, and the issues she faced of geographical isolation. Equally familiar to me is her religious upbringing and her marriage into a missionary experience as I am the daughter of missionaries. While I recognise parallels with some of Bertha’s experiences, I also understood that her experience was hers alone and it was this that I wanted to explore further.

The early research I did into Bertha’s experiences inspired me to start writing poems. There was an immediate sense for me of wanting to investigate Bertha’s unknown story. This sense of intrigue I had with Bertha’s story is reflected in the comments of Don DeLillo when he writes, ‘it is the lost history that becomes the detailed weaves of novels’

¹ Traditional sacred objects which hold spiritual powers (Strehlow, TGH 1995, p. 38)
Writing about setting was fundamental for the verse novel, the wide landscape of Central Australia creating a delicate backdrop which is a character in itself, always moving and alive with stories. Writing about it impressed on me the past as well as the present and for me the poems form layers like the layers of the land.

In the process of writing Bertha’s life into poetry, I was strongly influenced by the tone of her own writing. Her voice is especially evident in the long letter she wrote to her mother-in-law, Frieda Strehlow, in December 1936, after her return from the camel trek to the Petermann Ranges (1936, pp. 1–4). I focused on her turns of phrase as I wrote. The poems arose in response to her words, from moments in her writing that spoke strongly in her voice. This writing process echoes Aileen Kelly’s thoughts where she describes the process: ‘– you feel your way through the experience and the words get generated in the process’ (in Magee 2009). On reflection, this is the technique I also employed. Through the writing process, I made decisions about how Bertha’s character would interact with the world of Central Australia and how she would be placed in response to people and the landscape. As the poems emerged, her character was as much imagined, as it was real.

Consistent throughout my writing is the argument that poetry provides a voice for silences. This concept is supported in the work of poets, such as Adrienne Rich (1980) and Margaret Atwood (2005) among others, who explore the idea of voice in their work. While writing Bertha Strehlow’s story and exploring her place in history, I became more certain that the work had to include her journey into the ‘new’ landscape of Central Australia, a landscape she had very few words to explain or to enable her understanding.

In the mid point of her story, the poems become metaphysical in nature, as Bertha is exploring the spiritual experience entering into the country. Bertha becomes inseparable from the landscape she is in, and the land becomes her voice. By way of comparison, the work of Northern Ireland poet Fred Johnston, particularly his poem ‘Song at the end of the world’, explores the idea that he doesn’t have his own voice, but many. In the poem, his persona takes on the role of writing for others and letting them speak through him. His poem places the ‘we’ firmly in the landscape.
Not having a voice of my own...
we are only a breath
of sea, bearing rain
and we will go down into the earth...
(1988, pp. 24–5)

The concept of finding voice becomes a reflective moment in poem, as the poet speaks on behalf of the silent, bringing identity into being through the writing process.

**Conclusion**

As I journeyed across the desert and recorded my thoughts, impressions and poems, I wrote, trusting that my journal was an integral part of my creative research, even though the outcomes of the writing were unknown (Bacon 2014, p. 3). The practice was an essential part of my work as it enabled me to create Bertha’s poems. As the landscape came into focus for Bertha it was also coming into focus for me. The landscape provided a place for Bertha to speak and my poems can become a way to acknowledge her contribution to the anthropological work Ted was engaged in. The poems also highlight her role in their marriage and they keep her life in focus after he left her. Bertha’s story of survival in the desert, and in the years that followed at Jay Creek and Adelaide, are testament to her strength of character and her determination. Her writing as well as her silence have been the inspiration for writing poetry. The journal I kept while travelling in the Petermann Ranges thus became a starting point for many of the poems in Bertha’s story. Journalling in this way helped me to ‘call up’ the landscape when I was not physically in it anymore and I could recall the colours and smells from memory. The personal aspects of my journey as I travelled in the landscape began to blend with Bertha’s journey and resulted in a sense of freedom as I wrote Bertha’s poems (Ballou 2010, p. 3).
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KATH MANZIE
Youth Award

WINNER

Ka Wai (Micki) Teng
Yellow

FINALISTS

Ciara Bellis
Mummy, Mummy

Melinda Mees
Beyond the Memories

Lauren Northcote
Lulwa

Kierra-Jay Power
You sent me a post card from Mexico

Hamish Wiltshire
Any Ordinary Morning
YELOW

A Performance Poem

Ka Wai (Micki) Teng

15. The DIFFERENCE between a resignation and GIVING IN,
    Is one is the world with HANDS on your shoulders,
    FORCING you to your knees.
    The other is getting SHOT in your knee caps,
    And COLLAPSING onto the ground.

14. This year my father is 52.
    He was that STRAIGHT A student in high school,
    I know it doesn’t sound like much but they HAD


12. Just like the INSIDE of my elbows,
    Are not PALE enough now,
    His tan was never DARK enough.

11. Years old was the year before,
    My FIRST big exam.
    The first out of THREE that will SUPPOSEDLY determine my FATE.
    Not about whom I BECOME,
    But if I will SURVIVE.

10. 2002 was a good year for us.
We had just welcomed my younger sister,
Into our family.
My father FINALLY gained the courage,
To start up a business and to DARE to dream.
After his ambition of becoming a doctor,
Was TAKEN away from him.
At the age of EIGHTEEN.
They said he did not DESERVE that scholarship,
Because he was not of the RIGHT skin.

9. Now my father is UP to his knees
In a DEBT that my mum works her ass off to pay BACK.
When he PROPOSED to her
He asked her to MARRY him and
Let him TAKE CARE of her for the rest of
Their LIVES.
But we will forever be in debt,

8. Because my father REFUSED to SINK to his knees.
He would not BOW to those who DICTATED a country that gained FEDERATION
As brown, black and yellow.
But now has a PARLIAMENT of only ONE TONE.
Did my father SINK in QUICKSAND
Because he would ALWAYS
BE SWALLOWED BY THAT ONE COLOUR?

7. How does ONE MAN
STAY standing
With a BODY
Full of BULLET HOLES?
We had to CRAWL out of
Our OWN country.
So do I HOLD MY PASSPORT in my LEFT pocket
Like a BIBLE?
PREVENTING me from getting SHOT.
Should I WEAR my country’s FLAG
Around my SHOULDERs?
So that they will not COME and PRESS me down
If they can only see my FLAG
And not my SKIN.

6. The difference between a resignation AND giving in,
Is that one is a curtain call pulling shut.
Masking the PRETEND.
While the clapping drowns the
Act you’ve HAD to become.
And the other is being FROZEN on your feet
While the laughter CHIPS away at what
You THOUGHT was RIGHT.
Eventually caving INTO yourself.

5. But the SIMILARITIES are that you are
HIDING, you are
RUNNING, you are ASHAMED.

4. In a few years’ time,
I may have to sit for an exam.
It will be the most important exam of my life.
It will supposedly determine my fate.
As it will determine my NATIONALITY.
I may become an AUSTRALIAN.
But do not MISTAKE

3. I am NOT ashamed.
I will hold my HERITAGE in my LEFT POCKET,
Like a BIBLE.

2. I am NOT running.
I will WALK in the STREETS of my country AGAIN.

1. I am NOT hiding.
I will let it be KNOWN,
That I will not TOLERATE another man
Being PUSHED to his knees or,
Getting SHOT in his knee or,
Having to CRAWL away
Praying that the ground SCRAPES off his SKIN.
MUMMY, MUMMY

Ciara Bellis

Mummy, Mummy
Who’s that man?
The white one over there
With my sister in his hand

Mummy, Mummy
What are they doing?
The children rushing like water
Why aren’t we pursuing?

Mummy, Mummy
Where is everyone?
The ones like us
Every daughter and son

Mummy, Mummy
Why is he coming?
Why is he grabbing me?
Why are you running?

Mummy, Mummy
Why am I in his car?
I can hear the bang of the door
Will I go far?

Mummy, mummy
Why are you on the ground?
Whaling in pain
You know I hate that sound

Mummy, Mummy
Is this the end?
Where am I going?
Will I ever see you again?
Finding your brothers murderer is harder than you think—especially after seven months have passed and the clues are most likely beneath the sea. From my place at the top of the cliff, I can see the sea melting with the sky, and the sun slowly disappearing beneath the invisible line that separates the two. I think to myself, is that what my brother last saw when he fell? The famous Northern Territory red sun settling under the covers of the Arafura Sea? Or did he just see the drop of the cliffs, the thoughts of his body hitting the soft sand thirty metres below and the murderer's face getting smaller and smaller before he died from the fall? A fall that shouldn't have killed him had he not hit that rock.

“Young! What the hell are you doing on the edge of that cliff? Don’t answer that, just get down will you?” Finn shouts as he attempts to cross over the wire separating him from the edge of the drop.

“Finn will you stop calling me by my last name?” I shout back annoyingly. “How many times have I told you, I feel like I’m one of your footy mates- not your girlfriend- when you say shit like that.”

He finally hauls his athletic frame through the tiny slot in the fence, walking towards me, slowly, as if I’m going to fall off like Micah did.

Micah. I normally can just forget about him and the sadness his name brings. But not here. The twelfth of every month since Micah died, Finn and I would come to the cliffs at Nightcliff and search the sands and the grasses for evidence that would hopefully one day lead us to the murderer.

A large hand wraps around mine, warming it and tugging me backwards,
away from the edge. “It’s time to go home Mae.” Finn says, “It’s your birthday tomorrow, you will need the rest.”

As I turn to leave I see a figure in the distance that causes me to freeze. Something about the figure tugs at a memory, and I immediately go to shut it down, but my thoughts keep screaming Elijah Edwards. Finns twin brother, Micah’s rival, and my best friend. It can’t be, can it? I haven’t seen Eli since the day Micah fell seven months ago.

“You okay Mae?”

“Yeah. I- I just thought I saw something impossible, that’s all,” I mutter. “Let’s just go home.”

The trips home from our cliff searches are always silent. Finn knows better than to interrupt the thoughts clouding my head, and for that I am grateful. My brother’s death resulted in depression and anxiety, as well as a completely blank memory of the evening my brother died, but I will forever be grateful for him at bringing Finn and I together. Two grief stricken kids who found comfort in each other.

The times to contemplate deep and heavy thoughts are always short, as the cliffs are a mere five minute walk from our houses. His a modern house with high ceilings and glass walls facing the ocean, and mine next door. A made-for-the-Territory elevated home that cannot be viewed from the streets due to the dense tropical vegetation.

We walk onwards towards my house hand in hand. As we climb the steps together I am immediately assaulted by the smell of pines and citrus, a combination I’m all too familiar with from my life pre- Micah’s death. There is only one boy who smells like that and, coincidentally, it happens to be Elijah Edwards. Fuck me.

There sitting on an old rickety rocking chair was Eli, looking like he’s posing for a men’s magazine that specialises in antiques. Gone are his gangly limbs and replaced by broad shoulders and strong legs- an outline I could easily see through his slightly tight fitting white shirt and denim jeans. A boy who once seemed to be skin and bone has changed to muscle and strength in a matter of seven months. How could
Something in my face must have conveyed I was just about to jump over the railing into the pool below and just drown, for Eli was now standing a metre in front of me, mouth moving.

“I’m sorry, what?” I hope he didn’t realise I was staring at the way his lips moved than the sounds coming out of them.

“As attentive as always, aren’t you Mae?” he replied with a wink.

Seven months. Seven months he’s been gone and he thinks he can joke around and wink at me? Seven months when I most needed a friend to confide in and my best friend disappears the day I needed him most. Anger courses through my blood, and not even the thrill of jumping in the pool could cool me down.

“Where were you when I needed you Elijah? Where were you?” I scream at him. I’m all too aware of the close proximity between us but it feels so good to yell. To yell at him.

I can feel Finn’s hand clutching my hand tightly. If he doesn’t let go soon, all the blood supply to my hand will be cut off and he’ll be holding onto a hand without an arm. I look to Finn to convey with my eyes to lessen the pressure- he does. I look back to Eli and his face is contorted into anger too. Deep lines carve his forehead as not only anger but shock and surprise flash over his face.

“You’re dating Finn?” he whispers at me. He then turns to Finn and says, “Does she know yet? Does she remember?”

something about the way he says those words make me cringe. What does Eli and Finn know that I don’t? I turn to look at Finn, but shame seems to have crossed his face and he turns to look out into the garden. A faint whisper courses from his lips, “Not yet.”

I’ve had enough drama for one day and I push aside both boys to get inside the house, slamming and locking the flyscreen door and the wooden door behind it. The house is dark inside, which will help me, as the boys won’t see me looking out. Both Eli and Finn seem to be locked in a silent staring competition.
With the curtain as my cover I can fully take in Eli’s transformation. Finn and Eli may be twins, but their features could not be more opposite. Finns hair brown and shaggy, eyes as blue as the sea, while Eli has the eyes the colour of the grass and hair so dark it’s almost black. Finn has a swimmer’s body, though he plays footy and a jaw squarer than most. He reminds me of Josh Hutchinson- but way taller. Eli on the other hand has a jaw line that could sharpen knives.

The boys finally leave together, bodies tense and seeming to be in deep whispered conversations. My cue to fall asleep.

I’m awoken the following day by my mother and Finn singing the birthday song and carrying a chocolate cake into my bedroom. My mother hands me a gift of a beautiful dress I’ve been eyeing at the shops and Finn’s gift is a copy of my favourite book- Pride and Prejudice. After cake is served and mum leaves in her suit for work I’m left alone with Finn.

“What do you know about that night, Finn?” I ask. The thought has been bugging me all night.

“Nothing. Do you remember anything?”

The sad thing is, I don’t. It’s as if someone has wiped that one memory from my mind. I shake my head at him.

“You remember what the doctor said,” he replies. I remember that too well.

“Some Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, touched with depression right? But can’t you tell me what happened. Weren’t you there?”

Finn’s famous faraway look has returned. He seems to be doing it more often these days.

“I can’t tell you anything you don’t remember. And before you ask, no, I can’t remember anything about the murderer.” I know Finn too well. Every time he tells a lie, his eyebrows twitch. And he just said one.

“I had no sleep last night. I’m going back to bed, okay?” But Finn leaves even though he knows when I’m lying too.
Not long after Finn left, a thump sounded within my room. Eli was sprawled across the floor beneath my now open window.

“You do realise there are stairs, right?” I said around the laughter I was holding back. I forgot how much I missed Eli and the laughter he used to bring into my life. Maybe it was time I stopped treating him so badly and take him back as the best friend he once was.

“I wanted to be creative,” he retorted. “Besides, I didn’t want to collide with Finn on his way out.”

He walked to the centre of my room and circled in the same spot twice before looking back at me and grinning. “The rooms still the same, Mae.”

“It’s only been seven months Eli,” I reply. “Where’d you go?”

“Still a major Jane Austen fan are you?” he says dodging my question. He picks up my new book from Finn. He Flips through the pages and turns around, his back facing to me as if reading the book. Then just as quickly as he flipped through the pages, he places the book back onto my desk.

“Let’s go for a bike ride shall we?” And without my reply, he was out the door. Just as quickly as he left he was back again, this time with his hands behind his back and the shy grin from the old Eli I knew plastering his face.

“I almost forgot. Happy seventeenth Mae! You’re just as old as I am now,” he said as he placed a small object into my hand. “I’ll see you with your bike outside in five minutes. Pronto,” and left with a wink.

In my hand was a small plastic ring that would match the metallic tiara’s little girls would wear. It may have been disgustingly plastic, but this wasn’t any ordinary ring. The star shaped ring was a metallic gold and had a fake gem stone within the star. When I was seven I never wanted to be a princess. I just wanted to be a lady. I always thought being a lady involved wearing rings every day, and that was all I ever asked for. Elijah, having just moved in not long before, gave me a plastic ring. He would do so every year for the years to come, never missing out on giving me a plastic ring as my birthday present. Micah would join in with the celebration- the only time both boys would be friendly with each other. Inside the ring the word “momento” was inscribed.
I noted to myself to search this up later, but now I have a bike to ride.

We ride down the bare street in the hot sun. It must be at least forty degrees and I’m sweating litres of salted water from my body. I look over to Eli who seems to have no sweat pouring from his perfect body— at all. Just when I’m about to complain, Eli turns down an old dirt track.

I come to a screeching stop. “Oh no. We are not going to your clubhouse,” I holler at Eli.

“Come on, Mae,” he replies. “We need to get over our demons don’t we?”

Not once did he look back to see if I was still behind him or not, but I guess he knew I wouldn’t turn down a subtle dare from him.

The clubhouse was for Micah and Finn only. They would spend all their afternoons there, since the age of eight until Micah’s death. Eli was allowed, but being a girl, I wasn’t. The clubhouse looked as shabby as it always looked. The walls made of bits and pieces of driftwood hanging on by poorly hammered nails. It was a shock to still see the small house still standing among the gamba grass. I followed Eli inside the rickety building, bracing myself against the remnants of Micah that is sure to be there. But what I saw within the clubhouse was nothing close to what I imagined it to be.

The clubhouse was empty.

“Why is it empty?” I ask Eli.

“Because it’s been cleaned out, like every other piece of Micah left in this world,” he countered.

I wanted to defend Micah in some way, but this had nothing to do with him. This was reality. When we lose someone, we lose a piece of them. Their rooms are cleared, their clothes given away and their items binned. Every last remnant of them gets swept away.

Eli must have seen the sadness creep into my face as he said, “They will forever live on in our hearts, Mae. Remember that.”

There was a double meaning behind what Eli said. What did he mean our
hearts? Could it be that Eli had a connection that wasn’t all hatred with my brother Micah?

“Eli, what happened that night Micah died?” I ask, unable to stop myself.

“Mae,” he sighs. “If I tell you what happened, you wouldn’t believe me. You would hate me.”

What could possibly be so horrible that I would hate him for it? Why would he not tell me anything? Am I that immature I can’t stand to find out what happened to my brother that night? Does Eli think I can’t handle the truth? “Just tell me, Eli.”

“Oh, here goes,” he starts, taking a deep breath in. “The night your—“

“Mae!” Finn comes barging into the clubhouse at full speed. “Eli! What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Finn yells at Eli, getting right up to his face.

“I’m telling her what she needs to hear, Finn!” Eli yells back. Both boys seem to be puffed up to their full height. It’s like watching two wolves fighting for the alpha seat, you are both intrigued and scared shitless.

“You leave for seven months and then come barging back ready to shatter Mae’s whole world? You have no right Eli! No right at all!”

“I’m here now aren’t I?”

“That’s not good enough for Mae, Eli.”

Eli steps down from the battle between the males and sadness washes over his face. He turns towards me and whispers to whoever can hear his quiet voice, “She deserves to know Finn. We owe her that.”

One by one the boys exited the clubhouse. After taking one more look around I followed them out. I have so much information running through my mind. So many thoughts. I ride back home as fast as I can, hoping I can outride all the thoughts in my mind. Hoping that by tomorrow they will disappear again.

At home I could relax in my room and get lost between the pages of Pride and Prejudice. Halfway through the book a note falls out from between the pages. I unfold
the note and read the cursive writing:

*You are closer to the murderer than you think*

After the events that unfolded today and the palpable tension between the two boys, I know that there is something big they aren’t telling me. Something I may not be able to handle, no matter how much I think I can.

“Do you want to come to the cliffs with us?” asks Eli as he enters my room, while Finn stands in the doorway.

It’s the last thing I want to do, but after all the thoughts running through my head I nod and treat myself to connecting with my brother at the cliffs. I’ve come to accept that maybe Micah’s clothes aren’t here anymore, neither his belongings. But he will always be at the cliffs. Drying the tears from my eyes with wind, and messing up my hair like he used to do when he was around.

At the cliffs we stand metres from the edge. Eli on my left and Finn on my right. Maybe I won’t learn what really happened that night. And maybe I’ll be okay not knowing for once. I look down at my plastic ring from Eli, twisting it off and looking at the inscription. ‘Momento’. Latin for remember.

A sharp blinding pain courses through my brain. I feel as if my eyes have been pried open directly in front of a trucks fog lights. I am momentarily blinded and unstable, falling to the ground. Hands grab both my arms and pull me upright.

“Mae,” exclaims Finn. “Are you alright?”

“What’s up, Mae?” contributes Eli.

And that’s it. This is what my brain has been shielding me from all my life. I step out of the boys grasp and run straight towards the edge of the cliffs at full speed. I leave their yells and screams behind me. I leave this earth behind me.

I remember now. I remember all of it. I did it.
My real name is Lulwa, which, in my mother’s native tongue, is the word for the yellow lantern flowers with crimson centres, found along the shoreline of my ancestors’ land. This is well suited perhaps, because I was born amongst these wildflowers and the spirits of the wilderness speak to the deepest part of my being.

Garawa, my mother, spent her life under the southern skies in an enchanted region where, for thousands upon thousands of years, her people had roamed the land. She lived in a place where the crystal clear rivers and streams collided with vivacious waves of the ocean; she smelled of her verdant surroundings and could taste the salt spray on her lips. She was marked forever by this landscape, and in some way, despite our brief time together, she managed to imprint this deep connection to the land on me.

On the winds of the northwest monsoon, the stars of the silver river lead my father, a Makassan, to the land he called Hati Marege, my mother’s land. He arrived during the balnba season, at precisely the hour when the three-eyed frogs began their corroboree, announcing the coming of the first rains and perhaps also as a welcome to the sea traders. Garawa first saw my father when he was alone, knee deep in the ocean, his sarong hitched up and a spear in his hand. Although she was accustomed to the seasonal visits of the Makassan people, she was always intrigued by their strange way of life, so she spied on the young man from behind a tamarind tree. They first met when angry Danggalaba stealthily stalked the foreigner with jaws wide open. Alarmed, Garawa revealed herself and calmly instructed Danggalaba to leave the harmless man alone. And, for the first time, she looked deeply into the foreigner’s teak-coloured eyes.

The next time that the men went to hunt the gakkingga, and the women went to collect the ngamamba, I was born under the same tamarind tree that my father’s great grandfather had planted so many balnba seasons ago. Growing up, the seasonal winds
brought my father, but they also took him away. I remember when, two days before an enraged ancestral elder, Dariba Nungalinya, summoned the wild rains, rough seas, and winds that stripped the land bare, my father and his people set sail earlier than usual. I never saw the blue and white sails of the praus again.

My happiest times were the days I spent with my mother riding on the back of Durrula as his body pushed through the earth, creating new rivers and exposing the freshwater springs. We visited Dariba Nungalinya to learn about the lore of the land he entrusts upon us, and we ventured into the mangroves to collect cockle shells and crabs under the protective gaze of Danggalaba. However, Danggalaba could not protect me from the evil spirits belonging to the badagut, although he did send the curlews to warn us.

One smouldering dawn, under the fading glow of the emu in the sky, the reverent elders were erecting a small, wooden pole painted red, white and yellow over the last of the freshly dug, shallow graves. Three children had died from the eternal nightmares induced by the bites of the unrelenting mosquitoes. As usual, the piercing wails of the bush-stone curlews ended the night’s corroboree. But this time was different. At first there were only the usual few birds, but slowly they came in their numbers. Their cautionary shrieks, along with the desperate screams of mothers, was the last thing I remember before the evil spirits tore me from my mother’s arms. I never rode on the back of Durrula with her again.

*******

My new name is number three hundred and twenty seven, which is my identity within these barbed wire fences and high walls. This is well suited perhaps, because I am one of the many lost and disoriented children, dressed in rough cloth tormenting our telltale light skin.

And so it is that I have spent the last few years under southern skies in this forsaken place, where weekly, I am made to thank in unfamiliar words, a silent spirit for this new life. I live in a place where my thin bones and swollen stomach are denied the nourishment they need. I smell of stale urine from the flea-ridden mattresses in the overcrowded dorms and I can taste the blood in the wounds from the brutal beatings. I will be marked forever by this torment, however, despite everything, and in some
remarkable way, the profound connection to the land, my people and my mother, still speaks to the deepest part of my being.

Every night, as the glow of the emu in the sky gradually illuminates the darkness above, I lie amongst the cries and screams of the shackled children encountering their nightmares, anticipating the arrival of my Danggalaba. Together we pull the iron out at the corner of the fence and race back to Larrakia country and once more, I allow the breath of my ancestors to consume the totality of my being. Once again, I ride as Lulwa on the back of Durrula, carving caves and rocky outcrops in the ochre-coloured shoreline. Once again, I watch as the trails of smoke from the campsite fire transform the men into vigilant brolgas while the voices of the spirits take possession of the womens’ harmonious melodies. And once again, the many arms of the tamarind tree under which I was born, pick me up and sway me to sleep.

But there is no escape. Every morning I wake to the chilling sounds of the curlews, echoing through the compound. Maybe tonight, Dangganalaba will take me to my people for eternity.

**Larrakia Words**

- badagut- white person/people
- balnba- wet season
- gakkingga- magpie geese
- ngamamba-cycad nuts
- Danggalaba- crocodile (also recognised as a spirit)
- Durrula- The Rainbow Serpent
- Dariba Nungalinya-Old-Man Rock (spirit)

**Indonesian Words**

- praus (or perahu)- A sailing boat originating in Malaysia and Indonesia
YOU SENT ME A POSTCARD FROM MEXICO.

Kierra-Jay Power

I read it. No, really, I did.

But now I wish I hadn’t (had the guts).
All that’s left is a gritty, bitter aftertaste
and what feels like ash grinding between
my teeth. There is something sitting
heavy in my stomach, and I am frozen:
unable to move, scared of discovering
the knock of a solid weight,
(something thick like regret) beating
against the clenching walls. Or maybe
it will be the slop-slide of persistent guilt,
sloshing around until the stains sink in, for-
ever.

I read it. No, you’re right, I didn’t.

I was too scared of the impression
it would leave; seared, bruised, marked.
I was frozen in the face of it: that it would slither,
like sin and promises, into the last clean memory
of you left in the house. The final touch
the maid did not sweep under the couch;
like the condom wrappers, or takeout bills,
or your wedding band, when she popped
the buttons on your fly and
smeared her cherry lipstick.
ANY ORDINARY MORNING

Hamish Wiltshire

We pushed off at nine o’clock, and motored towards East Point. It was a cool morning and though I was dressed in only a t-shirt, I complained bitterly about the temperature. There were three of us in the boat; John, the Frenchman Gaeton and myself. John and I were chatting, seated on the starboard rail. Viewed from our position the East Point Cliffs were bathed in lovely late morning sunshine. Gaeton was steering, resting his left hand on the wheel in a very superior manner. In his right hand, wedged between two fingers like a cigarette, dangled the radio handset.

“Should we send them out?” John asked him. By way of reply he spoke into the radio, ‘Send ze Minnow Novice Fleet oot”.

Looking out across the bay I could see that there was no chance of getting three races away. The wind had built too much. It was a North Easterly, around force 4. In the moorings the smaller yachts were bucking, pulling at their anchors. Further across the harbour, towards Mandorah, white horses were stirred up by the breeze; their pale crests galloped across the water’s surface. I took hold of the wheel as Gaeton ordered the inflatable mark laying boats around. He set the upwind mark off the Trailer Boat Club. The wind swung towards the right.

“Non, non, non!” he cried. “Vy von’t ze vind stay still?” Exasperated he took the wheel and ordered me to set the mark. I guided the boat right, the wind swung back left. I resigned myself to imperfection.

“Just drop it!“

At half past we started the race. I watched the dinghies work their way upwind. Their light blue sails contrasted beautifully with the golden cliffs. Gybing, they ran before
the wind, down towards the bottom buoy, where they beat to weather passing through the line, set between our boat and a small orange buoy. As they finished I worked the air horn.

“‘Orn agin!’ Gaeton yelled as each boat passed through. Hearing this I would depress the red button mounted on the consol. The horn would shriek and Gaeton yell again. The process was repeated twenty times. It was tremendous fun. While Gaeton and I were engaged in our orgy of yelling and “’ornin’” John recorded the finishing order. Hunkered down over an exercise book quickly scrawling numbers, he did not appear to be enjoying himself nearly as much. By the time all of the Minnows had finished the wind had built even more. It sang through the boat’s rigging like a wailing mezzo-soprano, while the halyards beat out a quick snare on the mast. At quarter past ten we sent the Minnows back to the safety of the Sailing Club.

As I watched the dinghies work their way towards the beach, John pulled binoculars from his pocket, and began to survey the bay. His head traversed the distance between Myilly Point and East Point in a slow-braked swivel. Facing the sand bar, he stopped. He had seen something.

“There looks as if there is a boat in trouble over there,” he said quietly. “I think they need some help.” Gaeton, man of action that he was, decided that we would go and take a look. I upped the anchor.

“’Ang yourselves!” he warned. I leapt for the port rail, the nearest handhold. The breeze had built to force 7 and was still increasing. White horses were everywhere. Occasionally a wind snake, a rippling line of agitated water would form. We hit these at full throttle, hurdling them like a steeplechaser.

We ate up the distance quickly. As we got closer to the vessel I saw that it was no ordinary fishing boat. Instead, it was constructed from beer cans; even so it had an odd design. It was a catamaran; the port hull was constructed entirely of Victoria Bitter, while the starboard was Four X Gold. Connecting these were two wooden beams, strung with netting deck. This was decorated with even more VB and Four X cans.

“Vy is Australian beer like ‘aving sex in a canoe?” Gaeton asked mischievously.

“I don’t know,” I answered.
“Because it’s focking close to vater, ho, ho, ho!” He replied.

The green and gold vessel was obviously intended to appeal to Australian manhood. Admittedly, it did appear impressive. As we approached, the gruesome smell of thousands of cans of beer dregs washed over us and the effect diminished somewhat.

“It smells worse than a long drop,” gagged Gaeton. I was inclined to agree.

We came up towards the lee hull. I grabbed the film of chicken wire, which stopped the VB cans escaping into the water. Up close, the boat smelt even worse. Raising my head above the deck I asked,

“Would you like some help?”

“Yerp,” was the response.

The appearance of the creature that answered entirely matched his craft. John, still emerging from olfactory asphyxiation offered him a rope.

“Make it fast!” Gaeton ordered the cretin. He tied our towrope to his beam with a disaster of a knot. We set off as towboat, puttering back towards Cullen Bay Beach. Every so often I’d let loose a horn, just to make it seem as if we knew what we were doing. In reality we had no idea. The “orning” coupled with our wailing, beating rigging and the moaning of the beer boat meant our actions were accompanied by a soundtrack reminiscent of a dying Napoleonic drummer boy attempting to beat out Le Chant de l’Oignon for a final time.

We reached the beach safely. Our tow grounded itself, carving deep furrows in the sand.

“Silly Australian, needs to stop drinking,” was the teetotal Gaeton’s insightful assessment.

I only ever saw the individual once more. Years later he successfully stumbled out of the Parap Tavern, only to fall face first into the gutter. He was yet to take Gaeton’s advice. Doing so could only have served him well.
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The feel of men close up

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When we relocated to Ballarat, my parents enrolled me in an Anglican school.

On the first day, the teacher announced first period was chapel. I didn’t know what that was. ‘It’s like church’, my mother explained as she was leaving. I had never been to church and did not find this comforting. The teacher watched us through hawk-like eyes, already disapproving.

We were required to form two lines outside the classroom: a line of boys and a line of girls. We were to walk, holding the hand of a boy, out of the junior school and into the senior school. Inside the chapel, we were to sit down on the wooden pews and listen to the sermon. The service was delivered to the whole school and initially, being very young, I understood nothing and the hour served as a time for my mind to wander free of the punctuation of a teacher’s instructions. Later, I observed that sometimes certain of the students would come to the front of the chapel, kneel, and imbibe something proffered by the priest. The significance of this ritual was unknown to me, but it seemed to bestow a certain dignity on those who participated.

Sometimes a student would rise to stand at the pulpit and carefully read a portion of the bible. I wondered how these students were chosen. I was an excellent reader and it seemed only a matter of time before I would be asked to step up to the pulpit and demonstrate my skills.

But as I moved up into Grade Four and then Five, my perceptions came into focus. I resented the walk to chapel in gender-demarcated lines, and the cumbersome uniform that seemed to have marched on through the ages, unaffected by the vagaries of fashion. When the sport teacher caught me abstaining from the Lord’s Prayer in assembly, and leant down so that his ear was next to my lips, I remained resolutely,
obstinately silent.

I stopped being afraid.

At some point in my early childhood I must have seen a film about the civil rights movement, because I have a clear memory of an image coming into my mind during chapel one day of a black man stepping up in front of a crowd and delivering a rousing, audacious speech.

I became aware of the opportunities a microphone and an audience could bring. I imagined a teacher approaching me and marking out the chapter and verse. I saw myself nodding docilely and waiting for the moment when the stage would be mine. I could almost feel the microphone at my lips as I pictured myself stepping up and leaning forward, the whole school’s eyes and ears on me, every teacher, every student, the older kids, the younger kids all waiting, expecting to hear another dull bible story when instead - !

Exactly how I would have expressed my views, had I the chance to hijack a service, I never decided.

In any event, they never picked me.
I enter the cool and slide onto a chair. It’s sticky under my legs. I sigh, letting out the bad air. The whirl and whiz of after-work life outside becomes muffled inside the doors. I reach for a tacky magazine-waiting for an appointment is the only time I ever read them. Another star, famous for being famous is getting breast implants-can you spot the difference? Ebola is breaking out and we’re scouring the pages to see if Kahlishyia’s baby bump is showing?

“Hello,” Kate greets me. “Come through.”

I’d been coming to Kate for a while. At first, it was every now and then. Then friends started seeing the difference and thought it was doing me good. I did feel good after I’d seen her..if only for a day or so. So I began making regular appointments

We start with some light stuff..the traffic, my mad neighbour who intermittently yells out, “fertilizer,” from his balcony then retreats into his house..my recent date with a cranky man who did a burn-out down the road... What is it about a stranger that compels you to reveal everything? Maybe because they’re safe. They don’t move in your circles. They’re not too close that the shame of your revelations washes over you whenever you see them. There’s a level of control in what you say. You can spill a few crumbs or wail with emotion. A stranger’s not waiting for you to respond or preparing a platitude that’s going to help you or appease their sense of goodness...

I looked at Kate and sighed, “I had that dream again.”

“The one about Peter?”

“Yes..only this time when he’s lying there, he says, “It’s OK.”

“What do you think it means?”
“I guess.. I’ve always felt guilty that when I spoke to him on the phone, I was crying so much..I couldn’t ..say the right words..I didn’t know that’d be the last time I’d speak to him.”

Strange how I felt no uncomfortableness. The words just rolled out of me, like tears at Yoga or when I’m having a massage.

“You’ve been blaming yourself because the scene wasn’t like a movie? Because you got your lines all wrong?”

I should’ve been indignant by her accusation. Instead, I knew its truth. Peter had died years ago, but I was still replaying it in my head. I wonder how many people are walking around, waiting at bus stops, eating at “Char,” watching a sunset on Casuarina Drive, replaying old scenes in their head? We all seem so content and Buddhist, laughing with our mates in the present. What lies beneath?

The session was longer than usual. But in the end, I almost felt a sense of wholeness. I was beginning to heal. It felt good-a strange anti-biotic that gave me a glimmer of my former hopefulness.

Kate looked at me and smiled, “Well..what do you think?”

I touched my new haircut, looking at my reflection, critiquing the whole look.”I like it. You’ve done a great job.”
When Leslie gets to the ledge and turns around to face me with her composed, middle class ‘photo’ smile, I realise how easy it would be to step forward and give her a push. There are no witnesses around. It’s at least a 50 metre drop, and we have not seen a soul for almost a whole day.

Since we have been in the Tablelands I have felt a third presence between us.

Not that we have been completely isolated as we walk. Two other couples and a group have passed us – we are not fast walkers – and exchanged pleasantries and anecdotes. This has given me a break from Leslie’s incessant talk talk talk which I experience as a sort of violation. We have the calls of birds and the snaps of twigs and the crunches of leaves to attune our ears to but all I can hear is the same whining voice I have been hearing every day in the kitchen, on the phone, the moment I get home from work. The smack of her lips when she closes her mouth can be enough to make me want to silence her forever.

And there it is again – that other presence. A force that has come from within me. A potential.

The other couples that have passed us have both been straight couples, and have taken us for friends or sisters, and we have not bothered to correct them. For all the physicality between us we may as well be sisters. The group was a younger set, and they caught on straight away, but we did not keep pace with them for very long. They were enthused, and full of advice about where to get the best hiking boots and how to prepare and carry the lightest food. One young woman even had an open tray of seedlings fastened to the top of her backpack.

‘They get the direct sun while I walk,’ she explained. ‘And then we have fresh herbs for
dinner.’

Leslie had made her usual comments about hippies and young people. I know her so well she does not even need to be here. I could hold up both sides of the conversation.

She is standing there with that fixed smile on her face, waiting for me to take the shot. For some reason, I am reminded of an afternoon, decades ago, when a group of neighbourhood kids and I – just because we were bored – decided to catch a neighbour’s cat and set it on fire. My brother was there, egging me on. The boy next door got the petrol.

I was the one who lit the match.

I still remember its yowl of pain as it went up in flames.

I step towards my girlfriend, with my hands raised.
When Nana came to live with us we got kicked out of the TV room. It wasn’t a good start. She was a little old lady with a blue rinse perm and brown stockings. Paisley dresses in summer and pastel twinsets in winter. Hat and gloves for church on Sundays. Every day she tottered up to the letterbox posting letters to her friends. Otherwise she sat in “her” room in knitting baby clothes and watching “her” TV with the sound turned down. That drove us mad. Mum hated it that she drank tea.

“Bloody Christians!” she’d mutter under her breath and take her another cup.

Nana thought we kids were all spoilt rotten. Maybe that’s why she never shared her biscuits with us, or the chocolate coated caramels she gave the dog. I don’t remember her ever joining in the fun or chatting, she just pouted.

Mum said, “Ignore the old biddy.”

Nana had lived through the Depression and then the War, seen children of poor families stitched into their winter clothes, lost her house in a bushfire with four kids on her own and, although Col did come back, he was never the same and eventually died of Malaria. Now all she wanted was to be with him in heaven.

“Don’t marry someone older than you,” she said, “You’re a long time on your own when they die.”

I thought it was funny to catch her with her teeth out when she’d finished in the bathroom, and try to make her talk with her mouth caved in. One day I found a photo of her in her twenties and ran in to show her. She looked a lot like me.

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” she spat, “I look in the mirror and can’t even recognize myself.”
One day she gave me a copy of Rose Lindsay’s memoir, ‘A Model Wife’ which told me, too late, there was another side to her. Maybe she’d seen something of herself in me after all? It was a pretty risque story of an artist and his muse. According to Mum the old bitch never gave her anything so in more ways than one it became my guilty secret. We were all relieved when she decided to leave.

Twenty years later I went to see Nana in a nursing home, and found a tiny old woman, curled up in foetal position, her hair white and straight. She was almost unrecognizable except for the familiar plea, “Let me go, let me go. I just want to be with Col.” When the nurse delivered a cup of tea, I watched my Nana suck greedily from a baby’s tippy cup.

When she finally died at 98 she left us each 65 dollars. It took me a long time to decide how to spend her money. And now I have my ‘Nana pot’, a pastel blue paisley teapot. Mum hates it.
“It’s a beautiful sunset, today,” he says as he rips the skin from the animal, blood spraying onto his arms. He pauses in his work to wipe his sweaty brow and admire the pink gold sky.

I take the excuse to glance away from my brother, watching the slow sweep of dark clouds coming toward us. “Looks like it might rain.”

He grunts as he lifts the kangaroo carcass onto the back of the ute. “Nah, it won’t,” he says.

I look across the fading dam, now merely a mud pit and trap for desperate, weak animals like the kangaroo my brother is now using for dog food. Whirlwinds of red dust tear across the flat, grassless landscape. Emus, goats and kangaroos crowd under the sparse shade of a few available trees, escaping the heat of the setting sun.

I count seven dead animals that we’ve pulled from the dam.
“At least there are no cows or calves stuck today,” I say.
My brother grunts in response.

Tiny black ants cover my feet, biting me as I walk down the path to the house. There are millions of them across the yard.

I can hear the radio that Dad keeps in the kitchen and it crackles violently, making it hard to discern the words spoken by the presenter. Dad stands at the front door, looking up into clouds that gather by the minute with rain they hold like a promise. Wind picks up and scatters dust and leaves across the dirt lawn in front of him. I smell a hint of rain.
Dad tilts his head in the direction of the static coming from the radio. “There’s lightening about,” he says. “But it probably won’t rain.”

The phone rings. Dad’s footsteps boom down the veranda as he goes to answer. I follow closely and flick the radio off on the way.

“Hello? Yep. No. Did he?” Dad swears explosively and then listens intently. “Christ. Let me know if there is anything I can do. Yeah, I’ll be there.”

Dad remains by the phone for a moment and I wonder what has made him pause.

“Dad?”

He turns and gives my shoulder a squeeze. “Ah, pet. It’s not good news.” His expression makes me nervous.

“What’s up?”

“Adam Freean was... found... today.”

My heart sinks. My brother steps up behind us, having just come in from the yards. “What happened?” he asks.

Dad sighs heavily. “Looks like Adam went down to get 30 head of cattle out of a dam where they were stuck, trying to get to water. Didn’t have much success, so he shot them all.” We all grimace at the thought of such a loss of livelihood and life.

Dad continues, “Then he shot himself.”

“Fuck,” my brother murmurs. I find myself numbly staring at my feet.

In the grim silence a gentle sprinkle of rain begins to tip toe across the roof. Any hope it offers seems much too late.
THE FEEL OF MEN CLOSE UP

Natalie Sprite

I hadn’t gone to dance. I was there to meet the Buddhist who gave good head. That was how Maria had described him. “You’ll like him,” she’d said. We sat in her newly renovated kitchen. “He’s been celibate longer than you have.”

“But-,” I said, curious, careful. “Aren’t you two...?”

“Oh god no.” She shook her head and her long hair moved, shiny as fresh liquorice.

“Not at all, we’re just mates. I broke his drought, that’s all. A favour, really.”

We met at the Railway Club, where there was swing dancing. Women in wide skirts and bobby socks. Men in braces and two-tone shoes.

The Buddhist was shy and handsome and we looked at each and smiled. I thought we would dance together, but it wasn’t like that. Everybody danced with everybody.

My first partner was a woman with a swinging ponytail. She taught me the steps, guiding my body with her own until we moved together, swish-swish-spin. The sudden wonder of it made me laugh.

The caller yelled ‘change’ and I found myself before a short bearded man, who snarled when I got the steps wrong. He was stiff like a person make out of plastic and wire. I bowed my head and watched my feet.

But my next partner was tall, beautiful and blessedly too young for me to worry about sex. His name was Jun and when we danced, he led. I’d not known what that meant before. But I got it now. The clues were physical and slight like the ones
lovers give each other in sex.

When the caller yelled ‘change’, Jun didn’t.

He danced me out of the circle.

My mother always said she married my father because of the way they danced and I saw now, how you could fall in love with the grace you made with another person.

Jun began to sing along with the band. He sang freely like young children do. He swished me about the herringbone dance floor, throwing me against the lock of his arm then pulling me in close. I felt his young man’s chest and the swish swish sway of our hips and thighs pressed.

And when finally, he released me, I could dance.

I danced back into the circle and all around the circle, charmed by the scent of men close up, the texture of stubble, the feel of muscle under my hand.

But when it came time to dance with the Buddhist, he smelt of beer and we were clumsy together. I trod on his foot. His elbow cracked my eye.

My eye watered but I kept dancing.

At the end of the night, I saw him on the other side of the room with Maria pressed to his neck. When she saw me, her eyes slid sideways but I was only happy. I felt filled up with the music and the moment where I had found my own grace, there on the herringboned floor, outside the circle, dancing.
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